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Vintage INTRIGUE

Protecting the Pregnant Witness

JULIE MILLER

Julie Miller

Protecting the Pregnant Witness

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A ruthless killer…an expectant mother…one determined cop.Rafe Delgado had been there for Josie Nichols her entire life. So when he turned to her one night, emotionally drained thanks to a heartbreaking case, her longtime crush on the brooding cop reached a whole new level. But afterward, Rafe went back to being untouchable and Josie didn't know how to break through his shell…even to tell him she was pregnant.Everything Rafe did was by the book and so his moment of weakness could never be repeated. He didn't deserve someone like Josie.even if it was a daily struggle to keep his hands off her. But learning she could ID a cold#blooded killer changed everything. Now she was in his protective custody and caring about her only made his job harder. And learning about his unborn child made it nearly impossible.

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Содержание

“I don’t want you to get hurt, Josie. I care about you.”	6
Protecting the Pregnant Witness	7
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	8
CAST OF CHARACTERS	9
Contents	10
Prologue	11
Chapter One	13
Chapter Two	20
Chapter Three	28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

“I don’t want you to get hurt, Josie. I care about you.”

“Yeah, just not enough to do something about it.”

With that, Rafe drew back, taking his heat and charged energy with him. “I’ll admit you gave me a good shock Friday night. But you know I’ll take care of the baby—medical bills, daycare—whatever you need.”

Feeling a bit of pity that he could see no joy, nor feel any hope, at the miracle they’d created together, she reached up and brushed her fingertips across his smooth, warm jaw. His pulse leaped beneath her touch and she smiled sadly. “My brave, noble, do-the-right-thing Rafe. That’s the big issue, isn’t it? I don’t think you understand what I really need.” She pulled her hand down to her distended belly. “What we really need. And if you do, I don’t know if you’ll ever be able to give it.”

Protecting the Pregnant Witness
Julie Miller



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In memory of George M. Binger, Jr.
1930-2010
My first hero.
My dad.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Miller attributes her passion for writing romance to all those fairy tales she read growing up, and to shyness. Encouragement from her family to write down all those feelings she couldn't express became a love for the written word. She gets continued support from her fellow members of the Prairieland Romance Writers, where she serves as the resident "grammar goddess." This award-winning author and teacher has published several paranormal romances. Inspired by the likes of Agatha Christie and Encyclopedia Brown, Ms. Miller believes the only thing better than a good mystery is a good romance.

Born and raised in Missouri, she now lives in Nebraska with her husband, son and smiling guard dog, Maxie. Write to Julie at P.O. Box 5162, Grand Island, NE 68802-5162.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Sergeant Rafe Delgado —Point man and second in command of KCPD's premier SWAT Team 1. Self-appointed protector to his slain partner's daughter. After a botched mission, he turned to a friend and comfort flared into passion for one brief night. Now he's worried that he may be the danger she needs protecting from the most.

Josie Nichols —Nursing student. Bartender. Six months' pregnant and the only surviving witness who can identify a serial killer. As the murderer closes in, determined to silence her, she turns to her former best friend Rafe to protect her—and the baby he doesn't yet know is his.

Robbie Nichols —Josie's uncle. Owner of the Shamrock Bar.

Patrick Nichols —Josie's half brother.

Detective Spencer Montgomery —The KCPD detective investigating the Rich Girl Killer murders.

Jake Lonergan —New bartender at the Shamrock Bar.

Steve Lassen —A reporter with a nose for news? Or an annoying thorn in SWAT Team 1's backside?

Jeffrey Beecher —The event planner putting together KCPD's summer carnival to raise money for the widows and orphans fund.

Bud Preston —This perennial lowlife and odd-job man keeps showing up in the most unexpected places.

The Rich Girl Killer —Who is he?

Contents

Prologue
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Epilogue

Prologue

The Past

It was a bone-deep instinct to shut down his emotions and simply survive that allowed Rafe Delgado to tune out the world and squeeze the trigger.

Aaron was down. The car had plowed right through him, tossing him into the air and speeding past as he landed with an ominous thud on the pavement of the busy Kansas City street.

Bang.

And then the world rushed in and the fear welled up as snapshot images and jarring noises etched themselves indelibly on his battered soul. Shouts. Curses. Lights flashing. Sirens wailing. Radio static. Screams. The squealing, grating crunch of a car spinning on its blown-out tire and slamming into the bricks of a building down the block from the bank the driver and passengers had just robbed.

"Aaron?" No. Hell no. Rafe holstered his weapon and ran. He put out one hand to stop a truck turning the corner in front of him and radioed in the call for an ambulance. They'd been the first cops on the scene to answer the bank's silent alarm. Rafe's partner—veteran cop, friend, mentor—had said they needed to stop the getaway car. It was harder to catch a gang of thieves once they were on the run than to stop them before they escaped. They'd stopped them, all right. "Aaron!"

This wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening. Rafe Delgado was finally making something of himself. Learning to be a cop, learning to trust. Learning from the best. Sergeant Aaron Nichols was a friend and father, his confessor, as much as he was his partner. The perps had ignored Aaron's warning, had ignored his gun. Rafe had stopped them, but not soon enough.

Barely aware of the other uniformed cops swarming the neighborhood—stopping traffic, herding bystanders off the street, pulling the three dazed and injured criminals out of the car and handcuffing them on the sidewalk—Rafe ran to his fallen partner where he lay bent and broken in the middle of the intersection. Ignoring the pool of blood staining his knees, he knelt down beside Aaron.

"Aaron?" Those deep blue eyes, set between lines of laughter and wisdom, struggled to focus. Rafe scooped up his partner's beefy hand and squeezed it, drawing Aaron's attention. "I got ya, Sarge. Hang in there. The ambulance is on its way."

Aaron's scarred-up boxer's paw tightened weakly around Rafe's fingers. A breathy hint of his Americanized brogue whispered, "Did we get 'em?"

"I shot the tire and they spun out. Save your energy. Don't talk." His hand was cold. There was too much blood. Rafe lifted his head and shouted wildly. "Medic! I need a medic!"

The thick fingers convulsed around Rafe's. "This one's bad, sonny. No doctor can help me."

"That's Irish bull. You stop bleedin'. You hear me?"

Aaron's pale, trembling lips curved in a familiar grin. "Givin' me orders. Who outranks who?"

"Just trying to keep you around, old man." He wanted to apply pressure to the wound bleeding so profusely at the back of his head. But that meant rolling him over, and Rafe was certain from each shallow wheeze for breath that there were internal injuries and that moving him could make things worse. Rafe's eyes filled with tears and he swiped away the useless evidence of emotion to keep his partner's face in focus. "Aaron, tell me what to do."

Aaron's eyes grew distant. He knew he was dying. He knew. "You're a good cop. I knew you would be. I'm proud of you, son."

The faint trill of his native Irish accent was evident even with each gasp. He'd brought his son to this country when his first wife had died. His second wife had given him a daughter and divorced him. He was the best KCPD had to offer. He'd been through too much. He didn't deserve to die like this.

Fluid gurgled in Aaron's throat. "Rafe?"

"I'm right here. What do you need?"

He summoned his strength and squeezed Rafe's hand one last time. "You take care of my Josie. Patrick, too. This'll be hard on them. They need someone to depend on."

Rafe nodded. "I'll be the big brother they never had. Until you get better."

"You'll…need family, too."

"You're my family. Now shut up. Save your strength."

"Got to say this… A father worries…" Rafe wouldn't know. The man who'd sired him hadn't worried about anything but his booze and keeping child services out of his hair. Years of practice shut down the memories of pain and anger and betrayal that tried to rear their ugly head. Aaron needed him. His bloody fingers were scratching blindly across his belt. "Where's my badge?"

"Here." Rafe plucked the scuffed-up badge off the pavement and put it into his hand before pulling them both onto Aaron's chest. "Your badge is right with you, Sarge. Feel it?" The blue eyes drifted shut. "Sarge! Stay with me!"

They opened again. "Take care of my girl. Such a good heart. She has…crush…on you."

"I know. With you watching over my shoulder, nothing will ever happen."

"No, I…damn." A shallow rale stuttered through his chest.

"Aaron?"

"Watch Patrick…he'll fight ya."

"I can handle him."

His eyes opened and closed in lieu of a nod. "I love them. Tell 'em that."

"I will."

"You're…better man…than you think."

The tears chafed beneath his eyelids. "Quit talking like you're—"

"Promise me…protect them."

And then Aaron's scrappy boxer's fist went slack. His eyes glazed over and he was gone.

"I promise."

Chapter One

November—Ten Years Later

Rafael Delgado wore jeans, a badge and black leather well.

As he uncrossed his long legs and pulled away from the black heavy-duty pickup he'd been leaning against in the nearly deserted parking lot behind Kansas City's Shamrock Bar, Josie Nichols got a glimpse of the gun he wore on his belt, too. She smiled, unafraid, her pulse doing its customary flutter at the broad shoulders and fluid stride of the man who'd waited in the dark to walk her to her car nearly every night since she'd taken the job tending bar at her uncle's tavern four years earlier.

But then Rafe had been looking out for her almost ten years now, ever since he'd made a promise to her father—his first partner at KCPD—on the night Aaron Nichols had died.

Josie locked the Shamrock's back door and shook off the sadness that tightened her shoulders at the memory of her father's senseless slaughter in the line of duty. She could hear the assurance of booted footsteps crunching on the asphalt behind her. The shadows wouldn't be so scary tonight. The loneliness she lived with wouldn't prick so sharply. Chivalry was not dead. At least not in Rafe's book. She tucked the keys into her backpack and fixed a teasing smile on her face before turning to meet him.

"You know, Uncle Robbie installed a security camera back here. And the city put in an extra light. You don't have to wait and walk me to my car after closing every night." It was hard to miss the lack of an answering smile on his ruggedly sculpted features. "Especially when you've put in a long day like this one."

"It's no trouble." The flat response was a recitation of duty. Her heart squeezed at the exhaustion she heard in his gravelly tone, and she simply fell into step beside him when he took her elbow and walked her toward the beat-up Ford compact parked beside his shiny, supersize truck. "You warm enough in this?"

"I'm fine."

"I can buy you a new winter coat if you need one."

"No, you won't. And I don't."

"Damn it, Jose—are you going to argue every little thing I say to you tonight?"

"Whoa." Josie planted her feet, forcing him to halt. What the heck? She tipped her chin to try to decipher the sharp bite to his tone. "What's going on?"

A white cloud of breath formed in the chilly November air at his chest-deep sigh. "Sorry. I've got too many things running through my mind to be civil, I guess."

"Rafe?"

"Just walk."

She might have imagined the slight tremble she'd felt in his long fingers before they wound around the sleeve of her insulated jacket and resumed their pace across the parking lot. But she wasn't as concerned with the thinness of her thrift-store jacket as she was with her friend's cryptic remark. Rafe looked tired. It was that bone-deep kind of weariness that seeped into the soul and indicated a man who had seen and endured more than he should.

Although his stern face remained a mask just above her line of sight, Josie could see the signs. She was the kind of woman who noticed subtle details and read others the way most folks read a book. That talent came in handy working nights as a bartender, and she hoped to put those same skills to work once she completed her nursing degree next summer. Her senses were even more finely tuned when she cared about that person.

And Josie Nichols had cared about Rafe through a teenage crush, the loss of her father—a man they'd both loved—and the bond of adult friendship. In some ways, she was closer to Rafe Delgado than she was to any other person on the planet. But he'd made it clear his heart was off-limits to

her, and so she'd buried those feelings of infatuation that had matured into something much more profound now that she was a twenty-five-year-old woman.

Except for times like this—when the hour was late and the night separated them from the rest of the world. When they were alone. When Rafe was hurting and the self-avowed loner needed someone and she knew she could help.

Josie could guess at the pain shading his amber brown eyes. She'd seen the tragic story played on the news over and over that evening. She'd listened to the sketchy details he and his friends on KCPD's SWAT Team One had shared when they'd come in to drink a beer after this afternoon's deadly, heartbreaking standoff against one of Kansas City's most violent gangs. And then, before they'd had any real opportunity to decompress from the stress of the day, his SWAT team had been called away to the scene of a bomb threat to help calm a restless crowd who feared a serial killer had struck again.

Rafe had every reason to be in a mood. An innocent boy had died today. And while Rafe and his team had saved dozens of lives, it was the one life he'd lost that stayed with him. She'd heard the speech before. The first time was the night ten years ago when Rafe, little more than a rookie patrol cop himself, had come to the house to tell Josie and her half brother, Patrick, that their father had been mowed down in the street by a group of bank robbers in their getaway car. He'd glossed over the fact that he and her father had stopped the armed thieves, protecting bystanders on the street and recovering hundreds of thousands of dollars in stolen money. Instead, he'd sat on the couch between her and Patrick, with barely a tear leaking from the corner of his red-rimmed eyes, even though she knew he felt as though he'd lost a father, too.

Rafe was thirty-four years old now, but little had changed. Saving lives was doing his job—losing a life was personal. But that damn pride and noble code of honor he lived by kept him from grieving properly. Kept him from dealing with the rage and frustration and guilt that must be eating him up inside.

"Rafe, stop." She halted beside his truck. She couldn't keep her hands to herself when she saw the muscle twitching beneath the stony frown of his expression. Reaching up, Josie cupped his jaw, soothing the tension she felt in him. "That boy didn't die because of you."

"No. He died in spite of me." The sensitive skin of Josie's palm prickled at the rasp of late-night beard stubble that abraded her skin as he snagged her wrist and pulled her hand away. "His name was Calvin Chambers. And I can't get his blood off my fingers."

She twisted her grip to capture his hands between both of hers, angling them up toward the street lamp, turning them over. "I don't see any blood."

And then the floodgates of emotions opened. He spun away, raking his fingers through his hair, leaving a mess of short, tobacco brown spikes in their wake. He paced into the shadows beyond the circle of light illuminating them. "It's stuck in my head. The blood was so warm and he was so cold. He had bullet holes in his leg and chest. I tried to stop the bleeding. I had to pitch my gloves and uniform, there was so much of it."

"Oh, my God. The news never said it was that bad." Josie squeezed her fingers around the strap of her backpack, seeking a little comfort herself. "That poor child."

"He was so young. Ten years old. Ten freaking years old." Rafe stepped back into the light, startling her. "What the hell was I doing—sittin' there while Calvin bled out?"

"Rafe." She'd seen him decked out in his SWAT gear—black uniform, flak vest, helmet, a handgun, a rifle and gear she didn't know the name for. "Horrible people who didn't give a damn about that little boy were shooting guns at cops. You broke up a gang, a drug ring. His killer was arrested. You weren't sitting there doing nothing. You were looking out for that boy."

"All I could do was hold him. I know what it feels like to be that young and that hurt. Nothing makes sense. All you know is fear and pain, and all you worry about is if it can possibly hurt any worse."

She watched his face contort as the grief welled up and he fought it back inside him. The anger, the self-recriminations, rolled off him in waves. Josie knew that not one whit of it was directed at her. He needed to vent, and listening was another skill in her survivor's repertoire. Instinctively, she drifted closer, slipping her hand beneath his jacket to rest it over his thumping heart. "I know you did everything you could to save him."

He covered her hand with his, squeezing almost too tightly as he held it against the stuttering expansion and contraction of his chest. "I'm trained to take action, Josie. I'm not supposed to sit still and tell a child lies like he's going to see his mama soon and everything will be all right." He slid his warm hand along her jaw, tipping her face to trace the tears that spilled over her cheek with the pad of his thumb, as if touching the evidence of her compassion and sorrow was the only way to acknowledge the anguish he felt. "I couldn't get to a proper med kit. I couldn't get an ambulance to him."

She turned to press a kiss into his palm. "Your captain said there was a lot of gunfire. You were pinned down."

"Captain Cutler wasn't in that alley with me. I was lucky to pull Calvin out of that backyard at all." He stroked his thumb across her cheek again, wiping away another tear. "And damn it—" Rafe's voice shook, "—he kept trying to thank me for protecting him. He was scared to death, yet he was foolish enough or brave enough to try to make me feel better." He stroked his fingers across her temple, tucking a long strand of hair behind her ear and smoothing it back into the ponytail at her nape. "He died in an alley. In a stranger's arms. Walking home from school. That's not right for any child."

Over the years she'd known Rafe, he'd occasionally hinted at the horrors of his own childhood. Something about today's tragic events must be resonating deep inside him, waking feelings he normally barricaded behind an internal layer of armor. "No. It's not."

He stroked his thumb across her bottom lip and paused, as if he'd felt the same electric shock she had. "Somebody else should have gone after him. Somebody else could have saved him."

"Rafe…" His need was waking something vital and primal and feminine deep inside her. "He couldn't have been in better hands."

"Damn protocol. Damn rules. I should have blasted my way out of that alley—"

"Others might have gotten hurt."

"—and gotten him to the hospital."

"Stop it, Rafe." Josie let her backpack slide off her shoulder and plop at her feet. She moved a step closer, framing his face between her hands. "Just stop."

He pulled his fingers through her long, dark ponytail, then flipped it behind her back. He smoothed his hands across her shoulders, touched his finger to the rip she'd mended in the sleeve of her jacket. She wondered at the tiny frissons of heat that followed his every touch. Josie no longer felt the nip of November dampness in the air. She no longer heard the whispers of traffic on the street at the front side of the bar, no longer knew the hour of night or the fatigue in her own body as Rafe leaned in and touched his forehead to hers. "When your dad taught me about being a cop, he didn't teach me how to…how to lose a child. I feel so damn helpless."

"You're tough, Rafe, but nobody's that tough." She gave him a little shake, worried at the raw loss shading his eyes. "Dad would be proud of the man you've become. He'd be proud of the cop you are."

His hands finally settled at her waist, his fingers biting into the flare of her hips as he pulled her close enough for their jeans to rustle together and new pressure points beneath her skin to awaken at the needy contact. "Your dad would have saved him."

Josie wound her arms around Rafe's neck, sliding her fingers beneath the soft collar of his leather jacket to find the smooth warmth of his skin to anchor herself to. "This isn't Dad all over again. You were the best chance Calvin Chambers had. If anyone could have saved him, it was you.

At least he had someone strong and caring with him at the end. He wasn't alone." Tears burned in her throat and reduced her voice to a whisper. "How wonderful that you made him smile."

"If someone's going to die, I'm the go-to guy to have around, huh?"

"No, damn it, Rafe." Words weren't working. He couldn't hear her. He wouldn't hear. Rafe Delgado needed to feel the truth. "I'm so sorry you're hurting like this. Don't keep it in. It's okay to hurt."

She followed her instincts, doing the most natural, right thing she could think of, and kissed him. How many times, since she was fifteen years old, had she wanted to press her lips against Rafe's? How many lonely nights had she dreamed about turning their friendship into something more? But she'd always held back, settling for a peck on the cheek, treasuring a hug. But his emotions were too far off the chart tonight to settle for anything less than complete honesty between them.

"Shh." She kissed him again, lightly brushing her lips across his, testing the will of this coiled panther of a man, cooing sounds of desire and comfort in her throat.

Josie's lips parted as shock made him go still. His fingers aligned her hips with his. The heat of his body surrounded hers. Had she just broken some unspoken rule? Or did he understand she was giving him permission to kiss her back? Josie waited. Wanted. Dreamed.

Then, as if some understanding had snapped into place inside his head, Rafe inhaled a groaning breath and took over. He drove one thigh between hers and backed Josie against the truck. He slipped his tongue between her lips and deepened the kiss. She tasted the tang of beer on his tongue and the salty notes of tears from her own mouth.

With an impatient, throaty sigh, he unzipped her jacket and slipped his hand inside to squeeze her breast. The tender skin ignited beneath his touch and lit an ember deep in her core. Josie held on to his strong shoulders, her toes leaving the pavement as his knee wedged tighter, sparking flames that licked through her blood until they met up with his hands and mouth and consumed her in heat.

Rafe's breathy gasps matched her own. She was vaguely aware of one hand reaching beside her to open the truck door, while she was blatantly, eagerly aware of the other hand tugging at the buttons of her blouse until it could find its way inside to torment the aching nub of her breast through the lace of her bra.

The loneliness of Josie's solitary life—no mother, no father, a poor excuse for a brother, too much work and too much stress—evaporated beneath the greedy assault of Rafe's hands and mouth on her skin. He needed her. He needed her. The connection between them was irrefutable and intense.

As her top veed open to the night air, and the chilly dampness bathed her in goose bumps, Rafe left her. "No. Don't stop."

But Rafe wasn't leaving, he was looking for a little more privacy. He tossed her bag inside and before Josie could follow his lead, he lifted her onto the seat, shutting the door behind him and following her across to the passenger side. With little heed for long legs and cramped quarters and layers of clothing, Rafe maneuvered her onto his lap. He tugged off his belt and placed his gun safely in the glove compartment as Josie's fingers tested the contrasts between his short, silky hair and the rougher texture of his stubbled jaw. And then she had his full attention again. Rafe slid his arms beneath her jacket and blouse and pulled her hard against him, his hands roaming at will against her skin, his mouth claiming hers. The urgency of every touch, every kiss, conveyed the depth of emotion that Rafe had been unable to speak.

Josie cracked open a little more of her battered heart and answered. This wasn't about slow seduction. It wasn't about finesse. It was about needing and caring, giving and taking.

"I don't ever want to have a child look at me that way again," Rafe rasped against her lips. "I don't want to hurt like this. I don't want to feel…"

"Shh. It's okay. Let it go."

With Josie's knees splayed on either side of Rafe's thighs, and the hard bulge of his zipper pulsing against the seam of her jeans, he left no doubt about what he was asking of her. "We never… I shouldn't…"

His face was buried against her neck, and he was shaking so hard with the effort to restrain himself that her body vibrated right along with his. But she could also feel the heat and moisture of the tears he blinked against her skin. She pulled away just far enough to hold his face and turn his golden-brown eyes to the dim moonlight. The tears she saw pooling there made the decision for her. Her heart couldn't say no.

"You know I've wanted this. Wanted to be more than friends." Josie reached down to unzip her jeans, to assure him of his welcome and her own desire.

He studied her face, looking as surprised as she by the unexpected passion and soul-deep empathy burning between them.

"It's okay, Rafe." She leaned in and kissed him. "We're okay."

And then Rafe began to move with the urgent efficiency with which he defused bombs and took down bad guys. It was all fast and furious—a physical expression of every powerful emotion surging between them. Zippers crunched. His billfold came out. Clothes were pushed aside.

"I need you, Jose. I need you. I need…" Molding hands and desperate kisses made her blood drum through her veins. The heat rising inside her was almost unbearable. She could only hold on to his sturdy shoulders as he slid inside her, moving and rocking until they were both mindless with this physical, sensual outpouring of emotion.

"I love you, Rafe," she whispered as he crushed her in his arms and plunged inside her one last time, groaning with the release that she freely and willingly gave him.

HE SHOULD BE feeling better than this.

Rafe drew his fingers through the condensation forming on the side window of his truck and brushed the cool moisture across his feverish cheek. Oh, his body was well and truly satisfied—too spent and content to want one more thing. And those hated emotions that had raged through his system had dissipated under Josie's patient insistence and undeserved generosity.

She was snuggled up against his side in the truck now, her rumpled clothes refastened, her breathing slow and even. When he felt her stirring, he leaned over and pressed a kiss to the crown of her dark sable hair. When she tilted her chin and smiled at him, he knew what he was feeling.

Guilt.

He'd taken slaps across the face and a belt across his backside that didn't hurt as bad as this. He'd betrayed a friend tonight. Two of them. On the day Aaron had died, he'd made him a promise. Visiting his son in jail and boinking his daughter weren't exactly how he'd intended to honor Aaron's memory.

Some damn fine protector he turned out to be.

Josie's soft smile turned into a quizzical frown. "What are you thinking about?"

"Your dad." He shifted a little space between them, so that his thigh was no longer touching the tempting warmth of hers. "This wasn't my finest moment. I took advantage of that big heart of yours. I needed…" His deep sigh of remorse echoed in the truck. "I just needed."

"You needed to connect with someone who cared. Someone who would listen and let you feel what you needed to." She zipped her jacket and folded her arms across her middle. Was she cold? Rafe slid over to the steering wheel and pulled out his keys to start the truck and turn on the heater.

"Yeah, well, I should have stopped at talking."

"Not your strong suit," she teased. "You've always been a more physical being."

"I told Aaron I would always take care of you. Tonight, I just used you."

"That's insulting."

"Josie."

"Hey, I'm not a naive girl anymore. You're not my first, Rafe, so I knew what I was doing. It's not like you forced me."

"Damn close."

He found her crystal-blue eyes across the cab, saw them blanch wide and then darken. She turned in her seat, twisting the argument back on him. "You would have stopped if I'd asked. But I didn't want you to stop. Sometimes a relationship works that way. One partner needs more than the other at a given time. It's a mutual give and take."

"We don't have a relationship like that."

"Would that be such a bad thing?"

Oh, yeah. He was not relationship material. Definitely not with his former partner's daughter. After tonight, he might not even be friend material. "My emotions were out of control. That was a mistake."

She sat up ramrod straight, her Irish temper coloring her cheeks. "Making love was a mistake? Or feeling something was a mistake?"

Making love? She thought that wham-bam, thank-you, ma'am, was how it was supposed to be between a man and a woman? Just what kind of jerks had she been dating, who hadn't shown her how good it could be if a man took his time and… Ah, hell. Put on the brakes. Don't go there.

He squeezed his hands around the steering wheel. "I'm sorry, Jose. I made a promise to your dad to take care of you. I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing. I always figured it would be intense with you. That's kind of exciting. And you know I…care about you."

And he cared about her. But he couldn't keep trouble away or screen those jerks or even make sure she got safely to her car when she worked too late if his senses were blurred by his emotions and his focus was distracted by long legs and lush lips and that gorgeous fall of dark hair. He could hardly do right by her if he was the trouble. "Look, I already failed Patrick. I couldn't keep him off drugs and out of jail. I don't want to mess up what we have."

"Rafe, what about what I want?"

He opened his door and stepped out into the night. The bracing air filled his lungs and cleared his head of her lingering scent. "You've got class in the morning and you need to get home. I need to get back to the precinct garage and get the SWAT van cleaned up and refitted for our next call."

She grabbed her backpack and climbed out her side of the truck. "You have to do that tonight?"

Oh, yeah. He needed to get his hands busy doing something besides itching to reach for Josie again. He needed to busy his mind with a task where he didn't have to second-guess his every move. "I'm a jerk, okay?"

"Please stop. It hurts me to hear you talk like this."

"I never wanted to hurt you. I don't want things to change between us. I want you to be able to trust me. I need you to trust me. Nothing like that will ever happen again. I promise." After she unlocked her car, he opened the door for her and waited while she slid behind the wheel. Man, he wished she'd let him pick out something more reliable than this rattletrap for her. At least she let him change the oil and keep the motor tuned up and running as well as a beater car like this one could. "Go on, I'll wait to make sure your car starts. I'll see you next time you work at the Shamrock."

She turned the key. Once the engine growled to life, he started to leave. But Josie put out her arm to keep him from shutting the door. "Just for the record? You weren't a jerk for making love to me. Now you're being a jerk."

Of that he had no doubt.

He jumped back as she slammed the door, knowing he deserved worse. Once inside his truck, he followed her out of the parking lot but turned in the opposite direction toward his condo. He'd better be keeping a lot more than a few miles of physical distance between them. What the hell was he thinking? That was the problem—he hadn't been thinking.

Josie's skin was cool and pale in the frosty moonlight. Her touch was so gentle, so certain. He'd gotten more drunk on her lips than the beer she'd served him earlier that night. And her body—her tall, lithe, sweet body with those long legs snugged around him…

"Damn." He was breaking out in a sweat that had nothing to do with the heater in his truck.

Josephine Erin Nichols was his friend. His unofficial ward. His penance for letting his friend and mentor die ten years ago.

She was pretty and kind and sexy and funny, and strictly off-limits. And yet, for several mindless minutes tonight, she'd been everything he needed. Exactly what he needed.

He'd been a rutting bull who'd taken advantage of her friendship and compassionate nature. Hell, he'd barely gotten a condom on and hadn't even asked if she was on the pill. In his saner days before this one, he hadn't wanted to know if his sweet, hardworking buddy was sleeping with anyone. She was either working one of several part-time jobs, studying or going to school, so he knew she didn't have much time to date. He hadn't even had the presence of mind to make sure that she'd found the completion he had.

He was a jerk. A lonesome, selfish, let-friends-and-children-die-on-his-watch jerk. He'd been on his own since high school for a reason. And it wasn't just because he'd severed all ties with his worthless parents. He'd become obsessed with his job and the sweetheart he'd been engaged to had left him. He was alone because he couldn't make a relationship with a woman work.

But he could find solace in her beautiful, willing body.

Rafe picked up speed and merged into the late-night traffic that was mostly big rigs at this time of night on Interstate 435, and waited for the lightning bolt of her late father's spirit, or his own troubled conscience, to strike him dead.

Chapter Two

The Present

"You didn't bring me any cigarettes?"

Josie Nichols let the accusation in her half brother Patrick's tone sink in and curdle with the nausea already rolling in her stomach. "By the end of this summer, I'll be a registered nurse, and I'm not going to support such an unhealthy, expensive habit. Anyway, you promised me you were quitting."

"That was last month." Patrick leaned back from the plastic table in the KCPD detention center where she'd come to visit him between classes at UMKC and her nightly shift at the Shamrock Bar. His blue eyes narrowed as he brushed his dark hair off his forehead. Their black-Irish looks were about the only thing she had in common with what was left of her so-called family. "I've got pressures in here that keep me on edge, and a couple of smokes could go a long way toward making me feel better. Besides, they're like cash in here."

Josie slipped her hand below the tabletop, gently rubbing at the small bump on her belly, trying to coax some cooperation from her stomach. "What do you need to buy in jail?"

"Protection. Weed. Private time in the shower." He leaned forward again, propping his elbows on the table. She noticed the sinuous lines of a snake circling his forearm. Great. He'd given himself another tattoo. Sanitary considerations aside, their father would be so proud. Not.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?"

He paused for a moment, blinked, then sat back, silencing whatever he'd been about to share. "No more than usual. You bring me cigarettes next time you come."

Although her regular bouts of morning sickness had passed, long times between snacks and stress like this visit could easily trigger that unsettled feeling. Josie hadn't told Patrick about the baby. She hadn't told anyone beyond their Uncle Robbie—who'd found her in the Shamrock's restroom kneeling over the toilet two afternoons in a row, and said he recognized the signs from his own dear late Maureen—and the nurse practitioner-midwife who was taking care of her. The midwife was paid to be discreet, and no one kept a secret better than Robbie, even though he'd pestered her time and again to give him the father's name so he could "set the ruddy bastard straight."

Her relationship with Rafe had tanked after that night in the parking lot. Oh, he was just as protective as ever—annoyingly so—showing up to escort her to her car after work, coming over to her apartment to fix her car when it wouldn't run. But he'd turned into such a bear, nit-picking her every decision as if she was a child, arguing over trivial things, refusing to discuss anything deep or meaningful. He put in as many hours with his SWAT team—training, answering calls, volunteering for off-duty assignments—as she worked in a day, leaving them no time to sit down to talk and reconnect. Rafe had once again become the loner she'd first met all those years ago—afraid to attach himself to anyone, afraid to care.

Josie splayed her fingers, cradling the precious life growing inside her even more carefully. Sooner or later, her secret could no longer be hidden beneath loose clothes. But if Rafe couldn't deal with her in a healthy, reasonable way, then how would he deal with a child? If nightmares of dying children and his own abuse growing up still haunted his sleep, then why would he want one of his own? While she had no doubt that Rafe would do right by her once she found the courage to tell him, she knew his support would be all about providing money or a name or whatever the kid needed that didn't involve any emotional commitment.

If he couldn't or wouldn't love her or their child, then how could they ever hope to be a real family?

So Josie intended to treasure this baby all by herself, delaying the fight and the blame and the guilt Rafe would surely heap upon himself once he found out. She'd never known a man to hurt as

deeply as Rafe Delgado did. He'd suffered so much loss in his life that he trusted duty and honor more than his heart. Or hers. So Josie kept her secret.

Yeah. Aaron Nichols would be real proud of both his children.

"I brought you the magazines you asked for." Even the seedy ones she'd swallowed her pride to purchase at the convenience store for him. "Happy Birthday. I'd have baked you a cake and brought that, too, if it wasn't such a stereotype. You know, hiding a hacksaw inside it."

But Patrick didn't laugh with her, or even smile. Or thank her.

Instead, he signaled for the guard at the door, indicating the visit was over.

"I love you, Patrick. Be good. I want you to make your parole and get out of here…" by the time the baby comes. So she wouldn't be quite so alone. But Patrick didn't care about her wishes any more than Rafe did. "I want you out of here soon."

"Me, too. Bring me those cigarettes."

No "I love you." No "thanks, sis." No "goodbye."

Tears blurred her vision as the guard released him from the room and another escorted him to his cell. Josie pulled a tissue from her pocket and quickly dabbed them away, wishing she could blame the sudden sense of loss and loneliness she felt on her fluctuating hormones. She sniffed loudly enough to embarrass herself and glanced over at the two men across the room, shaking hands at their table. The prisoner in the orange jumpsuit seemed startled by the consideration that her own brother hadn't even shown her. But the man in the suit and tie—his lawyer, most likely—said a few words that calmed his client. A few gentle words, some show of caring and support would have been enough for her as well.

The tears welled up again and Josie quickly turned away to dab her eyes and collect the sack she'd brought Patrick's magazines in. Ashamed by her weakness, she stood and hurried toward the exit. She'd taken only three steps before plowing into the attorney's chest.

Instinctively, her hand went to her abdomen and she backed away. "I'm sorry. I wasn't looking."

She looked up to offer him an apologetic smile, and would have grinned outright when she saw his toupee sitting slightly askew on his forehead. But there was a blank look behind his glasses, something so cold and devoid of emotion in his light-colored eyes, even more so than Rafe's, that her smile died and she took a second step back.

"My fault entirely, ma'am." He smiled. But even that outward gesture of civility didn't reach his eyes. He was wiping his fingers with a crisp, white handkerchief. And was that…? Were those drops of blood she glimpsed before he tucked the crisp white cloth back into his pocket?

"Are you all right?"

"No harm done." He nodded to the guard and reached for the open door. "After you."

Maybe her hormones were out of whack and her imagination was working overtime. He'd probably suffered something as simple as a nosebleed. Lord knew the air in this place was dry as a bone. "Thanks."

But a gurgling sound behind her caused Josie to stop and turn. And go on instant alert.

The prisoner had slumped over the table, clutching his throat.

"Wait a minute. Is he…? Is your client all right?" When she spun around, the man had disappeared and the guard was closing the door behind him. "Guard!"

The uniformed black man hurried right behind her. The prisoner was shaking now.

"He's convulsing. Help me get him to the floor." All of Josie's training kicked in as she cleared the man's throat and turned him onto his side.

The guard was on his radio, calling for backup, while she checked the prisoner's thready pulse and fixed, pinpoint stare of his pupils. He wasn't breathing. His heart was stopping. She had nothing but her hands to help him. He needed a tracheotomy. Now. "Do you have a knife?"

Fifteen minutes later, the medic on staff at the detention center pronounced what Josie already knew. "He's dead."

She wiped the blood from her hands and dashed over to the corner of the room to empty her stomach.

THE NOISE OF clacking pool balls and TV broadcasts and dozens of conversations was particularly grating tonight. Josie waited a moment in the Shamrock Bar's walk-in freezer, counting the clouds formed by each breath, savoring the utter quiet of insulated walls and cold, heavy air.

But she was already shivering. She'd be hypothermic if she waited in here long enough for her headache to pass.

Ignoring the throbbing inside her skull and the twinge in her lower back, she lifted a crate of bottled beer off the shelf and backed her hip into the door release. The noise assaulted her eardrums the moment the door swung open. But this was rent money, or maybe that oak crib that was in such good shape at the thrift store. So she'd sucked up the pain and pasted a smile on her face by the time she left the back hallway and pushed through the swinging door that took her behind the Shamrock's polished walnut bar.

"There you are, girlie." Uncle Robbie plucked the crate from her hands and winked one crinkling blue eye. His robust Irish voice warmed with concern. "I wondered where you'd got to. Everything all right?"

Josie nodded, resisting the urge to touch her belly out here where the other staff and customers could see. "I just needed some fresh air."

"You know I'll give you all the time off you need." His silvering dark curls bobbed up and down as he cradled the beer on his hip and opened the cooler behind the bar to drop the bottles in one by one. "You only have to ask."

Josie eyed the two waitresses at their station, waiting to have trays filled, and took note of the customers standing two and three deep behind the green vinyl bar stools while Lance, another part-time student bartender hurried back and forth. Robbie Nichols was short-staffed, as usual, his nose for business not nearly as reliable as the charity in his heart.

"Who called in sick tonight?" Josie asked, answering the high sign from one of the waitresses and pulling two pilsners from the rack above the bar to draw a pair of beers.

Robbie's thick stomach jiggled as he laughed. "You know me too well, girlie. Enrico called, said he was under the weather. Odds are that's a lie, but what can I do?"

It was a bet she wouldn't take. Knowing Enrico Gonzalez, he was probably under the sheets with his girlfriend—or sleeping the evening away after staying too late at her apartment the night before. Josie set the beers on the tray and took the next server's order for a round of whiskey shots.

How was she ever going to leave Robbie to his own devices long enough to finish her nursing practicum at the Truman Medical Center or go on maternity leave? "Why don't you let me run this for a few minutes, and you go in the office and call Allison to see if she can come in and help out. You really need to fire Enrico and hire someone more reliable, too, so we don't get shorthanded like this again."

"You sure got your daddy's level head, didn't ye?" He crushed the box between his meaty hands and leaned in to kiss her cheek. "Fine. I'll go call. But I don't want to come back and find you lifting anything heavier than that whiskey bottle, understand?"

Josie grinned and shooed him toward the swinging door. "Yes. Now go before we lose any more customers for being too slow to serve them."

"I'll wait as long as you need me to, Miss Nichols." Josie set the shot glass she'd just filled on the tray and turned to the red-haired man in a suit and tie sitting at the corner of the bar. Something about him seemed familiar, but with the chaotic distractions going on all around her, she couldn't immediately place him. He pulled a leather wallet from his suit coat and flashed a brass and blue enamel badge. "My name's Spencer Montgomery. I'm a detective with KCPD."

Maybe that's what she recognized. Being located just a few blocks from KCPD's Fourth Precinct station, the Shamrock Bar drew the majority of its customers from cops and KCPD support staff. He must be a returning customer. "What can I get you, Detective Montgomery?"

"A cup of coffee is all right now. I'm on the clock."

Josie went to the counter behind the bar to pour him a mug of coffee. "Here you go. The coffee is always on the house."

But his light green eyes warned her that he wasn't really here for something to drink. "When the baseball game rush is over, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"About what?"

"About the murder you witnessed today."

AT 1:42 A.M., Josie locked the door behind her and turned to face the Shamrock's parking lot. What she needed after this endless day and longer night was a hug and a hot shower.

What she got was Rafe Delgado.

The springtime air was cool and pleasant, but a shiver rippled down Josie's spine when his truck door opened and he strode out across the parking lot to meet her. He was still wearing his SWAT uniform, crisp black from head to toe, with only KCPD and his last name embroidered in white on his chest pocket, the badge on his belt and a gun strapped to his thigh to break up his lean, dangerous look.

"Are you on duty?" she asked, pulling her shoulders back, bracing for another impersonal, duty-motivated meeting. "How many times have I told you I can get someone else to walk me to my car when you're working?"

"And who's that going to be?" He propped his hands on his hips and scanned the nearly empty lot from side to side. He glanced up at the dark windows on the building's second floor. "Did Robbie already turn in? He should walk you out."

"He would if I asked. He's on the phone with my cousin, Susan, back in Ireland." She could do a little contemptuous scanning of her own, up and down his tall, rangy build. "Besides, he knew you'd be here like clockwork, so why bother?"

Rafe no longer took her arm when he walked her to her car, but instead fell into step beside her as she headed for her Fiesta. "Why the hell didn't you tell me you'd gone to see Patrick today?"

Josie bristled at his tone. "It's his birthday. I always go."

"I would have gone with you."

Like having him lurking in the corner, standing watch over her, would have made the day go any better. "You weren't invited."

His breath seethed between his teeth. "So now I hear you're running a trauma unit there?"

Josie stopped in her tracks, cinching the straps of her backpack in tight fists as she tilted her chin to meet his downturned gaze. She stood five foot seven, and he could still make her feel small when he glowered like that. "Not tonight, Rafe. Just get back in your truck and wait for me to drive away."

"Do you know who that was you tried to save?"

"I was told his name was Kyle Austin. Apparently, he's part of some wealthy family with good lawyers who got him into the same security facility as Patrick. I guess money can't save your life, though, can it."

His clean-shaven face tightened with a stony look. "Austin is the man who was masquerading as the Rich Girl Killer. He's a stalker. An embezzler. A kidnapper. He tried to kill Charlotte Mayweather and Trip."

Flinching in surprise, Josie quickly processed the names. Trip was Rafe's friend, a fellow SWAT cop. He'd been hospitalized for most of a month after nearly dying while rescuing the reclusive Mayweather heiress from her kidnappers. "I thought the name was familiar. But I had no idea who he was. Has Trip recovered from his wounds yet?"

"He's on vacation with Charlotte right now. He reports back for duty next Monday." Rafe leaned in ever so slightly. "Just think how dangerous a man has to be to go nose to nose with a cop with Trip's skills. You don't want to be messing with a bastard like that."

Bastard status aside, Josie had a calling. "He was dying."

"There are people on staff to help—"

"I was there to help."

"You can't save everyone, Josie." She glared up at him. He knew he was at the top of her list of lost causes. "You need to stop trying. You're going to get hurt."

Tell me about it. Josie pulled her keys from her backpack and headed toward her car. She was tired, upset, hungry and in no mood to be reminded of that foolish night when she'd mistaken physical intimacy for an emotional connection. She'd opened up her heart that night—and Rafe had closed up his. Lesson learned.

"It's over and done with, Rafe. Detective Montgomery said he had ruled me out as a suspect in Mr. Austin's death, so I probably won't have to talk about it ever again." She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Hint, hint."

"Back up. When did you talk to Spencer Montgomery?"

He knew the red-haired detective? Josie shrugged as they reached her car. "He came to the bar tonight. He's investigating Kyle Austin's death as a homicide."

"He doesn't deal with jail-cell murders." Rafe's hand on hers stopped her from sticking her key into the lock. "He's investigating the Rich Girl Killer serial murders and related deaths. Does he think you know something?"

"I don't know." For a moment, Josie imagined the warmth seeping from Rafe's hand into hers was meant to comfort. But she wisely pulled away. "At first he thought I might have had something to do with Austin's death."

"Montgomery's an idiot."

"No." Josie remembered the unabashed perusal of those pale green eyes. "I think he's really smart. I thought he was going to accuse me of slitting Austin's throat."

"What?"

"I had to perform an emergency tracheotomy. The medic, he was there—he said I did everything just right." Memories of all the blood she'd washed from her hands and blouse, and the nerves she'd squashed down so that she could offer the help he'd needed, squeezed like a fist inside her, intensifying the headache and sour stomach she'd been fighting all day. "But that wasn't it. I mean, he took a statement, like the officer and medic at the jail did. But Detective Montgomery had me brainstorm a list of poisons for him that could cause the anaphylactic shock—that's um, paralysis of his airways—that killed Mr. Austin."

"He could get that info online or out of a book."

"He already did. I saw his notepad. He had a list of poisons already written down."

Rafe braced one hand against the roof of her car and glanced up into the moonless sky before muttering a curse and swinging his gaze back down to her. "Did he accuse you of anything?"

Josie shook her head. "Not outright. But he sure made me feel guilty about letting Austin die."

Rafe's hand moved from the car to her shoulder, his hard expression changing as he gave her a gentle squeeze. "You didn't let anybody die. Montgomery was out of line."

Josie swayed on her feet, drawn to the warmth and security of Rafe's chest. But she didn't want to open up and be cast aside again. No matter that he claimed the distance he'd maintained these past six months was for her own good, the distance was there. And she was too weary, too wary, to breach it. She twisted away to unlock her car and toss her backpack across the front seat. "So now you're on my side? You can't have it both ways, Rafe. You can't lecture me about taking risks and then think you can be there to pick up the pieces when that risk fails."

His arms flew out in the air on either side of her, his frustration stamped on every inch of his tall frame. “I don’t know how to talk to you anymore. I’m just trying to take care of you.”

“We’ll be just fine.”

He grabbed the door when she tried to close it. “We?”

Oh, what a mighty slip of the tongue. There was no way to hide the truth from those dark, ever-watchful eyes now. She leaned back in the seat and pulled up the tails of her untucked blouse to reveal the elastic waistband of her maternity jeans hugging the small bump on her belly.

The dome light of the car revealed everything she wanted him to see. “You’re pregnant?”

She tugged her blouse back into place and inserted the key in the ignition. “Brilliant deduction. And you’re not even a detective.”

“How far along are you?”

“Do the math, Rafe.”

His strong arm kept her from closing the door. He stepped into the triangle between the door and the car and squatted down, forcing her to look straight into those suspicious amber eyes. “It’s mine?”

Did he really think she had the time or inclination to be sleeping around? “It’s yours.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” His voice was little more than a husky whisper in the night.

Josie gripped the steering wheel, fighting the dueling urges to scoot away across the seat or to soothe that pulse beating along his tightly clenched jaw. “It hasn’t exactly been business as usual between us lately. You changed that night. It’s hard to confide in someone who snaps at me every chance he gets.”

“I don’t—” He had no room to argue there. “I’ve seen the worst the world has to offer, Josie—and some of that’s rubbed off on me. Maybe a lot of it. I wouldn’t inflict what I’ve seen and who I am on anybody. Your dad knew that about me. That’s why he wanted me to guard you from the dangers that are out there. It’s the same reason he knew we shouldn’t be together.”

She wouldn’t let him off that easily. “He didn’t want us together because I was only fifteen years old back then. That’s hardly the case now.”

“I gave him my word.”

“You worry too much about keeping your word to Dad.” She swallowed hard, feeling a familiar pinch of loneliness. But she had to be strong for her son or daughter. In three months’ time she wouldn’t be alone anymore. “I know you loved him as much as I did, Rafe. I admire your loyalty, but he’s gone. You’d do better to devote yourself to someone who’s actually alive.”

“Is that what you want? You want me to marry you?” He reached inside the car and Josie instinctively pulled her hands from the wheel and hugged her arms around her belly. The movement wasn’t lost on Rafe. She could see it in his eyes—she was shielding her baby from him. “You know what kind of childhood I had. How I feel about…having kids.”

“Oh, I know.”

At last, he drew his hand away. “Are you giving the baby up? Keeping it?”

“I’m keeping Junior.” She’d never considered any other option. “But don’t worry. I absolve you of all responsibility. I’ll sign papers if you want. I don’t want anything from you. Just think of this baby as all mine. I do.”

HE STOOD IN the shadows, waiting nearly thirty minutes for the cop sitting in his truck to quit cursing and banging his steering wheel, and then staring out into the darkness as though he might be holding back tears. Whatever Josie Nichols had said to him had clearly upset him.

Only after the black-suited cop had started the engine and peeled out of the parking lot, still fighting whatever the bad news had been, did he emerge from behind the Dumpster and walk to the vehicle he’d parked two blocks down the street. He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket, squirted it with a splash of breath spray and held the minty scent over his nose, trying to dispel the acrid stench from his hiding place that lingered in his nostrils.

Officer Mood Swing had thwarted his plan to make quick work of the situation that had developed. But his ongoing research and his patience in the shadows had paid off in other invaluable ways. He'd quickly learned Josie Nichols's nighttime routine. The fat uncle would be of no consequence—he'd taken the whiskey bottle upstairs to his apartment after closing the bar. But the big-brother cop could be as problematic as the extra security around the hospital where Miss Nichols spent most of her days.

He pressed the remote on his key chain as he approached his vehicle, pocketed the handkerchief as he found fresher air to breathe, and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket. It was a nasty habit, one he indulged only when he needed to calm himself, when he needed to think. And he definitely needed to think now.

KCPD was closing in on him. Every time he wrapped up a loose end, another thread in his plan unraveled. They'd kept him from knowing the satisfaction of squeezing the life from his last two victims. And he was hungry for revenge now. Aching with the blood-pumping need to destroy the last two women who had denied him what was rightfully his.

He could see their faces now, telling him no, apologizing. As if I'm sorry made everything all right. His heart raced in his chest and his breathing went shallow as he remembered the humiliation. He'd been punished for his failures, punished his whole life for being different, for not being rich enough or powerful enough to earn his place in their world.

He stumbled over the curb and caught himself on the hood of the van. Stupid, stupid boy!

"Shut up," he muttered, remembering the fists and the torture, remembering how he'd suffered all because a woman had denied him what should have been his. "Shut up!"

Hearing his own voice echoing off the brick and stone buildings surrounding him brought him to his senses. He inhaled deeply on his cigarette, letting the nicotine sink into his lungs and blood, finding the calm he needed before grinding it out in the street beneath his foot.

Remembering his training, remembering to never leave one trace of DNA, one clue to connect him to any one place or crime, he carefully picked up the squished butt and climbed into the van. After disposing of the butt in the ashtray with the other two cigarettes he'd smoked, he picked up the digital camera from the seat beside him and turned it on to scroll through the pictures of his victims. It was a trip down memory lane that made him smile.

He'd paid far too dearly for not handling those four women as a younger man. But now Valeska Gallagher was dead. He clicked to a new picture. Gretchen Cosgrove was dead. And another. Audrey Kline and Charlotte Mayweather would be dead as soon as he could devise the right plan.

He just needed time.

Patience.

And a plan.

A self-important gang leader had ignored his instructions and botched his efforts to kill Audrey. Kyle Austin's interference had kept him from killing Charlotte. And now both men were dead.

There was only one thing standing in the way of his success now. Another woman.

Finding her name in the prison visitors' log when the guards had rushed in to help Kyle Austin had been easy enough. Sister of a druggie, and anyone with an arrest record was easy to trace. He'd found Patrick Nichols's information online, and saw that, ironically, the inconsequential inmate was the son of a slain cop. All the newspaper stories about Aaron Nichols's heroic death had led him straight to the Shamrock Bar. And Josie.

He scrolled ahead to the last few pictures on his screen. Her long ponytail would give him something to hold onto if he decided to kill her with his hands. But then he was equally skilled with poisons and rifles. And he hadn't forgotten the bomb-making skills his father had taught him.

Josie Nichols wasn't his usual victim. She wasn't rich and she had no family, of influence or not, to speak of.

But she'd seen his face.

Even with his disguise, she'd been too close. He'd read the suspicion in her eyes. He'd seen the imprint of a memory being made.

Oh, how his fingers itched to wipe that look from her eyes.

It was only a matter of time before KCPD linked him to Kyle Austin's murder this afternoon —only a matter of time before Miss Nichols gave her description and some lucky cop spotted him. For years he'd been faceless. But now Josephine Nichols could look at him in a lineup or a courtroom and say, That's the man I saw. He's your killer. And then he'd be put in prison. Reunited with his father and uncles who'd left him for dead in a hospital emergency room long ago.

Josie Nichols could give him a face. She could take his freedom away. She could stop him before his retribution was complete.

And no woman could ever be allowed to have that kind of power over him again.

One way or another, Josie Nichols had to die.

Chapter Three

"I don't recognize any of the men in these pictures," Josie confessed, feeling as frustrated as the red-haired detective pacing the length of the interview room where he had her going through book after book of mug shot photos. "If one of these men is your killer, then maybe my memory's not as good as I thought."

But Spencer Montgomery didn't like that answer. He pulled the one she'd just closed back off the stack and opened it in front of her. "Are you sure? Look again."

"No." She shoved the book away, not sure if she wanted to throw it at Detective Montgomery or beg his dark-haired partner, Nick Fensom, who was sitting calmly at the far end of the conference table to say something. Ultimately, she took a deep breath, rubbed her tummy beneath the edge of the table to soothe the distress that was agitating both her stomach and the baby, and defended herself in a rational tone. "None of these men are the guy I saw wiping the blood off his hands just before Kyle Austin died. Those eyes? I'll never forget them. He's not here."

She thought she was coming in this morning to sign her statement about the events she'd seen Friday after visiting with Patrick. She had no idea these two detectives wanted to grill her up one side and down the other because they believed she'd come face-to-face with someone they'd dubbed The Rich Girl Killer.

She wanted to remind them that she'd come here of her own volition, trying to be the good citizen her father had taught her to be, despite the suspicions they'd initially thrown her way after Kyle Austin's death. She also wanted to remind them that she was already late for her shift at the Truman Medical Center where she was finishing up her nurse's training. And although her supervisor was married to a forensic scientist who worked for the police department, and said she understood such things, Josie didn't want any marks—like a lack of punctuality—to show up on her record.

Finally, the silent detective at the far end of the table spoke up. "Maybe he's never been arrested and he's not in the KCPD or State Patrol database. Do you want to try the FBI database?"

Josie's gaze shot to the clock on the wall. "How many pictures is that?"

Detective Fensom offered her a wry smile. "Too many to look at today, ma'am. But it might be worth forwarding your description to the Kansas City Bureau office to see if they pull any pix for you to look at on a later date."

Josie grabbed her backpack from the chair beside her. "So I can go?"

"One last thing." Detective Montgomery flipped through the papers in his folder and pulled out a copy of an enlarged image of a high-school yearbook page. He slapped it on the table in front of her and pointed to the picture of a boy with wiry hair, an acne-scarred chin and thick glasses. "Is that him?"

Leaning in, Josie studied the picture more closely and compared it to the man with the toupee she'd seen Friday. "Well, the man I saw looked fifteen years older—maybe because his hairline was receding, almost like arrow points. The cheekbones were different, the jawline more pronounced." She squinted, focusing in on the glasses he wore. The lenses distorted their size, but, "The eyes are the same." Josie leaned back, hugging her bag over her belly. There was something cold, something disconnected and eerily familiar in those pale eyes. She looked up at the detectives. "Is this him?"

"At least we're right about our Donny Kemp theory," Montgomery said to Fensom. Then he looked down to answer her. "This is what our suspect looked like when he was in high school. We believe he's had plastic surgery and has changed his identity more than once in the ten years since. If we can link Donny Kemp to whoever he is now—"

"The man I saw."

"—then we won't be chasing a shadow anymore. We could finally bring this guy in."

She glanced over at the computer composite a police artist had pieced together from her description of Kyle Austin's killer. The same cold eyes, masked behind a different pair of glasses, looked back at her and she shivered. "Am I in any danger?"

"All you've done is look at a ten-year-old photo. If we bring this guy in, and you identify him, we'll put you in a safe house until his case goes to trial. Otherwise…" he pulled out the statement she'd signed earlier, folded it up and tucked it into the inside pocket of his jacket, "you're listed as a Jane Doe informant in my report."

"And I've talked to the prison about expunging your name from their files," Fensom added. "You won't even be in the M.E.'s report on Kyle Austin's death. Until we find him and arrest him, he has no reason to see you as a threat."

She pointed to the computer-generated picture. "Are you sure?"

Spencer Montgomery crossed to the door and opened it, indicating she was finally free to go. "I'd recommend practicing common sense when it comes to your personal safety, but I think extreme measures would only raise a red flag at this point. You be sure to contact us if you think of anything else, or if you do feel threatened in any way. You have my card, Miss Doe."

Miss Doe. Not Josie or Miss Nichols. She hunched her shoulders and lowered her head as she faced the bustle in and around the maze of cubicles on the detectives' division floor. As long as none of them knew why she was here, as long as Donny Kemp—or whoever he'd become—never learned her name, she'd be perfectly safe.

Josie took a deep breath and headed toward the elevators. She could do this. It was right to do this. Friday, she'd tried to save a man's life and had failed. Today, she'd confirmed the police's suspicions about the identity of a serial killer. Tomorrow…

Junior rolled onto her bladder and suddenly, Josie had to focus on finding the nearest bathroom.

This baby was her tomorrow. The precious life growing inside her meant she wasn't alone in the world anymore. Rafe Delgado might regret the night they'd created this miracle, but she didn't.

Her only regret was that the baby would probably drive the final wedge between her and Rafe, ending whatever relationship they had left.

Just as she was about to push the elevator call button, the light for the fourth floor lit up and the doors slid open. Her heart shriveled when she spotted the five officers inside, outfitted in special black uniforms, weapons and gear that made them look as though they were marching into battle. It was useless to try to turn away, useless to duck her head and pretend she didn't know these regulars from the Shamrock.

Captain Cutler strode off first, tipping the bill of his hat. "Miss Nichols."

Trip Jones filled the opening, grinned, then stooped down to give her a hug. "Hey, Josie. Good to see you."

Alex Taylor winked. "Hey, Josie."

Miranda Murdock, the newest member of SWAT Team One, even offered a polite nod. "Hello."

Josie summoned the patience and strength to trade hi's and hugs and how are you's as the first four officers moved on past her.

But then Rafe was standing between the elevator doors, his grim, dark eyes sweeping over her.

"What are you all doing here?" she asked.

And then his hand was on her elbow, pulling her to one side, away from the criss-cross of traffic entering and exiting the floor. His fingers had burned through the cotton of her loose-fitting scrubs jacket by the time he'd turned her into the doorway of a closed office and released her. "Monday morning roll call," Rafe explained. "What are you doing here? Is something wrong?"

With her back pressed to the door it was hard to see anything beyond the dimensions of his chest, hard to stand her ground and tilt her chin and remind him that he didn't have any proprietary claim over her actions anymore. "I came in to sign my witness statement for Detectives Montgomery and Fensom."

He glanced away and shoved his fingers through his hair, leaving the short, tobacco-brown spikes in a mess that she would have smoothed back into place for him six months ago. Yet when he faced her again, the only message stamped on his face was a warning. “Don’t get involved with this case. We’re talking a serial killer here.”

She curled her fingers into her palms, fighting the urge to touch him, to soothe his concern. “Would you back down from doing your duty? Or did you learn different lessons from my father?”

“I’m trained to do what I do.”

“And you don’t think I’ve learned a few survival skills over the years, with the people I know and the things I’ve been through?”

He shook his head. “I don’t want you to get hurt, Jose. I care about you.”

“Yeah, just not enough to do something about it.”

With that, Rafe drew back, taking his heat and charged energy with him. “I’ll admit you gave me a good shock Friday night. But you know I’ll take care of the baby—medical bills, day care—whatever you need.”

Feeling a bit of pity that he could see no joy, nor feel any hope, at the miracle they’d created together, she reached up and brushed her fingertips across his smooth, warm jaw. His pulse leaped beneath her touch and she smiled sadly. “My brave, noble, do-the-right-thing Rafe. That’s the big issue, isn’t it? I don’t think you understand what I really need.” She pulled her hand down to her distended belly. “What we really need. And if you do, I don’t know if you’ll ever be able to give it.”

His gaze followed her hand down, then back up to look her in the eye. “Jose, don’t do this. Keep yourself and the kid safe. Montgomery can find another way to catch this guy.”

Knowing his concern for her safety was genuine, yet knowing that depending on him would only resurrect feelings that were too painful to bear right now, Josie put her hand on his chest and pushed him back out of her space. “It’s not your call to make, Rafe. Now you’ve got a meeting to get to and I’m late for my practicum. Goodbye.”

It was the most unnatural thing in the world to turn her back on Rafe and walk away. The baby seemed to know it, too. Junior shifted inside her, in Josie’s mind, trying to reach for Daddy and the heat and strength and security Rafe had in such abundance. The little traitor. She was trying to be strong enough for both of them, trying to save them both the heartache of wanting Rafe Delgado.

Sensing that Rafe was standing there, watching her every step of the way, Josie pushed the elevator’s call button and waited. The swish of movement in her belly, not quite a kick yet, but a definite presence with a determined opinion, continued. The shifting pressure settled right onto her bladder again. With her hand on her belly, and tears threatening the corners of her eyes, Josie squeezed her thighs together and whispered a plea. “Please quiet down, Junior. I’m trying to make an exit here.”

WITH FOURTH PRECINCT Chief Mitch Taylor running the Monday morning roll call meeting, Rafe was doing his best to pay attention. But the vivid memories of Josie’s touch on his skin, her hand cradling his seed in her belly and the battleground of emotions waging war inside him made it a real challenge.

“I want to remind everybody about the spring carnival we’re putting together for the KCPD widows and orphans fund this month.” Mitch Taylor pulled back the front of his jacket and propped his hands at his waist in a stance that indicated this project was every bit as important to him as the ongoing investigations on his agenda. His booming voice required no microphone. “Mark your calendars for Memorial Day weekend. Even though we’ve hired an event planner to coordinate the event, I’ll be looking for volunteers to help with everything from parking to running the arcade games for the kids.”

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