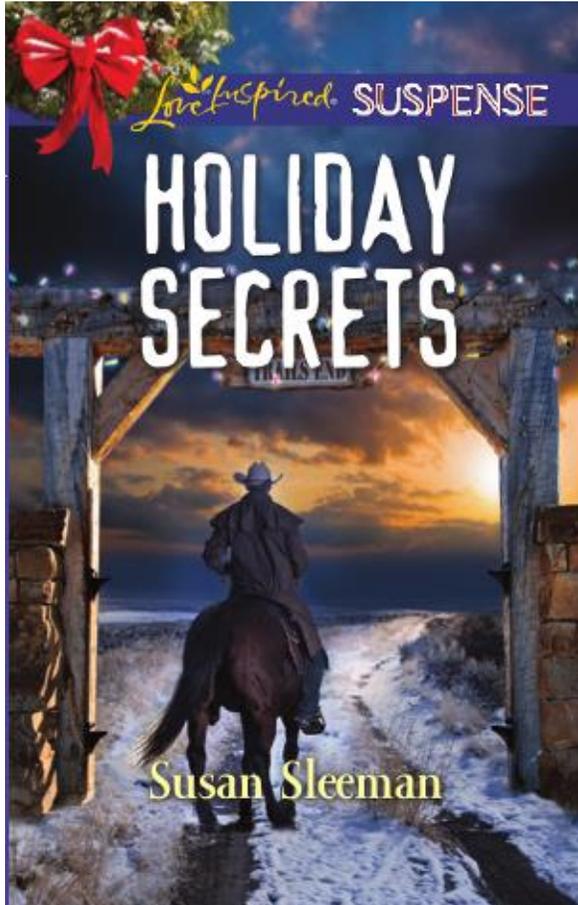


HOLIDAY SECRETS



Romantic Suspense – Print and Ebook

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DEADLY HOLIDAY REUNION

When his ex is thrust into the crosshairs of a deadly syndicate, FBI agent Gavin McKade will do whatever it takes to protect her. Even work the case with his stubborn sheriff dad. Gavin's holiday homecoming isn't exactly warm and fuzzy, but he must set aside the past to make sure Lexie Grant survives.

As if protecting Lexie from professional killers isn't difficult enough, the unlikely reunion has rekindled their complicated romantic connection. But if Gavin can't untangle Lexie from this dangerous web, the blurring line between duty and love may not matter...because this Christmas could be their last.

CHAPTER ONE

Lexie Grant's father had to pick today of all days to come back from the dead.

“Not a word from you in over a month.” She glanced at his prop plane rumbling in the distance on the abandoned airstrip, the winds from a blue norther howling across the field. “I thought you had to be dead.”

“Why in the world would you think that?” Her father raised his chin in his usual haughty manner.

“Your house and office. They were ransacked. Then you go missing. The sheriff couldn’t find you, and he suspected foul play. What else was I supposed to think?” She sighed and wished her father cared enough about her and her fourteen-year-old brother, Adam, to have told them he was leaving town. “Where have you been?”

He stepped closer to the crumbling maintenance building shielding them from the harsh wind racing through the Texas Hill Country. “There’s no time to explain. I have another appointment and have to leave.”

Right. Leave. He’d left her and Adam to be raised by their mother’s sister, Ruth, when their mother died giving birth to Adam. Why should Lexie expect him to stay and give her an explanation?

“So why are you here, then?”

“To give you this.” He held out a large manila envelope, his hand trembling.

She watched him for a moment, trying to determine if he was shaking from the twenty-five degree temperature drop in the last hour or if it was more. He stood strong as usual, but something was off. Maybe something to do with his disappearance.

Thankfully, her fears for his safety had been unfounded, and he was alive. Tears of gratitude sprang to her eyes, surprising her what with their troubled relationship.

He shook the envelope. “Take it.”

She might be glad he was alive, but she wanted nothing from him. Nothing at all. She shoved her hands into her pockets.

“The envelope.” He glanced over his shoulder to make a furtive sweep of the area.

“If you’re worried that someone is watching us, I should tell you Gavin is coming out here to meet me. He needed to talk to me tonight, too.”

“You’re meeting your old boyfriend? Here? Tonight?” His voice rose as he cut his gaze over the towering copse of bald cypress trees shadowing the abandoned property.

“Yes,” she replied, trying not to think about seeing the man she’d once thought she’d spend the rest of her life with, before he’d bailed on her three years ago.

“He’s FBI now...I can’t...I have to go.” He waved the envelope. “C’mon, take it. Everything you need to know is inside. It’s insurance to make sure you’re safe.”

“Safe? Why wouldn’t I be safe?”

He opened his mouth to respond but a rumbling noise sounded from the far side of the field, taking his attention.

A dirt bike burst from the shadows and raced straight for them.

“Gavin?” her father asked.

“No. He’s riding over on his horse.”

“Take this. Now!” Panic wove through his tone. He shoved the envelope toward her.

She’d never seen the all-knowing doctor this rattled. Should she be afraid, too?

“Now!”

She reached for the envelope. He let go, but she didn’t have it in hand. The wind whipped it into the air.

“No!” He charged after the envelope dancing toward his plane.

As a pilot, he could jump in the cockpit and take off anytime he wanted, but he seemed more concerned about getting the envelope.

“Are you coming back or leaving?” she called after him.

He didn't respond. She stepped away from the building to get a better look. He charged ahead, then froze in place, staring at the bike rumbling closer. He suddenly bent to grab the envelope. A gunshot rang out, cutting through the night.

Was it the biker? Was he the one shooting at them?

Her father took off, running toward the plane. The bike veered right, bearing down on him. He'd barely made it a few feet when another shot split the air. Then another. Her father went down.

Dad! No! She opened her mouth to scream.

No. Stop. The shooter will hear you. Maybe come after you.

She clamped a hand over her mouth as panic raced along her nerves. What should she do?

Hide. Yes, hide. Now!

She slipped behind the building. Held her breath. Fought the panic. Her horse Misty tethered a few feet behind her nervously shifted. Lexie raced to the mare.

"Shh, girl. Don't give me away." She scrubbed her hand down the mare's velvety nose until she calmed. "What do I do, girl? I can't just leave Dad out there."

But could she do otherwise and not be shot?

She had to try. She couldn't lose him when she'd just gotten him back. She was an ER nurse, after all, and she was sure she could help.

Hoping the shooter hadn't seen her, Lexie left the horse behind and peeked around the corner. The biker roared close and came to a stop ten feet from her father. The biker sat there, his gun outstretched, his bike idling. Her father didn't move.

"Stupid old man," the biker yelled as he dismounted.

Gun waving, he strode toward her father.

Was he going to shoot her dad again? Should she intervene or would he shoot her, too?

She had to do something, but if she died, she'd be of no help to anyone. So she had to be careful. Smart. Assess the situation before acting.

She crept around the back of the building. *Good.* Dark shadows clung to the crumbling siding. She eased through the inky blackness. Not only did she have an improved view of the action now, but she would also have a better chance to offer aid if the opportunity presented itself.

The bike's engine cut out and died, but the dying motor only stopped the biker for a second as he paused to look back. He shrugged and continued walking, holding out his gun in a gloved hand. He poked her father's side with a pointy boot. Her father's tortured moan rose into the stark night.

Yes! He's alive!

"Stupid, stupid man," the gunman said. "Running when bullets were flying."

The shooter was tall. Over six feet. Thin. Lexie searched the darkness for his face, but his tinted helmet hid his features. She'd never heard his voice before, but he had a deep Southern accent so he could be from around their rural Texas county.

He kicked her father again. "You didn't actually think I'd let you meet with the head of the syndicate today, did you?"

The syndicate? Her dad mumbled something, but she couldn't make out his response. She desperately wanted to know what type of trouble her father had gotten into. Even more, she wanted this man to take off so she could tend to her father's injuries.

"You should have known I'd never let you bring me down," the shooter continued. "Not when I'm facing three strikes. I'm not going to prison again and never coming out. You're a

smart man. How come you don't know by now that I'm smarter than you? That I'd hunt you down?"

A sick laugh rolled from his mouth and he moved closer.

Lexie held her breath. Waited for a fatal shot to sound.

Instead, the gunman jerked the envelope from her dad's hand and peered around. "So, who's meeting you here tonight?"

Lexie strained to hear the answer.

"No one," her father said, his tone weak and wavering. If she didn't get to him soon, he might not make it. "Was just hiding the envelope. That's all. I swear."

The shooter bent down and pressed the gun against her father's forehead.

Lexie almost gasped but caught herself in time.

The shooter waved the envelope in her father's face. "Thanks for this. I also have the copy you left with your attorney in Mexico. You should never have given him the information. Now he's dead."

"No."

"Yes." His voice was calm, like committing murder was an everyday occurrence for him. "You obviously planned to hand this over to someone tonight. Who?"

"No one," her father insisted.

"Not even your precious Lexie?"

Wait, the shooter knew her name? Knew who she was? Did he know her father was meeting her here? Would he come after her next?

Her heart stammered and panic ricocheted through her.

"Well, old man?" he demanded. "Lexie. Is she meeting you here?"

“No. I was hiding it. In the building. Would’ve called her later. Told her where to find it.” Her father’s voice was growing weaker, blood loss likely taking his strength. She hated seeing him in this situation, suffering at the gunman’s hand, but she appreciated his effort to distract the shooter from learning she was there.

A noise sounded from across the field. She listened. Heard a horse trotting. *Gavin?* Or was it just wishful thinking?

The gunman spun. “So, you were meeting someone, after all. No worries. I’ll be long gone by the time the horse reaches us.”

He shoved his hand into his pocket and came out holding a cell phone. He pressed his thumb to it, the phone coming alive and illuminating his face shield. She squinted to get a better look at his face, but the light reflected against the shield.

“I’m assuming you have another copy of these documents on the plane. Well, buh-bye, plane.” He tapped his phone.

The plane erupted in a ball of fire. The ground beneath her feet rumbled in concussive waves. Fragments of the plane flew through the air and hit the dusty ground. A rush of heat washed over her face even at this distance.

She stared in stunned disbelief. Just who was this guy and how was he involved with her father?

“See how much you underestimated me,” he shouted. “And don’t think I believe you when you say you didn’t give this information to your daughter. I won’t rest until I’m sure she doesn’t have it. Even if that means she has to die, too.” He laughed, the sound high and maniacal, his craziness sending her fear skyrocketing.

He was willing to kill her father, so what would he do if he spotted her?

Horse hooves thundered on the open field.

Please let it be Gavin. As a former local deputy and now an FBI agent in Houston, he'd be armed and know what to do—how to save them.

Are you there, God? Listening? Please don't let this psycho fire on him, too.

The shooter mounted the bike. Kicked the engine awake then screeched to a start and roared forward, stopping to take a final shot at her father. The gun report sounded like thunder.

No. Oh, please, no. Had he done the unthinkable and killed her father?

Her head swam. Her leg muscles turned to mush. She grabbed the wall to keep from dropping to the ground.

Breathe deep. Keep it together.

The biker laughed again then shifted his bike into high speed, passing right in front of her. She held her breath so even the tiniest movement didn't give her away. The whoosh of wind from the cycle blasted her face and heavy fumes irritated her nose. He glanced her way. The gun lifting.

Had he seen her? She couldn't be sure and remained frozen in place.

When he moved out of sight, she ran for her dad. Knelt beside him. Spotted gaping chest and stomach wounds.

For a moment, all of her medical training and experience as a trauma nurse fled and panic won out. Her pulse skyrocketed. She felt woozy. Like she might collapse. She wanted to give in. To forget her father lay in front of her with wounds only a skilled surgeon could treat.

“Dad...I...” She didn't know how to continue as blood oozed from his body. If she'd listened to the many times he'd nagged her about becoming a doctor, she could help, but with his extensive injuries, only a doctor could save him now.

He moaned.

She let her gaze flick over the area. Searching for what, she didn't know. Maybe she was just avoiding the obvious.

Cut it out. He needs you to be strong. To think. Get it together.

She ripped off her favorite Christmas scarf, wadded it into a ball and pressed it against the most critical wound. Blood saturated the cashmere in moments and she suspected an equal amount of blood spurted from his back, too.

Please, she begged. Don't let him die.

"Lexie," he muttered, his voice not more than a whisper.

"Shh." She bent forward. "Don't try to talk."

He struggled to breathe, his chest barely moving. "Be careful...dangerous. He took it. Your insurance. I should have...couldn't...my reputation. Legacy. He'll come after you, Lexie. He'll kill you..."

Gunshots. Lexie.

Gavin McKade cleared the tree line to see a fireball rising into the sky over an airplane torn in pieces and a dirt bike racing away from the maintenance shed.

Had Lexie given up on him because he was late and boarded the plane to go somewhere? Or were the gunshots directed at her and she'd been shot?

Dear God, don't let me be too late. Don't let Lexie be on that plane.

He jerked his unruly stallion's reins to keep him from bolting and searched for any sign of Lexie. He would call out, but with shots fired, he wasn't about to draw more attention to himself than Lightning's pummeling hooves might have already done.

Was she by the shed or in the plane?

He'd check the plane first. He kicked Lightning into motion. They tore across the open field, the biting wind hitting him full-on and carrying heavy black smoke in his direction. The heat soon forced him to pull up.

Dancing flames illuminated Fragments of the plane lay scattered around. No one could have survived the fiery explosion. If she was in there—no, he wouldn't go there. Not until he checked by the shed.

He whipped Lightning around and took off. Nearing the shed, he spotted someone on the ground. Someone moving. Small. Slight. A woman. Leaning over another person. Performing CPR.

He threw caution to the wind and shouted, "Lexie!"

"Gavin!" she screamed. "Hurry."

Thank you, God, he prayed, though he had no idea if God heard him as after shooting Emily, Gavin had been hard pressed to trust in his faith.

Gavin pushed Lightning into a gallop, the stallion's breath coming in hard puffs as he quickly closed the distance between them. To be safe, he drew his weapon as he dismounted.

"Lexie," he said, afraid he was wrong, that she'd turn, it wouldn't be her, and he'd learn she'd perished in the explosion.

She looked up from doing CPR on a man.

It *was* Lexie. His Lexie. No...not his. Not anymore. He let out a slow breath of relief. "Are you okay?"

She stopped her compressions, held up blood-covered hands and peered down at the man lying in front of her.

“It’s Dad. He...he’s gone.” A sob tore from her throat. “Gunshot wounds. I saw it all. He tried to give me an envelope and the guy shot him twice. Then took off. I tried to help Dad and failed.”

“Oh, sugar, I’m so sorry.” Gavin didn’t think of the years that had passed...of the turmoil when they’d broken up. Instead, acting on pure instinct, he dropped down beside her and drew her into his arms. She snuggled tight against him, and he cradled her head against his chest as her body heaved with pain-filled sobs.

She needed his comfort, and he was only too happy to hold her, but with the shooting, he had to keep his gaze roving the area, just in case the killer hadn’t really taken off.

He gently pushed back and gazed at her. “You said the shooter was gone.”

“He took off on a dirt bike.”

That explained the bike he’d seen.

“This can’t be happening. Not really. Can it?” She suddenly grabbed Gavin’s arm. “The killer can’t get away with this. We have to go after him.”

“He’s long gone by now and we won’t catch him on horseback.” Gavin dug out his phone. “But I’ll call Dad to get an alert out on the bike. Can you describe it?”

“Black, I think, but I’m not positive. Dark colored, anyway.”

“Did it have a license plate?”

“I don’t know. I was too afraid. I’m sorry.” She wiped away her tears. “But the rider wore a leather jacket and pants. He was over six feet. Thin.”

Without a better description of the bike, odds were low that they’d find the guy. Especially when a dirt bike could travel off-road.

“And the plane exploding?” Gavin asked. “Did the shooter have something to do with that, too?”

She nodded. “He used his phone to detonate it. Thank goodness Dad was flying his own plane and was alone.”

“I’ll want more details, but first I’ll get that alert issued.” Gavin dialed his father, Lake County Sheriff, Walt McKade, but stepped away from Lexie so he could speak freely about her father. He also didn’t want her to learn that conversations with his dad were still tension-filled. No sense in adding to her stress.

As his phone rang, he kept her in view while also watching for any signs the shooter might have returned.

“Sheriff McKade,” Gavin’s dad answered with his usual confidence.

Just hearing his father’s voice made him cringe, but he swallowed down his unease. “It’s Gavin. There’s been an explosion and shooting at the old airstrip on Engels ranch.”

“I know about the explosion. Just got a 9-1-1 call from neighbors...but how do you know about it?”

“I’m in town for a few days.”

“First I’m hearing about it,” he grumbled. “And you just happened to be out at the airstrip when all of this goes down?”

“I’ll explain that later,” Gavin said. “For now, you need to know Dr. Grant’s been fatally shot.”

“Well, I’ll be.” His words were slow and drawn out in his thick drawl. “Here we all thought he was dead and now he turns up only to be murdered.”

“Lexie’s here, and she saw the whole thing. The shooter took off. Heading east on a dirt bike. She thinks it’s black but she’s not positive. He’s been gone about five minutes or so. I thought you’d like to issue an alert ASAP.”

“You got that right. I’ll take care of it and head out there to get started on the investigation.”

Great. The moment his dad arrived, he would demand to know Gavin’s reasons for being in town.

He didn’t have the authority to divulge that, yesterday, Dr. Grant had become a person of interest in a major healthcare fraud investigation, and that Gavin had arrived to try to track him down.

“And before you try to claim jurisdiction on the murder...” his dad continued. “You know the ball’s in my court, not you Feds.”

Gavin stifled a groan. As far as he knew, his dad’s only experience with the FBI was watching TV shows and movies that often got things wrong. Murder investigations didn’t top the Bureau’s priorities, and the Feds rarely involved themselves in a case without being invited.

“No worries there,” Gavin said.

“I’ll be there in less than ten.” His dad disconnected the call.

Gavin returned to Lexie, who hadn’t moved, her gaze fixed on her father. Gavin squatted next to her and told her softly, “Dad’s on his way.”

She sighed. “I suppose now would be a good time for you to tell me why you wanted to see me.”

Though it was no longer necessary to locate her father, Gavin would still need to interview her and serve the warrant to search her father’s office and home. Obviously, there was

no point in the FBI filing charges against a deceased person, but his records could contain information about other doctors involved in the fraud. Still, nothing needed to be done tonight, and he'd hold off on upsetting her until after she'd gotten some rest.

"That can wait," he said.

She shook her head in wide sorrowful arcs. "You sound like my father. You both had these big things you needed to talk to me about. Turns out, he only wanted to give me that envelope. He tried, but it was so weird."

"Weird in what way?"

"He was acting totally out of character. All jittery and afraid. Clearly, he had a right to be. The shooter was creepy and not at all concerned about committing murder." She blew out an unsteady breath. "He said this would be his third strike, and he wasn't going back to prison. He also took the envelope and said he'd killed Dad's attorney in Mexico because Dad gave him the same information."

So Dr. Grant had been hiding out in Mexico this last month. But why? "Did the shooter mention what the envelope contained?"

She shook her head. "He did say he was part of some syndicate. Said Dad was meeting with the head honcho today, and the killer wasn't going to let that happen."

Gavin nodded but didn't speak. Dr. Grant wasn't the only doctor in the fraud investigation. Gavin hadn't yet found a connection between the doctors, but he supposed it was possible they could have formed a syndicate and this murder was related.

"And there's more," she said. "The killer knew my name. Called me Dad's *precious Lexie*. Which means he didn't know dad very well as I wasn't precious to him. Maybe once. When Mom was alive."

Gavin had hoped she'd reconciled with her father in the past few years, but clearly she'd still had issues with him. And now, thanks to her father, a killer knew her name.

Gavin didn't like it. Not one bit. He didn't want the killer to know anything about her. "In what context did he mention you?"

"He asked if Dad gave me the information, too. Dad said no, but the killer didn't believe him. Dad warned me before he died that this guy is dangerous, and he'll come after me. Kill me, too."

"Kill you?" Gavin's voice shot up, spooking Lexie and Lightning. He lowered his voice. "Do you have the information he's worried about?"

"I don't know what was in that envelope and Dad didn't give me anything else. But now that we know someone is looking for information, it makes sense that his office and house were ransacked." She turned her big-eyed gaze to him. "What if the killer spotted me as he was leaving? If he did, he knows I saw him commit murder." She shuddered. "Do you think he'll come after me? Try to kill me, too?"

"I won't let that happen, sugar. I promise." Gavin wrapped an arm around her shoulders to help allay her fear, but his emotions were a different story.

If this man had killed once, he wouldn't hesitate to do so again, and now he had Lexie in his sights.

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