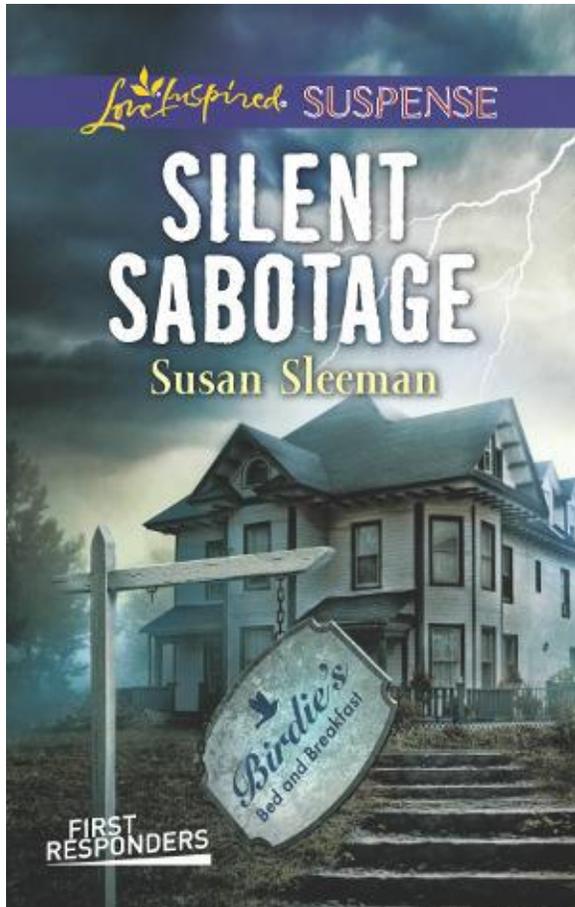


SILENT SABOTAGE



Romantic Suspense – Print and Ebook

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A HIDDEN ENEMY

Emily Graves left everything behind to save her aunt's struggling bed-and-breakfast, but she's hardly through the door before she's the one who needs saving. Someone in Bridal Veil, Oregon, will go to any lengths—even murder—to keep her from making the B and B a success.

Sheriff's deputy Archer Reed has made it his personal mission to bring down the culprit. But first he has to convince Emily to accept his protection...and determine why anyone would want to harm her. As Emily's unknown enemy becomes increasingly violent, Archer may be the only person who can keep her alive.

CHAPTER ONE

The scream was high and sharp, and Emily felt her aunt Birdie's pain to her core.

"He's shooting at us!" Birdie cried.

Emily had heard the gunshots sounding from the parking lot at the flea market and antiques mall where they were shopping for all-natural soap. Could be a hunter, as cougar season was open all year in this part of Oregon, but the blasts sounded too close.

So then what? A shooter on a killing spree? But that was ludicrous. Nothing like that happened in sleepy Bridal Veil, Oregon.

"Someone has to help us." Birdie took a tortured step back like a trapped animal ready to bolt.

“No one is shooting at us.” Heart racing, Emily patted Birdie’s arm and searched the space for any sign of a danger.

She saw a small crowd browsing at colorful booths rimming the exterior walls of the old grocery store. A mobile food cart selling corn dogs, pretzels and soda sat in the middle of the space next to worn picnic tables. Big fans whirred overhead, stirring the unusually steamy July air, but it was still thick and muggy. Nothing out of the ordinary for this small town in the foothills of Mount Hood, except the heat wave.

Emily lifted her hair from her sweaty neck, her heart rate starting to return to normal. She looked at Birdie, her face red and blotchy from the heat. In one of her Alzheimer’s fogs, she’d insisted on wearing jeans and her favorite long-sleeved flannel shirt.

Pop, pop, pop. Gunfire rang out from the parking lot.

Birdie grabbed Emily’s arm. “Did you hear that?”

“Yes.” Emily spun toward the door, fear spearing her heart.

“A shooter!” a man yelled as he came running in the front door. “He’s gone postal in the parking lot. He’s headed this way.”

“I told you so,” Birdie said matter-of-factly as if being right was more important than the fact that a crazy gunman was coming into the building.

A burly guy stepped through the door with a big black rifle in his hands and green duffel bag slung over his shoulder. He wore a baseball cap pulled down low and surveyed the space. His jaw firmed in determination, and he looked up. Dark, cold eyes swept across the room.

“It’s Delmar,” Emily whispered, trying to stem her fear when she recognized the former member of Oregon Free, a local environmental group where she was a member.

Was he here for her?

He’d been kicked out of Oregon Free for committing violent acts to further environmental causes. Acts such as planning to blow up a bridge to stop tankers from carrying oil. Not that he was able to carry it out. He’d shared his plot with her to try to impress her so she’d go out with him, and she’d turned him in so the police could intercede before he caused unspeakable harm.

A sheriff’s tactical team stormed the bridge, but Delmar’s sister had already convinced him to hold a peaceful protest instead. When the authorities arrived, his anger surged, and he marched toward them. His sister tried to stop him before an officer shot him, but she caught her foot in a pothole and fell, hitting her head on the curb and dying on the spot.

An accident. A horrible accident. But Delmar blamed Emily for the death. Hated her. And now he was here with a gun. Likely for her.

Alarm bells rang in her head, and she started backing away, tugging Birdie with her.

“It’s showtime, people,” he shouted, lifting his weapon and staring at a young man holding a corn dog.

Delmar spoke to the man, and he replied as he backed away. Emily couldn’t hear their conversation, but Delmar frowned, then lowered his eye to the sight and popped off a shot, cutting the man down.

Emily gasped and panic grabbed at her throat, making it hard to breathe.

Delmar swung his weapon up higher, his finger stretched out on the side. He ran the barrel over the crowd as if searching for someone specific. Back and forth he went, swinging in wide arcs until he stopped with the sight leveled in Emily's direction.

"We have to take cover," she whispered to Birdie and took her aunt's hand to slip quietly out of the aisle before he spotted her.

His steely eyes glared over the sight. He adjusted his cap, spit on the ground, then stepped into the food court. Up went the gun again. Down went his finger. He talked to two additional men, the result the same.

Stomp, stomp, stomp, he advanced on them. Heading her way.

Terror gripped Emily's body. They had to flee. Now! If he spotted her, he'd...

No. Not going there.

She turned to the nearest booth owner and whispered, "Is there a back door?"

"Yes, but you'll have to cross the courtyard to get there. He'll see you for sure." The owner melted into the corner of his space and ducked under a small table.

No room for Emily and Birdie to hide under there with him, but she couldn't keep moving and risk drawing Delmar's attention. She directed her aunt into the man's shop and behind a rack of soaps and lotions. Emily peeked around the rack to get a look at the food court.

Delmar came closer. Step by step. Bearing down on them.

Emily drew them deeper into the shadows and prayed. For herself. For Birdie. For everyone in the building. God was the only thing standing between them and a bullet.

Delmar stepped up to the booth and she confirmed his identity. His eyes were glazed and his focus jumpy. He'd had some run-ins with the law in violent protests, but he'd grown even more radical over the past few months. After his sister died, he'd also become bitter and angry. Now he was unhinged.

She waited. Watched him. His face. His expressions. The cold hate and fury emanating from his body. This wasn't the quiet and unassuming man she'd once sat beside in meetings. That she'd planned peaceful events with to save the environment.

This man, the one standing here, was filled with rage. His gaze connected with hers. Sharpened for a second, then narrowed into snakelike slits.

Emily's heart stuttered and nearly stopped beating.

"Emily Graves," he said, cocking his rifle, a sick smile sliding across his mouth. "Imagine finding you here..."

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Gunshots sounded from inside the mall as Deputy Archer Reed sneaked up on the main entrance. He might be alone, but as the first officer on scene, he had to take action, as it would be quite some time until reinforcements arrived. Twenty or so minutes outside the Portland metro area, deputies were spread thin. Even

a rapid response team like his team wouldn't get there quickly enough. If he hadn't been driving back to Portland from doing a community outreach event when the active shooter call came over his radio, he wouldn't be here either. No law enforcement officer would be.

But he *was* here and it was up to him and him alone to stop the shooter.

He muted his radio so it didn't alert the shooter to his presence, then grabbed his rifle from the trunk of the squad car. Thankfully he'd come off patrol to go straight to the event so he was armed and ready to roll.

Strapping on his vest and grabbing extra ammo, he raced for the door, offering a prayer for the injured, the potential victims inside and for his ability to apprehend the shooter without loss of life.

He paused at the doorway to evaluate. The shooting had stopped, people had taken cover and it felt like a desert in the middle of summer. Jet engine-sized fans blew from above, stirring the muggy air. Loud and whiny, they would cover any sound he might make as he eased inside.

Muffled sounds, perhaps voices, came from a booth on the far side of the space. Archer raised his rifle and moved on the balls of his feet. Silently. Stealthily forward. Keeping to the edge of the booths.

Nearing the backside of the building, he saw movement in a shop with all-natural products made in Oregon.

A large man shot across the opening. Archer made him at five-ten, 180 pounds. Gleaming bald head. Dark, ugly eyes. Holding a high-powered semiautomatic rifle in his hands and attired in a combat vest, the pockets holding fresh ammo clips.

Odd. Most active shooters wanted to die, but the vest, especially one with steel plates like the body armor he'd put on, said something else.

This guy was here to inflict damage—serious damage—and not be easily taken out.

Sirens sounded in the distance. *Good*. Backup was almost there.

"I said do it. Now!" the shooter suddenly shouted. "Before the cops arrive."

Archer heard a woman respond. He couldn't make out her words, but she pled with the gunman as if he was holding her hostage.

A good sign, actually. If the shooter was taking hostages instead of opening fire, Archer could use his skills as a negotiator to talk him down. But first, Archer had to get close enough to evaluate the situation without alerting the gunman to his presence.

He dropped to the ground. Belly-crawled along the floor sticky with soda until he could see inside the booth. He forced himself to ignore the grime and focus on the action.

A woman with curly gray hair stood staring into the distance. A younger woman dressed in cutoff jean shorts and a bright yellow T-shirt stood tall in front of the older woman. A slight man wearing a brown shop apron huddled in the corner, his face slack, his mouth hanging open.

The shooter approached the young woman. Pressed the rifle barrel to her heart.

"Do as I ask or I'll shoot you right now."

"Delmar, please. I can't..."

Delmar. Something about that name rang a bell. Archer couldn't place it, but the woman knew the shooter's name.

Was she involved with him?

"My aunt." She turned to point at the older woman. "She's not well. Alzheimer's. She's afraid. Needs me by her side."

"Boo-hoo. I don't care. In front of me. *Now!*" He ground the rifle deeper into her chest.

After a lingering look at her aunt, the young woman complied and he clamped his arm around her neck then backed away from the other people before releasing her. "Don't move."

Archer wanted the chance to use his negotiation skills to end this without loss of life, but right now, the situation still fell under an active shooter scenario and protocol called for an armed intervention.

He sighted his rifle on the gunman. Held his breath. Focused. No clear shot.

Weapon still trained on the woman, Delmar reached into a duffel bag sitting on a table and pulled out a bright red vest with pocketed explosives and long wires running from his backpack.

A suicide vest.

"Father, no," Archer whispered and drew in a breath.

"Put it on, Emily." Delmar's mouth split in a twisted smile. "I can think of no one better than you to wear this."

Emily. Her name was Emily, and she obviously knew the shooter but was terrified of him, and his piercing glare said he hated her.

What was going on here?

Large brown eyes flashing with strength and determination, she slipped her hands through the vest armholes. She stood five-six, and the vest hung to her thighs. The wires trailed along the floor to the backpack connecting her to Delmar.

Anger choked off Archer's breath, and he fought to draw in the sweltering air. How dare this shooter come in here, gun down innocent people and terrify this woman. How *dare* he!

He wasn't going to get away with it. Not today. Not on Archer's watch.

"Hurry it up. The cops are on the way just like I planned." Delmar grinned arrogantly. "But be careful. Wouldn't want to blow you to pieces...yet."

So he wanted the cops on scene and seemed as if he wanted to take Emily out, too. Maybe he was one of those guys who couldn't end his own life, and he needed the police to do it for him. Or...maybe this was designed as an ambush for responding officers.

Archer rolled to his side and scanned the building. Then to his back and other side, looking for a sniper waiting to kill the first responders. Archer didn't see anyone, but then if the shooter was a trained killer, Archer wouldn't see him.

“Why are you doing this, Delmar? Why me?” Emily’s hand stilled over a Velcro loop and she looked up at Delmar. Her chin rose and her determination doubled when Archer expected her to fall apart or at the very least burst into tears.

A sardonic smile played on the man’s face. “Why not you?”

“We once worked well together. Remember all the group meetings where we championed the same issues?”
Group? What group? Archer wanted to ask.

“Sure. Once upon a time.” He paused, his face still filled with rage, then took a step closer. “That was before you killed my sister.”

She looked up from fastening the vest’s Velcro loops, terror in her brown eyes. “I didn’t kill your sister. It was an accident. She fell and hit her head on the curb.”

Delmar’s lips curled in a sneer. “If you hadn’t reported my plan to the cops, Cindy would be alive today.” He got in her face. “And you deserve to pay with your life. The world will be better off without you.”

She gasped and stepped back, her worn Birkenstock sandals slapping on the concrete. “You can’t mean that.”

“I can and I do,” Delmar bit out.

Archer cringed at the unfettered fear in her eyes now, but kept his focus glued to his scope. He was desperate to save this woman’s life, yet he still hoped he wouldn’t need to fire.

“You’re not being fair,” she said. “I was afraid your bomb at the bridge would take lives.”

Bomb at the bridge.

Aha...that’s it. How Archer knew the name *Delmar*. Though Archer wasn’t the negotiator and hadn’t responded with the First Response Squad to a bomb callout at the Interstate Bridge, he’d heard about the incident. Turned out there was no bomb, but a woman died in an unfortunate accident.

And Delmar, this man armed to kill, wanted revenge. On Emily. Maybe on the FRS for their response to the bridge callout.

A sick feeling sent acid burning up Archer’s throat.

“I had to report you, don’t you see?” Emily continued.

“And I have to end your life, don’t you see?” He ended in a high note, mimicking her.

She gaped at him. “Is that what this is all about today? Shooting others to get to me?”

“Big head, much?” He rolled his eyes. “No, seeing you walk in the door just gave me a chance to stop trying to make your death look like an accident and take you out in a blaze of glory.” He grinned, a mean, ugly smile. “Now close that vest so we can get on with my plans.”

“What do you mean me dying by accident?” Her fingers shook as she finished the loops, then she raised her shoulders and stood staring at him, her arms hanging limply at her side.

“Exactly what I said. A pot rack falling in your kitchen. An arrow barely missing you, lodging in the tree instead.”

Emily gasped. “You...those...weren’t accidents...? You did it? But when the police found a camouflage hat, they said the arrow was likely from a hunter who ran off because the season hadn’t opened yet. They never thought someone had tried to kill me.”

Delmar grinned, but didn’t say another word. He drew out a trigger, the wires running straight to the bomb. Then he palmed the handheld trigger and proudly displayed it for the hostages.

Archer’s heart sank. The guy had admitted to trying to kill her, which could mean he had nothing to lose and planned to die today.

And was going to take himself and the hostages out with a bomb.

Emily took a step back, her gaze roaming the area. Her eyes locked on Archer. Before she could respond and give him away, he jerked out his badge and held it up for her to see then placed a finger over his mouth, telling her not to speak.

She took a deep breath then gave a jerky nod. Time stood still for a moment as he looked her in the eyes and transmitted confidence in his ability to end this standoff successfully. And before he looked away, he caught a flash of renewed strength in her eyes. She was a strong, courageous woman, and he was looking forward to meeting her once this was all over.

Archer returned to his scope. Fixed it on Delmar then zoomed in to get a better look at the bomb trigger.

Archer wasn’t the bomb tech on the First Response Squad, but he’d seen his fair share of devices, and the unit in Delmar’s hand looked like a compression switch.

This wasn’t good. Not good at all.

If Delmar was shot or simply released his hand, the bomb would detonate.

Oh, man.

The game had dramatically changed. Not only was Emily—a woman Delmar hated and wanted dead—now his hostage, but he could take out the whole building with the simple release of his fingers.

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