

HOMELAND HEROES | BOOK ONE

A woman in a black suit and high heels stands in the center, holding a handgun. The background is a red-tinted city skyline. The title 'SECONDS TO LIVE' is written in large white letters across the middle.

SECONDS  
TO LIVE

SUSAN SLEEMAN

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*To my mother and father,  
Geraldine and Rodney Becker*

If only . . . I could share this moment and my joy with you. You could hold this book in your hands, and I could tell you that your outstanding example of hard work and dedication have made not only this book possible but many others. I could hug you one more time and tell you how much I love you and miss you . . . if only.

# CHAPTER 1

**ONE MISTAKE.** That was all it took to put Dustee's life on the line—death right on her heels.

She glanced over her shoulder into the murky night, with shadows shrouding the tall city buildings. She searched the soupy fog. Looking—seeking the man tailing her. A thick wall of fog blocked her view, but he was there. She could feel him. Feel the evil. The anger. The desire for revenge. Following her, his footsteps silent and deadly.

Phantom, he called himself, had been hot on her heels since she'd gotten off the bus, reaching out to grab her. She'd bolted into a group of fellow riders strolling down the hill. He'd hung back, his hoodie up, hiding his face. He lurked like a whisper of her imagination. But she hadn't imagined him. He was real.

Terrifyingly real.

Her stomach knotted tighter, twisting into a stiff ball of agony. It *should* be knotted. She deserved it. She'd done this to herself.

What made her think she could break the witness-protection rules? Be the exception and get away with it? She was forbidden from using any electronic device to access the internet. But it had been too long. She couldn't help herself. The library computers called to her. Now Phantom had found her, and she'd put both her life and her twin sister's life at risk.

Stupid craving for an online connection. She shouldn't have given in. Definitely not. She had to get away from him. But how?

She focused ahead on the winding road leading into the city of Portland. She picked up her pace. Hurrying. The clip of her spiky heels on the concrete sounded like machine-gun fire.

*Run. Faster. You're so good at it.*

Running from everything. From her past and nearly being incarcerated by the FBI. They offered a deal instead. All she had to do was help them take down Phantom. She'd jumped at the chance to help bring in the notorious hacker, but he outed her, and she had to go into the Witness Protection Program to stay alive.

Now he wanted to kill her, brutally, like the last person who'd tried to infiltrate his organization.

She didn't want to die.

*Oh, please. No.*

She picked up speed.

*Click. Click. Click.* The staccato bursts of her pointy heels rang through the air, a beacon for the man hot on her trail. She paused to kick them off. The pumps she'd been so excited to buy only a week ago tumbled down the road in front of her. Shoe over shoe, the rainbow-dyed leather disappeared into the curtain of fog kissing the asphalt.

She slowed to take another quick look over her shoulder. Other riders had turned off, and he'd silently moved closer, his hand in his pocket like he had a knife. One to slice her open, as he'd done with the last person who betrayed him.

Her heart raced, threatening to explode and paralyze her.

She swallowed hard and took off running. The sidewalk was cool against her feet, the roughness biting into her tender skin, but she didn't stop. Not even when sharp rocks cut into her flesh. Or when she heard his footfalls echoing into the night and pounding closer.

Closer.

Disappearing was her only hope.

She ran. Harder. Her breathing labored. An alley lay a few feet ahead, beckoning her. She careened around the corner, catching her fingers on the rough brick of an old seafood shop to keep from plummeting down the incline.

She picked up her pace, searching for a hiding spot—some-where he wouldn't think to find her. Her chest burned, and she labored to gain even a sip of oxygen. She couldn't keep this pace up for long, but if she didn't, he would catch her.

He'd tower over her. His ghastly eyes glazed with the anger of betrayal. Filled with the darkness of revenge. A weapon. Pointed at her. Warning that she was about to die. That he was going to feel the relief of revenge.

*Help. Oh, help.*

Who would help her? She'd made a huge mistake. She was on her own.

She searched both sides of the narrow alley. A dumpster. Trash cans. Cardboard boxes. Her gaze settled on a big grate in the back wall of the fish market, the sour smell of rancid seafood almost suffocating her.

She ran to the spot. Assessed the grate.

The vent was large enough for her body. She released the catches on all four corners and tugged hard. The grill suddenly popped out. She fumbled with the cool metal. Catching the grate before it hit the ground, she set it down silently to slide her fingers into the slatted openings.

Balancing the grate, she tucked up her legs and wiggled into the yawning duct. She clasped the steel tightly and jerked it back into place. Holding it with one hand, she dug out her phone and scrolled to the number for Taylor Mills, the Deputy U.S. Marshal assigned to her protection.

The call connected. Rang. Once. Twice.  
*C'mon. C'mon. Answer, Taylor. Please! You always do.*  
Footsteps pounded down the alley, coming closer.  
*No. Not yet.*

One more ring.

Phantom was almost to her hiding spot. She had to end the call before the screen's light gave her away.

She punched end and silenced her phone. Taylor would call back. Dustee was sure of it—as sure as she was that she had to escape Phantom. Taylor was like that. The best person Dustee had ever known. Selfless and caring.

Dustee's fingers on the grate cramped, but she clung tightly.

Phantom's footsteps halted nearby. Eerie quiet settled over them.

She caught a glimpse of him through a sliced opening. His face was shadowed as he stood tall. Strong. Searching the area. Looking for her. For a hint to her location. For anything, even the barest of clues.

Anger and hatred emanated from his body. Finding her was personal to him—so personal—this could be the end for her.

She didn't want to die.

*Please, no.*

Her heart raced. Faster. Faster. Pounding against her chest like the heavy beat of a conga drum.

A sob crept up her dry throat. Pressing hard. Begging for release.

She bit her lip to keep from crying out. From letting him discover her location. Tears welled up. She swallowed hard.

Waited. Waited.

The silent night pressed in on her.

He turned. Faced the wall. The grate.

*Please. Oh, please don't let him see my fingers. Please.*



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Deputy U.S. Marshal Taylor Mills's phone rang twice from her purse, then stopped. She sighed at the welcome silence. If one more witness needed her today, she would lose it. Any need. Even a quick phone call to talk about their loneliness in the Witness Security Program, a conversation she had on a daily basis.

She closed her condo door and twisted the dead bolt. She was alone. Blessedly alone. At least physically. For the moment. In the condo she bought only a year ago, filled with all her favorite things. Comfort things. Too bad she was never here to enjoy them.

Her phone sounded again.

"Please, not again. I can't even tonight." She dug deep to find the person she wanted to be and answer it—the person who put the needs of the people in WITSEC before her own. She helped them adjust to a new life in hiding, forget their pasts, and succeed while under protection of the U.S. Marshals Service's Witness Security Program.

*Hah, you're one to talk. Try forgetting your own past for a change.*

Preparing to cringe, she looked at the caller ID.

*Oh. Good.* Not a witness. Her friend Lisa.

"Lisa." Taylor tried to sound enthusiastic, honestly she did, but she didn't pull it off. "Did you just call and hang up?"

"No. Why?"

"I missed a call and was worried it might be important."

"Wouldn't your caller ID show you who it was?"

"It's a number I don't have in my address book. Could be a telemarketer, I suppose." Still, Taylor worried someone's life might depend on her having answered.

"You sound stressed out," Lisa said.

*Stressed?* Taylor had reached a point where no word existed to explain her anxiety level, and she would need to create a new term to define it.

“Tough day at work,” Taylor replied and left it at that. She wanted to say more but couldn’t. Lisa didn’t know that Taylor was a WITSEC deputy. Few people did. Many lives depended on WITSEC deputies. All were sworn to secrecy so they couldn’t inadvertently lead someone to a witness. That made it hard to have a real relationship of any kind. Including romantic. Not that she was even thinking of romance in her life. A topic she couldn’t even begin to ponder now.

“So, what’s up?” That cheery voice she was trying to conjure up finally appeared.

“I wanted to ask if you’d like to catch a late movie.”

“Tonight?” Taylor glanced at the clock, the hands nearing nine. “Late is right. I have to work tomorrow.”

Lisa snorted. “Since when did you turn into my grandmother and go to bed so early?”

“That’s me. Grandma Taylor. Been working sixteen-hour days. At my grandmotherly age, I need my beauty rest.”

“That rough, huh?”

“I literally haven’t had a minute alone in weeks.” Taylor tried to remember a period of time lately that she’d had solely for herself. Nothing came to mind. Nothing. Not a single moment in recent days. Sure, she slept alone. Showered and dressed alone. That was about it.

Every moment of every single day she was on call with the goal of protecting her witnesses from dangerous people who wanted them dead. That meant she had to be sharp all the time. A late movie wouldn’t help with that. “If you don’t mind, I’m gonna pass. Maybe we can grab dinner on Friday.”

“Sure. No worries.” Disappointment lingered in Lisa’s tone.

“You know, I wasn’t going to say anything . . . but seems to me like you need a vacation.”

Boy did she. “I think you could be right. Maybe Friday we can talk about doing something together.”

“Talk about it is all you’ll do,” Lisa muttered.

Taylor wanted to argue, but she was slow to pull the trigger on big things. Okay, maybe on a lot of things. She was risk averse most of the time, thanks to losing her brother, Jeremy, when they were teens.

“Let me know if you decide to bail on me.” Lisa ended the call.

Guilt heaped itself on Taylor’s head. She was such a bad friend. Not on purpose. She really cared about Lisa and wanted to be a better friend. But her witnesses were always in potential danger, and they had to come first. She had no idea why Lisa put up with her, but thank God she did.

Taylor headed for her bathroom. Usually seeing the space’s cool, gray muted tones with bright white and silver accents was enough to lower her stress a notch, but not tonight. Not after the day she’d had putting out fire after fire.

She started the faucet running and dumped in a liberal dose of bath crystals. The lavender beads swirled in the rushing water, and the room instantly smelled like a magnificent garden. Perfect. A long soak in the tub would do wonders for her attitude and ensure a good night’s sleep.

Just one hour. Sixty minutes. Three thousand and six hundred seconds of warmth and bubbles. For her and her alone.

After all, the odds of a witness having a major catastrophe in the next hour were low, and if the person who’d called really needed her, they would call back.

Taylor had to risk leaving them on their own this one time to maintain her own sanity.