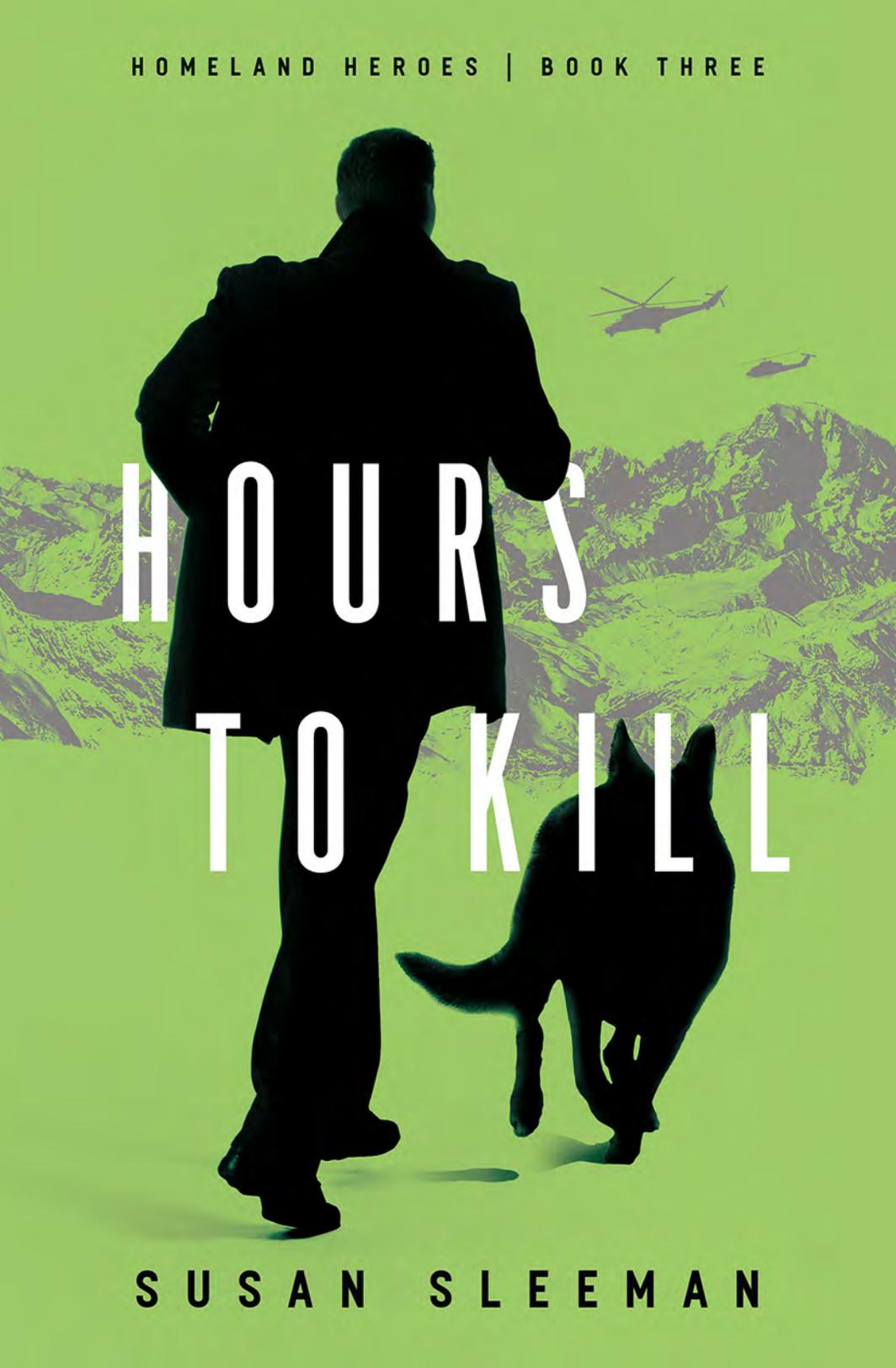


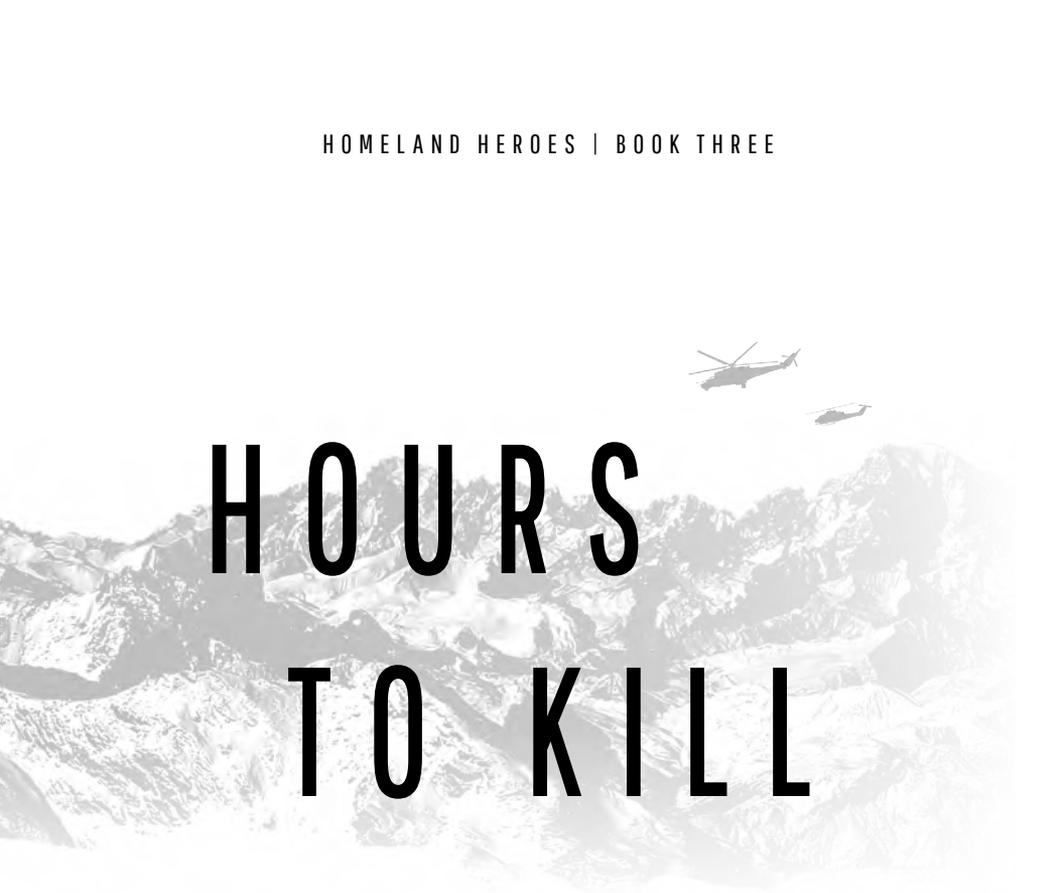
HOMELAND HEROES | BOOK THREE



HOURS
TO KILL

SUSAN SLEEMAN

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*For the Sleeman family—
Don, Mickey, Patti, and Barb*

You all have been so supportive of my writing career,
and I am very blessed to have you on my side.

CHAPTER 1

THE BRUTAL KILLER put a knife to her mother's throat. Addison Leigh's mother blinked in terror, her eyes wide. The switch-blade pressed against her crinkly neck. Right there in the small Portland home Addy shared with her mom.

Addy gasped.

"Back off, Agent Leigh, or else," the masked man snarled, his lips moving in the mouth opening.

Addy tried to breathe. To think.

The video playing on her computer screen in the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement office was time-stamped five minutes ago.

Five minutes!

This man could still be in her house. With her mother.

Was it real? Staged? Was this armed man really at her house?

What should she do?

Think, Addy. Think.

She grabbed her phone and dialed her home number. One ring. Two. Three.

No answer.

"Warren, come here!" she yelled to her fellow ICE agent two cubicles down in the bullpen.

Ring four.

"C'mon, Mom, answer," Addy muttered as she jumped to her feet and tried not to lose it. "Please answer."

Voicemail. *No. No. No.*

She slammed her fist on the desktop.

Calm down. Panicking won't help.

A lack of answer didn't mean anything. Her mother could be napping, and her caregiver, Nancy, never answered the home phone.

"What's up?" Dressed in his usual khaki pants and white button-down, Warren sauntered her way.

"Watch this video." She clicked replay. "It's my mom. Or a Photoshopped version of her. I called the house. She's not answering."

Addy dialed Nancy's cellphone and watched again as the man pulled her mother's head back. He growled at the camera from behind a coward's ski mask, the brown skin of his hands telling her he might be connected to her current investigation. Something dark dotted his hand, but she couldn't tell what. A wound maybe.

His eyes focused on the camera, dark orbs in the mask's holes.

"Back off, Agent Leigh. Or else." His tone was high-pitched, obviously in an attempt to distort his voice, making it harder to do comparisons.

Back off. Back off what?

Was it Bruno Razo? A killer. A drug kingpin and gunrunner who was the focus of Operation Crossfire, her current investigation? A sorry excuse for a man.

Addy sucked in a gulping breath. Another and another, making sure to hold it together in front of her fellow agent as the call to Nancy rang in her ear, the sharp rings piercing Addy's brain.

Warren bent closer to the screen and let out a low whistle. "If it's Photoshopped, they would've had to film your mom at some point. And she would've needed a terrified expression like this when they did."

"Her dementia causes fear all the time, so they could possibly have caught her on a walk or at the park with me or Nancy."

The call to Nancy went to voicemail, and Addy's worry doubled as she shoved her phone into her pocket.

"In that case, it's a professional editing job." Warren frowned. "But I honestly think it's legit."

If Addy was on the verge of panicking before, the statement from an eighteen-year ICE veteran sent her over the top. "It's time-stamped five minutes ago. Mom's not answering the phone."

"They used a sheet for the background, so if they did indeed film it at your house, they disguised the room." Warren locked eyes with her. "Or it means it was Photoshopped."

"I need to go home. Check on her and see—" A sob grabbed Addy's voice, stealing it like a thief in the night, tearing away her last words.

Warren held her gaze, his normally calm powder-blue eyes darkened. "I'll come with you."

She nodded. She would be grateful for the backup, especially from an experienced ICE agent like Warren.

"I'll drive." He dug his keys from his pocket. "You're in no state of mind to get behind the wheel."

She thought to argue. Stand up for herself. A woman in law enforcement was often taken advantage of. Thought less of. But this wasn't that. He was right. Her hands were trembling, her heart thudding.

"Let's go," she said, but before she bolted for the door, she grabbed an extra ammo clip and shoved it in her pocket before pulling her jacket from the back of the chair.

Outside, a biting January wind whipped in her face, and she slipped into her jacket as she ran down the street behind Warren toward the parking lot.

She ignored him opening his car and charged over to the vintage Mustang she'd inherited from her father. She popped the trunk of the cherry-red vehicle and dug into a black nylon bag holding her Kevlar vest and emergency supplies. She slid

into the vest and then joined Warren. He'd clicked open the locks on his nondescript sedan and was donning his vest too.

Seeing him dressed in tactical gear made the terror even more real. Her mother honestly was in danger, and they were heading to her house to rescue her.

Unbelievable. Totally unbelievable.

Addy breathed deep so she didn't lose it and climbed into the passenger seat. She buckled her seat belt. Took three tries with shaking hands to get the clasp into place. She had to calm down before they arrived at the house. If her mother was indeed being held captive, Addy had to be thinking clearly.

Warren slid into the driver's seat and started the car, the powerful engine roaring to life and vibrating the vehicle. He got his emergency light going and tore out of the lot, his hands steady on the wheel. Stalwart. A word she never used, except it somehow perfectly described him. He'd been like a father to her since she'd arrived back in Portland. At times smothering her with well-meaning advice, and other times leaving her alone. Right now she appreciated his help.

"Maybe I should call the local PD," Addy said. "Get them out there faster."

Warren gave a firm shake of his head. "First, you only live a few miles away and you don't know they'll arrive faster than us. And second, do you really want to risk some rookie rolling up on the scene and making a mistake that costs your mom her life?"

Her mother's life. In the balance. Her whole body trembled.

A car whipped in front of them and cut them off. Warren slammed on the brakes, saving their lives but wasting valuable time. She pounded a fist on the dash. She should have driven. At least she would feel in control of something. Anything.

She dug out her phone to call the house again.

Ringing. Ringing. Ringing.

Please, dear God, let Mom be okay. Please. Please. Please.

Warren turned his inquisitive eyes on her. “The warning on the video. It has to do with the investigation you’re working on?”

“It’s not like the guy came out and said so, but yeah, I have to figure it does. He’s not Caucasian, and my chief suspect in this case is Hispanic.”

Warren careened the car around the corner. “You’ve worked this investigation for months. Why the threat now?”

“There’s something big. I mean like *huge* going down in six days. My suspect must have found out I got wind of his plans, and he wants me to back off.”

She let the video replay in her mind, trying to find any lead or clue. “Bear. He wasn’t barking.”

“Your dog?”

She nodded. “Mom can’t handle him so he’s crated during the day. But as a retired police dog, he would sense the danger and be jonesing to get out. At a minimum barking.”

“You think they hurt him?”

Dear God, no. Bear might live up to his name and be this big tough German shepherd, but he was her cuddly baby too, and she couldn’t stomach the thought of anyone hurting him.

Warren turned onto her street. “Or maybe the guy on the video drugged Bear.”

“We’ll find out soon enough.” She pointed out the window at the house three down from hers. “Pull up here.”

She ran her gaze over the modest ranch that her parents had owned since the seventies—the house she’d grown up in. After Addison split with Mack, she’d moved in with her mom, and they’d just painted it a deep gray with white trim. The lawn was neat and tidy, thanks to a landscaping crew she paid to keep it that way. Nancy had parked her older model Honda in the driveway, but there was no sign of any other vehicle.

“Let me try calling again.” Addy got out her phone and dialed.

The call connected and rang but went straight to voicemail.

“No answer.” She shoved the phone into her pocket. “Since we don’t know which room they’ll likely be in, we’ll go in the front where we’ll have the best view of the main living area.”

He nodded. “I remember the layout from your party.”

Party. Right. Remodel of the kitchen and family room celebration. Not something she could even imagine right now with her heart in her throat.

She eased out of the car and drew her gun. The wind, warning of coming rain, buffeted her body. She stayed low by the boxwood hedge that served as a fence and crept up to the front door painted a bright turquoise. Rain started spitting from the gray skies, dampening her hair and face. She swiped it away and dug out her key. As silently as possible, she unlocked the door, her hands trembling. The turn of the dead bolt sounded like a sonic boom in her ears.

If Razo is still here, please don’t let him have heard that.

She turned the knob. Dreaded pushing on the door that stuck on the corner in humid weather like today. Why hadn’t she gotten that fixed?

Because you didn’t know keeping quiet could be a matter of life and death. How could you?

She put her shoulder to the door. Pressed. Wood rubbed against wood. The grating noise sounding like a piercing cry, giving them away for sure.

Addy couldn’t hang back. She had to breach with confidence now.

Gun raised, she charged into the room that held the lingering smell of her mother’s arthritis cream. Addy scanned the space. Saw her mom. Then Nancy. Both tied up. Both gagged. Otherwise unharmed and seated in wooden chairs in front of a sheet stapled to the wall.

“Are they gone?” she asked Nancy.

She frantically bobbed her head up and down.

“I’ll clear the house while you stay with your mom,” Warren offered and eased past her to the hallway leading to three bedrooms.

“Check on Bear,” she called after him. “First room on the right.”

As she stepped toward her mother, Addy’s attention was drawn back to the sheet.

The perpetrator had painted a message in a fire-engine red color on the white fabric. The letters were big and bold, and paint dripped from them like blood.

Stop or next time they will pay, and so will you.

The message finally sank deep inside her, and Addy’s heart nearly refused to beat. The video hadn’t been faked. Razo, if it was indeed him, had come into her home. Taken her frail mother captive. Threatened her life with a knife and left her tied up like a trussed pig for Addy to find, then issued his warning.

Her legs threatened to buckle.

“Bear’s in his crate!” Warren yelled. “Sound asleep. An empty meat wrapper by his snout.”

Drugged. Razo had drugged Bear.

Drugging an animal. Taking her mother and Nancy at gunpoint. Calmly making a video.

The man was dangerous. A psycho.

Addy had to up her protection game. Just had to. Because despite Razo’s aggressive, audacious actions—his issued threat—she was more motivated than ever to hunt him down and make him pay.

Mack Jordan shifted the strap of his assault rifle and was fairly salivating in the RED team’s rental vehicle on the way to bust their suspect and find the missing girls. Mack and his fellow team members, Sean Nichols and Kiley Dawson, had waited countless months to bring the three Montgomery, Alabama teens

home. And as the team member with a fugitive-apprehension background, Mack was in charge of the op to rescue the abducted teens.

Sean pulled the SUV over just down the road from their target, and Mack climbed out of the vehicle, his trusty cowboy boots thumping on the asphalt. Sun shining overhead belied their dark mission ahead. He grabbed the battering ram from the back of the vehicle, the girls' faces coming to mind.

Felicia. Becky. Izzie. All thirteen years old at the time of their abduction, disappearing without a trace. The RED team—his team often described as having superhuman skills—had been called in. But they'd failed and couldn't find the girls. The investigation went cold, and their supervisor closed the case. Didn't stop the team. They kept working in their free time until they tracked down the van that had driven off with the girls inside it.

The van was driven by Jim-Tom Williams, who was hunkered down in the dilapidated house just down the road. Their surveillance of this dump hadn't shown the girls living there, but they'd watched the place long enough. It was time for action. Time to lean on this guy and bring the teens home.

"Y'all ready for this?" Mack nearly cringed at how strong his Texas accent came across when under duress or with adrenaline flowing through his body. Didn't matter. Sean and Kiley were unfazed by it.

Kiley shifted her Kevlar vest and tossed her ponytail over her shoulder, the chocolate brown a similar color to young Becky's hair. Kiley's green eyes flashed from adrenaline. "Born ready for it."

"I'm all in. Way in." Sean, the most reserved member of the team, slid a hand into dark brown hair, his fingers getting caught in the slight curl.

"Then we're a go." Mack gave a final nod, cementing the mission in his mind, and set off, marching down the shoulder of the country road—steadily moving through the humid breeze

toward the tiny clapboard-sided saltbox house. Rusty junker vehicles sat on blocks in the yard. Unmown grass billowed in the breeze. The invasive kudzu vine climbed up two vehicles and swallowed them whole.

The local SWAT team had cordoned off the street, and Mack had arranged backup from their department, their deputies manning the major thoroughfares in the area.

Mack crept up the weed-infested gravel drive.

His Spidey sense was tingling, and it never let him down.

Someone was in danger.

Was someone about to get hurt in the op? The girls? Sure, the team saw no sign of the teens on the premises, but the place had a root cellar, and Williams could be holding them captive down there.

Mack moved steadily forward, the others creeping behind him. Concern clawed at his soul. Growing stronger.

Should he abort? Continue?

Uncertain, he paused and flashed up his hand to tell his team to hold. He had to decide what to do. Quickly. If he didn't, someone could get hurt.