

FATAL MISTAKE



Romantic Suspense – Print and Ebook

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Each day could be her last...but not if he can help it.

Tara Parrish is the only person ever to survive an attack by the Lone Wolf bomber. Scared and emotionally scarred by her near death, she goes into hiding with only one plan—to stay alive for another day. She knows he’s coming after her, and if he finds her, he will finish what he started.

Agent Cal Riggins has had only one goal for the past six months—to save lives by ending the Lone Wolf’s bombing spree. To succeed, he needs the help of Tara Parrish, the one person who can lead them to the bomber. Cal puts his all into finding Tara, but once he locates her, he realizes if he can find her, the Lone Wolf can, too. He must protect

Tara at all costs, and they’ll both need to resist the mutual attraction growing between them to focus on hunting down the bomber, because one wrong move could be fatal.

CHAPTER ONE

*Spotsylvania County, Virginia
Thursday, April 28
7:50 p.m.*

He was coming for her, and he was close.

He'd parked on the driveway and would soon head for the pump house, taking long strides. Spaced evenly, methodical, as she knew Mr. Perfectionist would take, his footsteps rustling over dead grass, bringing him closer.

At the door, he would twist the rusty knob. Step inside. Spot her. She could almost hear his thoughts when he did.

I was sloppy. Now she knows. Do I let her live? Kill her? How can I dispose of the body?

The body. Ha! *Her*. He was going to kill **her**. She'd grown up with him. Lived next door for years, but he had no choice now. He had to know she wouldn't keep quiet about this...this what? She didn't even know what to call it.

She swept her gaze over the rough-hewn table, pausing at neat piles of white blocks covered in green cellophane. Explosives—military grade, like she'd seen in briefings in her job as a government translator. The blocks sat solidly among triggers, wires, pipes, and items she couldn't identify. Items for a bomb. Maybe several bombs. Pages and pages of diagrams, maps, and other papers were scattered beside the equipment.

Recent television news stories raced through her brain. Explosions on the first of every month. The destruction. Chaos and confusion. Nothing more than burned-out shells left behind. Death. Muslim women. Always women.

Oh my gosh! Oren. Her childhood best friend was a killer. A terrorist. The Lone Wolf Bomber. No...no. Couldn't be, right? But the evidence...

His car door slammed in the distance, the echo reverberating through the quiet.

He's coming.

She had to escape, but how? The only door and window in the tiny building led to the path he'd take.

Think, Tara, think. Hurry! Hurry!

She reached for her phone. The smooth case slipped through her fingers and tumbled to the floor.

Father, please. Help me!

She dropped to her knees, her fingers crawling over the dirt floor until they curled around the cool metal. She woke it up and lifted a finger to tap in 911.

No. She should call the FBI's hotline. The bright red letters, 1-800-THE-BOMB, had scrolled across the television screen nearly every newscast for the last few months. They were better prepared than local police to deal with a lunatic bomber. She punched in the number and the phone rang.

"Hotline, this is Special Agent Cal Riggins," the deep male voice said.

Good. She'd gotten an actual agent.

"My aunt's tenant, Oren Keeler." Her words tumbled out, rushing over each other. "He has...oh my gosh...this can't be happening. I'm...I'm in the pump house. Behind my aunt's home. There are bomb-making materials here."

"Calm down," Agent Riggins said. "What's your name?"

Calm down? Was he nuts? "I can't calm down. Oren just drove up. Once he finds me here, he'll kill me."

"It would help if I had your name," Agent Riggins said evenly when her body revved on high octane.

He was so infuriatingly composed, Tara wanted to shout at him to take her seriously, but Oren would hear her. "My name's Tara. Tara Parrish."

"Hello, Tara."

She didn't have time for pleasantries. "I need you to get someone over here now. Before he comes inside and discovers me."

"What's your address?"

She rattled off the farm address in rural Virginia about an hour and a half from her home in Washington, D.C. "I'm down the drive. In the pump house. It's not more than a shed behind the hired hand's house Oren rents. He grew up next door, but his mother died last year and he recently lost the farm. My aunt invited him to live here."

"Why are you in the pump house?"

"My aunt...She wasn't getting any water at the main house, so she asked me to check the pump. The door was locked, but I broke in and found...oh, no...no. I can't believe this is happening."

Her heart rate skyrocketed, and she shot across the room, putting as much distance as possible between her and the door.

"Where is Keeler now?"

"He just got out of his car and will be here soon. He wasn't supposed to be home, but he came back early. He's gonna...oh my gosh...he'll..." She couldn't say the words aloud, as everything suddenly seemed terrifyingly real.

"Is there another way out of the shed?" Agent Riggins asked, that infuriating calm remaining in place.

"Nothing he can't see. I can't..." A sob stole her words, and tears pricked at her eyes, itching, burning for release. She swallowed hard to fight them off.

"Hey, hey, now, Tara," he soothed.

She heard clicking on the line, then silence. Terrifying, horrible silence.

“Are you still there?” she cried out.

“Don’t worry, I’m here. I’ll get you through this. My team is already dispatching a sheriff’s deputy.”

What? He was passing her off. Unbelievable.

Tears gave way to anger. “But what about you? You’re the FBI. You should be here, too. To arrest Oren. He could be the Lone Wolf. The bomber you’re looking for. I thought you’d make this a priority.”

“It *is* a priority, and I’m on my way. But even with a chopper on standby, it’ll take twenty minutes or so for me to arrive.” She heard activity in the background of the call, and his breathing picked up as if he was on the move. “The deputy can arrive sooner. Until then, I need you to take proactive measures.”

“What can I do other than blow up one of his bombs?” Hysterical laughter bubbled up, and she swallowed it down.

“Does the door open in?” he asked, ignoring her panic.

“Yes.”

“If you’re not by the door, go over there.”

“But that’s where *he*’ll be.”

“Just trust me, Tara. Go to the door. Stand behind it so when he pushes it open he doesn’t see you.”

He sounded so certain, so sure, that she did as he asked and crossed the room.

“Okay, I’m there,” she whispered, but didn’t have peace about moving closer to Oren.

Agent Riggins might be able to give directions that he thought would help, but he didn’t know Oren. Didn’t know his tenacity. She did. Had experienced it when he declared his love

three months ago, and she'd let him down not too gently, but he still needed a giant stick upside the head to get a clue.

"Now find something big and hard that you can strike him with," Agent Riggins continued. "If the deputy doesn't arrive before Keeler enters the building, you'll have to disable him."

She looked around the room and found a thick, jagged piece of wood. She almost laughed, as it was looking like Oren would get that whack upside the head he sorely needed, but there was nothing funny about her situation.

She lowered her voice to keep Oren from hearing her. "Okay. I found a board. It should work."

"Good. Now you're ready to take action if needed," Agent Riggins said over the sound of his footsteps pounding in the background of the call.

"I...he..." She lost her voice. Lost her breath. Concentrated but couldn't seem to draw in enough air. She was suffocating.

"Let's not focus on Keeler," he said. "Why don't you describe the items on the table?"

Right. Forget the man who walked up the path ready to kill her.

"Come on, Tara," Agent Riggins commanded. "Breathe deep and look at the table. Tell me what you see."

She could at least give it a try. She glanced at her aunt's old potting bench with chipped and peeling green paint. "There's a cardboard box. It's labeled 'Explosives Dangerous Handle Carefully.' Next to it are white blocks. They're wrapped in green shrink-wrap."

"How many packs?"

"I don't know. Fifteen. Maybe more."

A low whistle came over the phone.

“That’s bad, right? I knew it. Really bad.” She moved her focus farther down the table.

“There’s also a bunch of PVC pipe connected with elbows to look like a C.”

“C,” he mumbled.

“Yeah. Is that bad?”

“Can be.”

“Does the Lone Wolf use pipes like these?” she asked, knowing reporters had never revealed specifics of his bombs.

“Sorry. I can’t discuss that with you.”

Translated, yeah, the Lone Wolf used PVC pipe and odds of Oren being the bomber were growing by the minute.

Panic finally won out, and she clutched a corroded pipe to stay upright. “With the way Oren changed, I should have known something like this could happen. We were friends growing up, but he got weird in high school. Always spouting off about causes that no one cared about. Then he changed religions and tried to get us to convert to the Islamic faith. So I guess this isn’t unbelievable. Or maybe it is. I mean bombs. Who does that? Not someone in my life.”

Her thoughts traveled to her aunt waiting for her at the main house. “Oh my gosh, my Aunt June. She’s going to freak when she hears the Lone Wolf is living on her property.”

“You could be wrong about this. Maybe Keeler’s letting a friend use the space.”

“Oren? Friends? No...no, he doesn’t have any friends. He’s a loner.”

A car trunk slammed, and then footsteps crunched over gravel.

Her heart skipped a beat. “How long will it take for the deputy to get here?”

“He’s five minutes out.”

“That’s too long.” She whispered to keep from being heard. “Oren’s coming to the door. What do I do?”

“First, take a deep breath, Tara.” Agent Riggins’s soothing voice returned, serene, almost melodic, yet deep and strong.

She thought she’d like him if she lived to meet him.

“C’m on,” he continued. “Breathe. In through your nose. Out through your mouth.”

She tried it. Managed two cycles before she heard Oren’s footsteps stop. Her throat closed.

“He’s right outside. I can hear him.” The words came out on an exhale.

Her hand shook so badly she almost dropped the phone.

“Calm down, Tara. Put the phone in your pocket so Keeler doesn’t know you’ve called to report him. It’ll also free your hands to take a better hold on the wood you found.”

“Hang up? What? No. No. I don’t want to hang up. Don’t leave me alone.”

“I won’t. Just put the phone in your pocket, and I can continue to listen in. We’ll stay connected. Okay?”

The doorknob turned, a click of the metal sounding like an explosion in her head. “Please stay with me, Agent Riggins. Please.”

“Don’t worry, Tara. I’m not going anywhere. I’m here for you.”

Right, he’d said that, but he wasn’t here, now, was he? Her life was in her own hands. Hers alone.

CHAPTER TWO

Spotsylvania County, Virginia
8:10 p.m.

The Black Hawk's rotors thundered over Cal's head as he pressed his phone against his ear and listened hard for any word from Tara. He'd transferred her call to his cell and despite her phone remaining in her pocket, he'd picked up enough of her movements to stay current on her situation.

He'd heard the board crack against Keeler's body and Tara's footsteps as they'd pounded away from the pump house. And then...then...man, it had been gut-wrenching when a gunshot rang through her phone, and she'd issued a desperate plea for help. Every protective instinct in Cal's body sat up and took notice. But even worse, the sound was followed by silence.

Deadly silence.

"ETA, four minutes." Chopper pilot Zach Lawson's voice came over Cal's earbud.

"Copy that," Cal said, trying not to snap at Zach.

Cal was worried about Tara—that was a given—but he also didn't like this op. Didn't like it one bit. His six-person team should be suited up and on board with him. An FBI Critical Incident Response team, they always had aircraft and pilots on standby and could have wheels up in, say, an hour or so, but Tara couldn't wait for an hour. He'd had to move on the fly.

So no backup. No team. No trained operators carrying out their assignment alongside him. Tonight he had only the phone connection to Tara, the red blip of her cell on his GPS, and an aerial map of the farm for intel.

Could be worse, he supposed. At least she'd thought to call the hotline manned by agents 24/7 so they could instantly respond to credible threats. If she'd called 911, the deputy who Cal instructed to stand down at the pump house, could be racing after Tara and Keeler, getting both of them killed or even causing a SWAT situation that the deputy wasn't prepared to handle.

"Three minutes," Zach announced.

Cal couldn't sit any longer. He needed to pace but with the small space he settled for standing, his shoulders and head bent to keep from hitting the overhead. He stared down on the boots he'd worn as a SEAL on too many hostage rescue missions to count. Missions that ended in more failures than Cal could accept. He slammed a fist into the chopper's metal hull, the pain stinging up his arm and taking away some of the anger.

Some.

The rage had been simmering in his gut since a rescue gone bad where a seven-year-old boy died in his arms. Cal carried a boatload of regret from that op, and now, women dying at the Lone Wolf's hands? That had added even more guilt to the equation. Too many lives lost on his watch. He wouldn't let the same thing happen to Tara.

He jerked out his phone and checked her GPS dot. She continued to move deeper into the woods, and it would take him longer to get to her.

"Two minutes," Zach said.

Cal shrugged into his pack and double-checked his assault rifle and ammo before stepping to the door. Outside the city, black clouds obscured the moon and stars. Obscured his landing.

Once they were on target, he'd fast-rope down to the road and be on Keeler's tail without the guy even sensing his arrival. Perhaps Keeler would hear a chopper whirling overhead,

hovering for a moment, then moving on, but nothing to put the guy on alert. Give it another hour or so and the full squad of operators would arrive.

Now *that* thought was smile worthy.

“One minute,” Zach said.

Cal lowered his night-vision goggles. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the greenish color tinting his vision and pulled on his assault gloves. Made with a Nomex and Kevlar blend for protection, they had a gun-cut finger for increased dexterity.

The helo went into a hover, and Cal glanced at Zach, who gave a thumbs-up.

Go time.

A burst of adrenaline raced through Cal’s blood, but he regulated his breathing. He nodded at Zach and jerked open the door. Air roared past, sucking and swirling. He kicked out the rope and grabbed it. Sliding down, the friction burned into his gloves. Thankfully, the Nomex shielded his hand. He hit the road hard, jarring his whole body. He wasted no time but signaled a successful landing, and the helo departed like a hummingbird whirling into the black of night.

He took a moment to get his bearings. To his right sat an open grain field. On his left, a thick grove of trees mixed with the darkness. He pulled out the GPS device and followed the red dot about five hundred yards ahead in the stand of trees. Still moving, Tara had slowed her pace. Probably tiring. Made her more vulnerable.

He had to move. Now!

He crept through the woods. Silently. Carefully.

Step. Step. Step. Break. A quick check of his surroundings.

Rinse and repeat. Over and over.

A tedious way to advance, but standard operating procedure for a hostage rescue professional dictated a cautious approach to arrive undetected and alive. After all, he had to protect himself first if he hoped to save another person.

In the thick of the trees now, Cal heard an owl hoot above, but otherwise deafening silence greeted him as he crept forward. Muggy, spring air closed in, the forest feeling like a sauna, and sweat dripped from his body.

Fifty yards away from Tara's location, he lifted his goggles and raised his rifle. He sighted in the area ahead and looked through the red crosshairs, but found no one.

He crept closer and swung the rifle to his right. Held his breath. Searched. Twenty feet ahead, Tara stood with her back to a tree, her chest rapidly rising and falling. No sign of Keeler.

Cal backed up and skirted behind trees to edge closer for a better look. He wanted to call out to her, but his sixth sense told him something was hinky. He took a stand behind a tree and scanned the area.

A branch snapped to his right, echoing through the still of the night.

He swung the scope, saw nothing, but dropped his finger to the trigger anyway. If Keeler and the Lone Wolf were one and the same, Cal wanted to take him alive to gain much-needed ISIS intel. But the most important thing right now—the most important thing at all times to a law enforcement officer—was to protect innocent life. Sure, if he brought the bomber in, or even put two in his chest, Cal might be stopping a future attack, but that attack wasn't certain.

Tara's life was on the line right now.

He ran his scope over the area, seeing nothing, but his frog sense kept screaming he was missing something. He continued to scan.

C'mon, c'mon, c'mon. Show yourself.

A sudden explosion in the distance thundered through the air. The ground rumbled beneath his feet in rolling waves, and the sky flashed with brilliant reds and oranges. He estimated the blast came from the pump house, and now any evidence they might have recovered to locate Keeler should he get away burned in a red-hot inferno.

A gunshot split the night. A cry of distress followed. Cal swung his scope back to Tara in time to catch sight of her collapsing to the ground. He stifled a shout of rage and scanned the area. Saw no one.

“FBI. Don’t move,” Cal called out, though he didn’t have eyes on Keeler.

Cal remained in position, his finger itching to jerk the trigger, but he couldn’t very well go firing at random into the forest, hoping to hit a person who may or may not be the Lone Wolf. Who may or may not have just shot Tara. Cal needed more information to discharge his weapon.

Deep laughter rumbled through the trees behind Tara. “Nice try, Secret Agent Man, but I think you’ll want to check on Tara instead of chasing after me. Adios.”

The guy charged through the trees, the sound of snapping branches and crunching leaves soon trailing off. A sense of urgency to bolt toward Tara ate at Cal’s stomach, but he eased his way up to her, scanning the area with each step, looking for a trap. She lay on her back, and even in the thick of the night, he clearly saw through his NVGs the dark spot pooling on her abdomen.

A gut shot, one of the worst places to take a hit. She wouldn’t survive if he didn’t stop the bleeding and get her to the hospital.

Memories of the day the young boy lost his life on the raid came rushing back, filling Cal’s chest with apprehension, but he kept moving and grabbed his radio to connect with Zach.

“Alpha One, this is Alpha Two requesting exfil at secondary location.” A cold feeling of dread twisted through his body. “Hostage has taken a bullet. Radio the ER and let them know

we're bringing her in with a gunshot wound to the left abdomen. And get word to standby deputies that Keeler's on the move. He's armed and dangerous and heading due west of my coordinates."

"Roger that," Zach said calmly, the way all operators on the team would respond.

Cal stowed his radio, grabbed his flashlight, and ran the beam over Tara's face. Her eyes were closed and her mouth pinched. He swung the light over her body, stopping at the wound. He positioned himself above her yet kept an eye on the location where Keeler had fled.

"Tara." Cal put cheer he didn't feel into his voice. "It's me, Cal. I told you I'd get here."

Her eyes fluttered open.

"I...he..." Her voice, a mere whisper, evaporated into the inky black sky.

"Don't talk." Cal tore off his gloves and ripped his medical kit from his pack. He flipped on his headlamp and pressed gauze pads on the wound.

She moaned, and the phone she clutched in her hand fell to the ground.

"It's okay, Tara. I'm going to get you through this," he soothed as her blood easily saturated the gauze, increasing his concern.

He grabbed a couple rolls of Kerlix and pressed hard. She groaned, a drawn-out, tortured expression of pain, but it was weaker this time. He rested his fingers on her wrist to find a fast and thready pulse.

Not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

He turned his attention back to her face and cringed at the tightness he found there. He gently swept a strand of hair from her eyes and bent low. Her agony sent a visceral pain piercing his body, hitting him in a place in his heart he thought long dead.

“We’re going to take a little trip, sweetheart.” He did his best to keep his concern from his voice. “But don’t worry. I’m going with you, and I’ll get you to the ER in plenty of time.”

He picked up her phone, then lifted her into his arms, his promise hanging in the air. Why had he made another promise? Like the one he’d made to the boy on his failed rescue. Just a kid who didn’t make it.

What good was a promise when he had no control over the endgame and it was up to God to save her life?

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