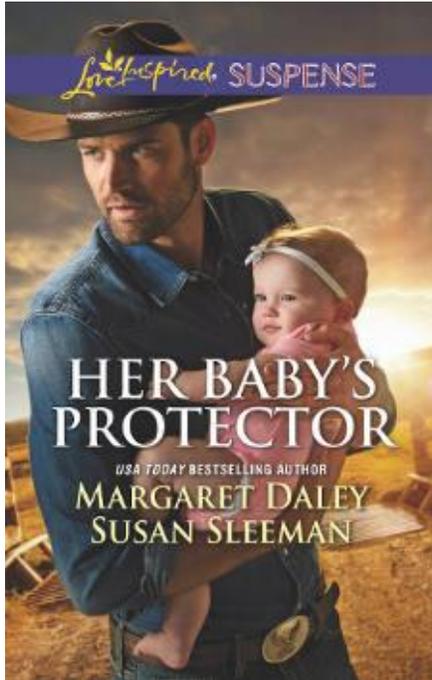


FATAL MISTAKE



Romantic Suspense – Print and Ebook

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The tragedy that killed Bree Hatfield's best friends—and left her with custody of their young daughter—has been ruled an accident. But Bree knows it was murder. Scared and alone, she turns to her ex-boyfriend, navy SEAL Clint Reed, who'll risk everything to protect baby Ella and the woman he never stopped loving.

CHAPTER ONE

A hail of bullets peppered the outside of Bree Hatfield's house, piercing the wall.

She dove to the floor, her mind racing.

Ella. She had to get to the baby asleep in her portable crib.

Father, please! Help me!

Head down, Bree slithered across the room. The carpet's rough fibers burned her elbows, but she kept her gaze focused on Ella stirring in her crib.

Bullets continued to slice through the exterior wall. She cringed but kept moving. The window above her head exploded. Glass shards rained down, pricking her neck.

Her heart stuttered. She covered her head and tucked into a ball, freezing in place, hoping to escape a bullet.

No! Ella needs me. She just lost her parents. I'm the only person she has now.

Bree dug deeper for the resolve to move forward. She elbowed over the glass, the sharp shards piercing her skin. Pain radiated up her arms but she ignored it, powered ahead and reached the crib. She shot to her feet, lifted Ella and dropped back to the floor, all in one fluid motion.

She cradled Ella close. The baby's big blue eyes blinked hard. She puckered her mouth and let out a wailing cry as if she understood the looming danger.

"Shh, sweetie," Bree cooed as she turned on her side to protect the six-month-old. Bree stayed low and scooted forward, moving deeper into the house. She finally reached the cracked linoleum in the kitchen and slid behind the island of cabinets.

She let out a heavy sigh. Drew in a deeper breath and jiggled Ella to calm her while digging her cell phone from her pocket. With shaking fingers, she dialed.

"911. What's your emergency?" the operator asked.

"Help, please!" Bree cried out to be heard above Ella's cries. "Someone outside is shooting at my house."

"Your address?" the woman asked.

Bree rattled it off. "Hurry. Please. I have a baby here. She's in danger, too. I need help."

"Officers are on the way, ma'am. Are you in a secure location?"

"Secure? I don't know." Bree looked around the space. "I think so. As long as the shooter doesn't try to come inside."

The roar of a powerful engine sounded at the road followed by the squeal of tires.

"Wait. I think they're leaving." Bree listened. "The shooting. It's stopped."

"Stay where you are, ma'am, until the officers arrive."

"Yes...sure...I won't move."

"And hold on the line. I'll let you know when they arrive and it's safe to answer your door."

Ella's cries continued and tears rolled down her cheeks. Tears formed in Bree's eyes as well, and she wanted to wail with Ella. Instead, Bree kept rocking and wished she had Ella's pacifier. "Shh. Shh. It's okay, sweetie."

"How old is your daughter?" the operator asked, likely trying to calm Bree down.

The comment did just the opposite as it reminded her of Ella's parents who died two weeks ago from carbon monoxide poisoning. "She's six months old, but she's not my daughter. Her parents recently died, and I'll soon have full custody."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

“Thank you,” Bree mumbled as she’d done over and over for the last two weeks when sympathies were offered on Laura and Jason’s deaths.

Such a terrible, horrible, senseless loss.

The day they died had started out so innocently. Ella was teething and cranky 24/7, so Bree had offered to watch the baby, allowing her friends to go out on their cabin cruiser and spend the night under the stars together, just the two of them.

But they didn’t come home the next morning. Didn’t answer their phones. Bree called 911, and the sheriff’s department located their boat anchored in a secluded cove.

They were found in their bed, and the detective who investigated their deaths said the generator powering their air conditioning failed, filling the cabin with carbon monoxide. An accidental death, he’d claimed, but Bree didn’t believe it. Jason was too careful and meticulous with everything in life to die in such a preventable accident.

“Officers are just down the street,” the operator said. “When they knock on your door it’s safe to answer.”

“Thank you.” Bree sighed out a breath and disconnected.

She pushed to her knees to rock Ella who settled into more of a whimper than body-heaving cries. Still, Bree could use help with Ella as the police sorted out this disaster. Bree pressed speed dial for her mother.

“Hey, sweetheart,” her mother answered. “Ella fussy again?”

“Can you come over right away?” Bree fired off details of the incident, her words shooting out as fast as the barrage of bullets that had cut through the wall.

“I’m on my way.”

Not surprised at her mother’s no-nonsense response, Bree disconnected. Her mother and she were both take-action kind of people. No point in dwelling on emotions and feelings or ruminating. Just face the problem head on and solve it. That worked most of the time for Bree. Well, there was that one time with her former boyfriend Clint...but she wasn’t going to let her mind go there.

She shoved her phone into her pocket and retrieved Ella’s pacifier just before footsteps pounded toward her front stoop. Bree settled Ella in the crib and went to the door.

She found a young officer who looked barely old enough to shave. Behind him, another officer marched up to the neighboring house and a third officer rummaged in the trunk of his patrol car.

The officer at the door ran his gaze over her. "I'm Officer Winkleman. Is everyone all right here, ma'am?"

"We're fine." Bree rubbed her hand over her face.

"Your arms are bleeding."

She glanced at the cuts. "It's nothing. I'm a nurse. I can handle it."

The officer nodded and took out a small notebook. "Can you tell me your name and what happened here?"

She introduced herself. "I was getting ready for bed when all of a sudden someone started shooting."

"Did you see the shooter?"

She shook her head. "I dropped to the floor then crawled over to Ella's crib to move us behind the kitchen cabinets for safety. Then I called 911." How in the world was she organizing her thoughts when they were ping-pong in her brain like pinballs?

"Do you know of anyone who would want to shoot at you or your house?"

Her thoughts immediately went to Laura and Jason's deaths. Could this be related?

"Maybe. My friends died from carbon monoxide poisoning a few weeks ago." She shared the details. "I've been looking into the incident, and I'm beginning to think it wasn't an accident at all."

The officer's eyebrow went up in a perfect arc. "And why's that, ma'am?"

"First, there was a gouge on the boat, like another boat had rammed into it. Jason was meticulous about everything. If the gouge had happened before the day they died, he would have complained about the damage, and he didn't say a word. Second, I texted with Laura all day while they were on the boat. If it was damaged that day, she would have told me."

Officer Winkleman's eyes narrowed. "Okay, say the damage occurred near the time they died. It still doesn't mean someone killed them."

"There's more. After I discovered the gouge, I asked around the marina to see if anyone knew anything about another boat in the area that night. I found a guy who saw two boats in the cove tied together around the time they died. When he came closer to them, one boat raced off. He said it was too dark to describe the boat or the driver, but I asked the guy to tell Detective Newlin about what he saw."

"And did he?"

She shook her head. “He refused. He said he was doing something that night that he didn’t want the police to know about, and there was no way he’d go to them. I gave Detective Newlin the guy’s name and boat registration number. Turns out the boat was stolen, and the detective couldn’t find the guy. Detective Newlin thinks I’m just grasping at straws to get him to investigate when there’s no real reason to do so.”

“I can see why he might think that.”

“I didn’t make up my conversation with the guy, and he had no reason to lie to me about what he saw. Why would another boat be tied to Laura and Jason’s in the middle of the night? And now this?” She gestured at her living room. “Look at this place. I think the killer followed me home and shot up the house. Maybe to warn me. Maybe to kill me.”

The officer stared at her, his gaze patronizing. “You live on the fringe of a bad neighborhood, ma’am. This could simply be a drive-by shooting.”

She glanced around the area, looking for anything to disprove her theory, but bullets had riddled only her home. “I see no damage to anything else from the shooting,” she said. “It doesn’t look like any other houses, or cars, or people out on the street were hit by the gunshots.”

“Not that we can tell at this point,” he admitted.

“But you expect me to believe that a random criminal drove by and decided to shoot up my house—and *only* my house—for absolutely no reason?” She sighed. “Why won’t any of you listen to me?”

“From what you’ve told me, Detective Newlin did listen, and he investigated each incident you told him about, but he was unable to find anything that indicated foul play.” The officer stared at her for a moment as if weighing his next move. “Still, I’ll contact him and tell him about the shooting.”

Right, and tell him that you think I’m nuts while you’re at it.

“Make sure you also mention that I’ve been asking around at the dock, and I think the killer’s afraid I’m on to him.”

“Seems like a long shot, ma’am.” He flipped his notebook closed. “We’ll need you to remain in your house while we process the scene.”

She nodded her understanding. “I called my mother. Marie Hatfield. She’s on her way to help me with the baby. Can you please let her in?”

“Of course,” he said and pivoted on his heel.

Bree watched him step down the walkway and talk with the officer at the patrol car. Together, they strung yellow tape across the road, sealing off her home as a crime scene. She wanted to think the officer was right, the detective, too, that Jason and Laura's deaths were accidental, that no one was targeting her at all, but her gut said otherwise. It was clear, though, if someone killed Laura and Jason, it was up to her to prove it.

She stayed at the door watching her neighbors spill out of their houses and the officers take their statements. She stood strong under their cautious yet curious glances until her mother drove up. Bree wanted to collapse into her mother's arms as she'd done in her childhood, but she drew in a breath and blew it out instead. She was a mother now, and she had to be strong.

After showing her ID, her mother slipped under the fluttering yellow tape to march up the walk. Her expression tightened with each step.

She grabbed Bree up into a hug. "I'm so relieved you and Ella are okay."

"Me, too." Bree enjoyed the warm embrace for a moment then pushed away before she started getting weepy.

"It looks like a war zone out here," her mother said as they stepped inside and closed the door.

Bree ran a hand over her face.

Her mother took hold of Bree's arm. "You've cut yourself."

"I had to crawl through glass to get to Ella." Bree checked the blood caked on her skin. She could treat herself, but the angle would prove a challenge. "Would you mind looking at it for me?"

"Sit and I'll get the first-aid kit."

Bree went to the sofa and shook the cushions. Glass tinkled to the floor, mixing with larger shards already underfoot. Thankfully, Bree hadn't crawled over any big pieces or her elbows would be shredded. She sat, her gaze going to the window, and her phone rang, startling her. She didn't recognize the caller's number, but she hoped it was someone she'd talked to at the marina and they had information on her friends' deaths.

She accepted the call. "Bree Hatfield."

"You're sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong," a gruff male voice said. "Back off or next time I'll make sure the bullets hit the mark."

Fear raced through Bree's veins, along with a sense of vindication. She'd been right after all. "Who is this?"

No response.

“Hello?” She looked at the screen to see the call had been disconnected.

Her mother came into the room. “You’re as white as a sheet. What is it? What’s happened?”

“I think I just got a call from Laura and Jason’s killer.”

“What?” Her mother dropped onto the table in front of Bree.

Bree ran her gaze over the broken vase, the shattered window, the wall filled with holes, and her fear ramped up. “He warned me to back off or next time he’d make sure he shot me.”

Her mother twisted her hands together. “You need to tell the cops outside or get on the phone with that detective.”

“And tell them what? That a man called and threatened me? The officer who took my statement thought I was way off mark, so he’ll look at me like I’m crazy. And if the detective hasn’t believed me so far, why will he believe this?”

“Good point, but you have to call him.”

“I will,” Bree replied, a sudden resolve filling her heart. “But even if he blows me off again, I have to keep looking for the killer. Ella’s been left an orphan, and she deserves to know the truth about what happened to her parents. They deserve for the truth to be told, as well.”

“Ella deserves to be safe, too,” her mother pointed out. “How are you going to protect her and yourself from her parents’ killer?”

“About that,” Bree replied. “I have an idea.”

*

Clint Reed rumbled down the country road in his 1950s Ford pickup that had once belonged to his granddad. The window open, he gulped in the late summer air. A born and bred Texan, there was something about the air in his home state that let him breathe deeper. Or maybe it had more to do with his lack of tension after leaving his crazy life as a navy SEAL behind for two weeks of leave on his ranch.

He turned off the highway and swung down the winding drive of HR Ranch, named after his granddad Hank Reed. Knee-high grasses, brown from the late summer sun, swished in the breeze. Clint called the ranch home for only a few weeks out of the year, but he’d been raised on the sprawling land since his parents died when he was twelve.

The tires crunched over gravel, taking him past a large corral that brought childhood memories flooding back. Riding his horse in this very corral. Climbing the big oak at the end of the drive

and building a tree house. His stern grandfather who failed to show love, always judging. Making life hard on a boy whose parents had been the very opposite. Making Clint hate the place.

Still, now that his granddad had passed and the HR belonged to Clint, he found peace on the acreage—especially when he needed a break from the extreme demands of his job. The solitude away from people, from life-threatening problems and missions. Give him a few days at the HR riding his horses Frosty and Trident, and he'd gladly head back to the SEALs for his next deployment.

He rounded a bend and spotted lights shining through the trees.

Lights? Was someone at the house?

He stomped on the brakes to think before going barreling up to the house. His housekeeper, Nessie, could be there, he supposed, but not likely at ten o'clock at night. He killed his headlights and cut off the engine before dialing her.

"All good residence," she answered.

"It's Clint. Are you at the ranch?"

"No."

"When's the last time you were here?"

"Yesterday."

"Did you leave a light on for me?"

"No."

"Anything seem odd when you were here?"

"No."

Most of the time Clint appreciated Nessie's to-the-point personality, but right now, he'd like more than one-word answers. "And Pete? Is he here?"

"He's snoring up a storm in his recliner, but we'll be over first thing in the morning."

"Okay. See you then." Clint disconnected.

Had Nessie actually left a light on? She was conscientious, and yet, she was nearing seventy. He needed to check it out, and he'd been a SEAL far too long not to take care and approach under cover.

He silenced his phone and slipped out of the truck, glad the door's rusty hinges were quiet for once. He unlocked the tool box in the truck bed to retrieve his handgun and rifle.

He loaded both guns and set off for the house, moving silently through the trees. A soft breeze played over the tranquil ranch, cutting through the sticky night alive with cricket chirps and an owl's repeated hoots. Everything in nature was ignorant of the danger that lurked ahead, but Clint wouldn't let down his guard.

In the clearing around the long, low house, he found an older-model sedan. He eased alongside it for cover and took a good look.

What in the world?

He moved closer and ran his fingers over bullet holes dotting the side. His apprehension skyrocketed.

Was a local thug using the usually empty house as a hideout? Clint would have installed a security system, but he'd never had any issues. Plus Nessie and Pete didn't like the thought of having to arm and disarm it, so he'd bowed to their wishes. Maybe it was time to reconsider.

He racked his handgun and continued forward, working his way through tall grasses and wildflowers to the mowed area outside the house. Warm light spilled out, illuminating the shrubs and flowers Nessie cared for. Gauzy curtains fluttered in the breeze and brought him to a stop.

So the window was open. Nessie might have left a light on but she would never leave a window open. Something moved behind the curtains. Someone was inside and he needed to find out who.

His best bet was to enter through the back door and surprise them. He circled around the rear of the house, unlocking the door as quietly as he could. He slipped inside and down the hall where female voices drifted out to meet him.

One voice pierced his brain, and his heart skipped a beat.

No. He had to be wrong. *She* couldn't be here. Right?

He shot a quick look into the room and spotted two women. He recognized both of them but the younger woman's face was burned into his memory.

So now what? How did he step into the room and tell the only woman he'd ever loved that he was home without letting her see how much she still got to him?

Keep it light. That's what he'd do. He cleared his throat to alert them to his presence.

"Hi honey, I'm home," he joked as he swung around the corner.

"What on earth." Bree clutched her chest. "What are *you* doing here?"

“Ah, this is my house, Bree. Shouldn’t I be the one asking that question and demanding a good reason for you breaking in?”

She rushed across the room to him, tears filling her eyes. “I’m in trouble, Clint. Big trouble, and I have nowhere else to go.”

Aw, man. No. Not tears. Not a voice that trembled with fear. He could tune out a lot of things in life, but he could never ignore a woman in trouble, especially not when the woman was Bree.

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