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Sheriff's Runaway Witness

KATHLEEN CREIGHTON

Kathleen Creighton

Sheriff's Runaway Witness

Аннотация

Pregnant and on the run, Rachel Malone Delcorte is the only witness to the murder of two federal agents. Mob boss Carlos Delcorte wants her baby—his grandson—and he wants Rachel dead. But as fate would have it, sheriff's deputy Jethro "J.J." Fox gets to Rachel first. After delivering her baby and seeing her safely to her billionaire grandfather's estate, he's sworn to protect the beautiful widow. Keeping mother and son safe isn't the problem for J.J.—he's used to handling the bad guys. Matters of the heart—that's a whole different story. He's always had his own agenda. One he's not sure Rachel can accept....

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“You’re a witness. You’re my witness.”

“You are the witness who is going to break this case for me. The witness who’s going to get me my old job back. Now—do you understand what I want from you?”

She nodded. Her body had gone cold and still. He must have felt it, because he let go of her arms, exhaled and muttered, “Good...” He bent down to pick up his hat from the mossy creek bank where she’d tossed it.

She cleared her throat. “You want me to testify,” she said carefully, feeling nothing at all, except cold. “You want me to say I saw who killed those two feds.”

“I’m sorry you’ve had to go through all this for nothing, but I didn’t see anything. Do you get it?” She sucked in another breath. “So, you can go home now.”

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Dear Reader,

Recently, events in my life have brought me back to the valley in the southern Sierra Nevada mountains of California where I grew up. So, it is perhaps fitting that as I begin a new chapter in my life, I begin a new series, as well, and that I have chosen

the mountains and deserts of my youth and childhood—rich in beauty, history and romance—as its setting.

The new series, which we are calling *The Scandals of Sierra Malone*, will follow the efforts of reclusive, eccentric billionaire Sam Malone, now well into his tenth decade. Hoping to connect with his only surviving heirs, four granddaughters he's never met, Sam has invited the four to come to his remote California hacienda to claim their inheritance. For each of the four, the summons is a life-changing event, one that will bring them unexpected adventure, even danger—and, of course, romance.

This, the first book in the series, is Rachel's story. I hope you will find it both heartwarming and compelling, and that it will serve to bring you back to June Canyon Ranch again and again, to join us as the saga continues.

To new beginnings...

Kathleen Creighton

Kathleen Creighton

Sheriff's Runaway Witness



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KATHLEEN CREIGHTON

has roots deep in the California soil but has relocated to South Carolina. As a child, she enjoyed listening to old-timers' tales, and her fascination with the past only deepened as she grew older. Today, she says she is interested in everything—art, music, gardening, zoology, anthropology and history, but people are at the top of her list. She also has a lifelong passion for writing, and now combines all her loves in romance novels.

For Gail and Patience,

(Who is the personification of her name,)

For forbearance, kindness and understanding

Above and beyond all reasonable expectation.

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Prologue

From the memoirs of Sierra Sam Malone:

I never thought I would live so long. For the fact that I have done so I must give credit to the Man Upstairs, I suppose, but also to three beautiful women, all of whom loved me a sight more than I deserved. Lord knows I never did right by any of them, but maybe there is still time before I die to make up for some of the wrong I did. I sure do mean to try.

Telling the story—the whole truth...well, I reckon that's as good a place to start as any.

Part One—Elizabeth

That day outside of Barstow when the railroad bulls beat me senseless and threw me off the train and left me to die in the desert wasn't the first time Death came for me and went away empty-handed. Not the first time, but I thought for sure it was the last, and my last day on earth before I'd even reached the ripe age of eighteen. It would have been, too, if not for a bit of crazy dumb luck...and a sweet bit of a girl named Elizabeth.

I don't recall much of that day, and even if I did I wouldn't bore anybody to death telling about it. I do recollect that it was April, and the desert was blazing hot in the daytime and freezing cold when the sun went down. I know I walked when I could and crawled when I couldn't walk anymore, and tried to take shelter in the heat of the day underneath any kind of bush big enough to

offer a morsel of shade. I know I got more prickles than comfort from that effort, and that I was plain fool lucky I didn't try to share some rattlesnake's midday napping place.

For some reason—instinct, I reckon, or Divine Guidance, or maybe it was just because, being a mountain boy born and bred from the green hills of West Virginia, and I had no wish to die in the desert—I didn't try to follow the tracks back to Barstow but instead kept stumbling my dogged way toward the mountains I could see off in the distance. Could just as well have been a mirage, but it wasn't. It was mountains, real ones, and something in me told me there might be water there, somewhere.

Well...if there was water in those barren hills it eluded me, and I knew the sands in my hourglass were fast running out. I won't die like a dog on my belly in the dirt, I told myself, and with my last ounce of strength, rose to my feet to shake my fist at the heavens and that terrible killing sun. And as if to punish me for my defiance, at that moment the earth fell out from under my feet, and down, down I fell, rolling and tumbling in a torrent of rock and sand...down, down until I fetched up finally in the bottom of a gully, skinned up and bloodier than the railroad bulls had left me.

Once I'd shaken the cobwebs out of my head and the sand out of my whiskers, I saw something in the side of that gully that nature hadn't put there: a hole, it was. A hole big as a man is tall. A hole dug by men. And in that part of the country, there was only one thing it could be, and that was a mine.

Now, as I said, I'm from the hills of West Virginia, and I know a thing or two about mines. One thing I knew was that a lot of the time there's water to be found in those mines, water that can take life as well as give it.

Well, I didn't hesitate. I scrambled up the side of that gully like a madman, clawing my way with bleeding hands. When I got inside the cave and the blessed shade enveloped me, I could smell it. I'd heard tell of animals—horses and cattle and such—being able to smell it, though I'd never thought it had much of a smell, myself. But in that moment I knew it did.

Water.

Yes, sir, I could smell water somewhere in that mine tunnel, and I stumbled my way toward it like a crippled moth fluttering its feeble way to the flame. Deeper and deeper into that tunnel I went, until it was too dark to see my hand in front of my face. I felt my way along the walls, and when my feet got wet I fell to my knees, then flat on my face in that blessed pool. An underground spring, it was, and it had flooded that mine, as water has a way of doing, often to the woe of the miners unlucky enough to get trapped by it. But that day it saved one poor soul, and that was yours truly, Sam Malone.

I drank my fill and then must have passed out for a spell, and when I opened my eyes next I thought I'd died after all. There was light where there shouldn't have been, a soft, golden glow, and I recall thinking, Lord, I don't know how or why but I made it to Heaven! Because where that light hit the water and the walls

of that mine tunnel, it gave back a sparkle, a shine I'd only heard about in the stories men told around the fires in the hobo camps alongside the railroad tracks. I understood, then, the madness that drove men to leave everything they knew and the kinfolk that loved them, throw it all away to follow the lure of the gold.

Could it be? In awe, almost in a trance, I dipped my hand into the pool of water and held it up to my face and stared at the flecks that stuck to my skin. Yep, no doubt about it—it was gold.

Before my brain could get to understanding what had happened to me, before I could think what kind of miracle I'd stumbled across, the light moved and sent my shadow dancing long and crooked across the tunnel wall. And a voice spoke to me from the blackness behind the light.

“You're trespassing.”

That is how I found my first treasure. Her name was Elizabeth.

She had the face of an angel, but any notions I might have had about being in Heaven went flying straight out of my head when I saw, by the light of the lantern in her hand, the shotgun she carried cradled in one arm and leveled straight and true at my heart.

Chapter 1

Mojave Desert, California

Present day

Jethro Jefferson Fox the Third—or J.J., as he was more commonly known—was in a surly mood. This, despite the fact that the weather was predicted to be sunny and the temperature to top out at around a balmy seventy-five degrees. And, after the past week's rain, there were still lingering patches of green on the hillsides and even some flowers hanging on, which he happened to know was about as good as it got in the Mojave Desert of Southern California.

However, having grown up in the verdant hills of North Carolina, J.J. was pining for—no, grieving for—green. All the sweet soft shades of green, of roadsides and cow pastures emerging from the dead brown of winter, of new-leaved hardwood trees and deep dark piney woods and underneath in the developing shade, the snowy white of dogwood blooms and lavender-pink of redbuds.

Helluva place for the son of southern Appalachian moonshiners to wind up, he thought, where the green happened in the middle of winter and if you blinked you missed it, and the nearest thing to shade came from spiky clumps of Joshua trees.

The image glaring back at him from the half-silvered mirror over the wash basin in his cramped trailer-sized bathroom gave

him no joy, either: hair sun-bleached and crawling well past his collar; facial hair grown beyond the fashionable stubble look and rapidly approaching Grizzly Adams; blue eyes developing a permanent squint in spite of the aviator shades he nearly always wore. The hair and beard had probably originally been some sort of rebellion against his exile to this hellhole, but as it turned out, nobody in the department seemed to give a damn what he looked like, and with the springtime about to turn into summer it was too damn hot anyhow. Time for the shrubbery to go.

He picked up a razor and was contemplating where best to begin mowing, when his radio squawked at him from the bedside table where it spent most nights—those he wasn't out and about on San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department business. He picked it up, thumbed it on and muttered a go-ahead to Katie Mendoza, on morning duty at the station desk.

First, he heard a nervous chuckle. Then: "I wasn't sure I should call you with this, Sheriff."

"Well, you did," J.J. said, returning the baleful stare of the dog sprawled across the foot of his unmade bed, head now raised and ears pricked, awaiting developments. "Might as well tell me."

"I thought it was a joke, first call I got. Then 911 dispatch got one. So I figured I better—"

"Spit it out." J.J. was thinking, Not much chance it's a dead body, not with a lead-in like that. He didn't feel too much guilt at the fact that such a thought would cross his mind, either. He could only hope...

“You’re not gonna believe it,” Katie said with another nervous laugh.

“Try me,” said J.J., trying not to grind his teeth.

“Well, okay.” Some throat clearing came across the airwaves, followed by a semi-professional-sounding monotone. “Sheriff, we’ve received several reports of a person walking through the desert, out in the middle of nowhere, an undetermined distance from the highway, off Death Valley Road. No sign of a vehicle anywhere in the vicinity.”

“Uh-huh.” J.J. waited, figuring there had to be more.

After another episode of throat-clearing, it came. “J.J., swear to God, I am not making this up. This person—it—she—appears to be a nun.”

Beverly Hills, California

Approximately twelve hours earlier

“He’s going to kill me.”

Even as she said it Rachel thought, People say that all the time. My mom, dad, boyfriend, husband...so-and-so is going to kill me. It’s just a saying. It doesn’t mean anything.

Rachel meant it. Now she waited to see if she would be believed. She closed her bedroom door and leaned against it, breath held, waiting. Hoping.

“I’m sure he plans to,” Sister Mary Isabelle stated matter-of-factly, drawing back to examine the bruises on Rachel’s cheek and jaw. Her brown eyes narrowed but she didn’t comment. She crossed the room and seated herself on the bed, carefully

arranging the folds of her habit around her. “You know too much. And—” she nodded in the direction of Rachel’s bulging belly “—once your baby’s born, Carlos won’t need you any longer.”

Rachel let out her breath in a gust and realized she was dangerously close to tears. To be believed was an almost overwhelming relief. She gazed at her oldest and dearest friend in affectionate awe and took refuge in laughter. “Izzy, sometimes I can’t believe you’re a nun. You’re way more worldly than I am.”

Sister Mary Isabelle gave an un-nunlike snort. “I’m sure I am—although technically, you know, I’m a ‘sister,’ not a nun. Why wouldn’t I be? Here in the Delacortes’ family enclave you’re more cloistered than I have ever been. Plus, I’m a doctor, dear heart. My clinic is located in a part of the city that sees more of the bad stuff of life than you ever will—gang violence, drugs, domestic abuse, teen pregnancy. A habit doesn’t shelter me from all that, you know.”

“Yes, and speaking of that,” Rachel said, as the fact registered belatedly, “why are you? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear one before.”

Sister Mary Isabelle smiled, making her cheeks look like round pink apples within the confines of the wimple. “I have my reasons, which will become clear shortly.” She took Rachel’s hands in both of hers and squeezed them. “I’ve been worried about you, you know. I thought you were making a huge mistake when you left in the middle of your first year of internship to marry—”

“And you’ve told me so,” Rachel said dryly. “More than once.”

Sister Mary Isabelle was silent for a moment. Then she touched Rachel’s bruised cheek—a feather’s touch, but still Rachel jerked away from it as if from a slap. “Did Carlos do this?”

“Of course he did—and I know what you’re thinking,” Rachel said angrily. “Nicky would never have hit me. Never. He wasn’t like that. He was nothing like Carlos.”

“Chelly... Nicholas was Carlos’s son. He grew up with a father who hits women. You know the odds are—”

“Nicky was nothing like his father.” Rachel repeated it as she had so many times in her mind. Willing herself to believe it. She had believed it. Until...

“You were in love,” Sister Mary Isabelle said sadly, “and you wanted to believe he would have been able to break away from his father’s organization. From his influence. Maybe he could have—only God knows. The fact that he was killed before he had the chance to try is tragic. But,” she added sternly, “the fact that two federal law enforcement officers were also killed in that shootout is even more tragic.” She paused to give Rachel a penetrating stare. “You know that, don’t you?”

Rachel nodded silently. She’d been living with that knowledge, that guilt, for months.

“The fact that you happened to be pregnant when Nicholas died bought you some time,” Sister Mary Isabelle went on, her voice grave. “But you must know Carlos Delacorte will never

trust your loyalty. And—” her eyes twinkled with humor “—he’s never really liked you, anyway, has he?”

Rachel managed a wry smile in response. “What’s not to like? A nice girl from a Catholic school, on her way to becoming a doctor—”

“—with a moral compass, a conscience...”

Rachel sighed. “Well, yes, there is that. Carlos does hate me. And I think he actually blames me for Nicky’s death.”

Sister Mary Isabelle gave another snort. “He can’t live with his own share of fault in getting his son killed, so he needs someone else to dump it on.”

Unable to sit still, Rachel began to pace, steps jerky and uneven, one hand on her tight belly. “I’m sure he sees this baby as his second chance. It’s Nicky’s child. His own flesh and blood. Carlos can’t wait to get his hands on it.” She suddenly had to hold on to the edge of the tall dresser as fear weakened her knees. “Izzy,” she whispered, “I think he plans to take my baby away from me the moment he’s born. That’s probably when he’ll do it, you know—kill me. While I’m out of it—helpless. He’ll figure out a way to make it seem like complications of delivery, or something. Not that he’d do it himself, of course—he’d probably let Georg or Stan have the privilege of smothering me with a pillow. They’d enjoy—”

She was enveloped in the crisp folds of Sister Mary Isabelle’s habit. It smelled of soap and starch, and an arm was firm and strong around her middle.

Through the rushing sound in her ears she heard Sister Mary Isabelle's voice, calm and firm—her physician's voice. "Hush. That's not going to happen. And right now you are going to stop this drama. The last thing you or your baby needs is for you to panic."

Knowing she was right didn't help much. "I don't know what I'm going to do," Rachel whispered as she allowed herself to be settled on the edge of the bed. "They watch me every second, Izzy. I feel so...trapped. It's gotten much worse since I got the letter...."

Sister Mary Isabelle straightened, instantly alert. "What letter?"

Rachel wiped her eyes. "It came two days ago. By special courier—I had to sign for it personally, with my I.D. Carlos wasn't here, otherwise I doubt I would ever have gotten it. Even then, Carlos's watchdogs wanted to take it away from me, but I opened it and read it with the courier standing right there. There wasn't much they could do about it, short of killing both of us on the spot." She paused to gulp back a laugh she was aware could easily spiral into hysteria. "I'm sure they would have enjoyed that, too, but it would have been a little hard to cover up."

"The letter?" Sister Mary Isabelle prompted.

Rachel caught a quick, shallow breath; these days deeper ones were becoming harder to manage. "Yes. It was from—you're not going to believe this, Izzy—my grandfather."

"Your—oh, you mean the eccentric billionaire? The one who

—”

“—abandoned my grandmother and didn’t even come to the memorial service when my dad—his own son—was killed? And never once tried to get in touch with me after Grandmother found me in that Manila orphanage and went through all kinds of hell to bring me to America? Yeah, that grandfather. Sam Malone. He wrote to me, can you believe it?”

“What on earth did he want?” Sister Mary Isabelle’s eyes were shining now with interest. “I didn’t know he was still alive. He must be...how old?”

“Very old. I’m not sure exactly, but in his nineties, I think. Maybe even a hundred. I don’t know what he wants, to tell you the truth. Something about an inheritance—which I certainly don’t want. Seriously. I don’t want a thing from that man.” Rachel curved her hand over her lower abdomen and the envelope affixed there with surgical tape gave a faint crackle. She felt the baby roil as if in response. Her brief flare of anger had already faded, leaving her once more feeling frightened and vulnerable.

So, she’d managed to protect the letter, big deal. Now what? She’d never felt so helpless.

She took another shallow breath. “I don’t want anything from Sam Malone—not for me. But maybe it’s—you know...the fact that it came just now, when I’ve been wondering how in the world I can get away from here...I’ve been thinking, maybe it’s not a coincidence.”

“I don’t believe in coincidence. Sometimes God works in

mysterious ways,” Sister Mary Isabelle said serenely. Then, with her customary practicality: “What did you do with the letter? Did Carlos take it?”

Rachel shook her head and smiled a fierce, defiant smile. “It’s here,” she whispered, rubbing her belly. “The letter. I taped it to my stomach.” Sister Mary Isabelle gave a whoop of laughter, and Rachel gulped down a giggle. “Yes, and when Carlos demanded that I turn it over to him, I told him I’d hidden it where he’d never find it.” She sniffed. “Not even Carlos would dare to violate me there.”

“Clever girl. Good for you.” Sister Mary Isabelle immediately grew somber again. Her always expressive eyes darkened with sorrow as she lifted one hand and cupped Rachel’s bruised cheek. “But he did lay a hand on you. Was that when he hit you?”

Rachel nodded, remembering pain and outrage. And fury. “When I told him I’d hidden the letter where he’d never find it. It was out of sheer frustration, I think.” Her lips tightened bitterly. “He’s been so careful up till now.”

Sister Mary Isabelle suddenly leaned closer to whisper in her ear. “Are there surveillance cameras in this room?”

The question didn’t surprise Rachel; it was one she’d asked herself often enough. She shook her head and whispered back, “I don’t think so. I’ve looked.”

“What about bugs?”

She gave a humorless laugh. “I don’t know why Carlos would bother with bugs when I don’t have access to phone, internet or,

with the exception of yourself, visitors. But when I want to be sure of at least some privacy..." She took two steps toward the door and reached for the light switch. "There," she whispered as the room was plunged into darkness. She punched a button on the clock radio on her bedside table and a Bruce Springsteen song filled the silence. "Now, what did you want to tell me?"

"Good for you." Sister Mary Isabelle's chuckle came from the shadows. "I've come to spring you. It's time you got yourself and that baby of yours out of this Hell you're in—and being Roman Catholic, I do not use that term lightly."

At the first words, Rachel had smothered an involuntary cry with her fingertips. Now her gaze jerked to the windows, where, as the room behind her darkened, the panorama of the lights of Los Angeles had come into view. The world out there...how many times had she gazed at that incredible vista, stretching from the mountains to the sea, and felt like an animal in a cage. Trapped.

"How?" she whispered. "Can you work miracles?"

"I'm a sister, not a saint." Izzy sounded amused.

In the near darkness, the deeper shadow that was Sister Mary Isabelle moved and rustled mysteriously. Rachel waited in suspense, breath held. Then warm hands clutched her cold ones, and something—a bundle of fabric that smelled of soap and starch—was thrust into her arms.

"What—"

"Shush—I told you I'd explain the habit. It's for you, of course.

I'm wearing my regular clothes underneath. Here," she added, when Rachel stood motionless, stunned, "I'll help you put it on."

Sister Mary Isabelle explained in a whisper as her hands turned and tugged Rachel this way and that. "Leave your own clothes on, of course. So you can ditch the habit as soon as you're safely away from the compound. Good thing I'm...shall we say, generously built, hmm? You'd be way too tiny and this would be a tent on you under normal circumstances, but with that nine-month baby bump, plus the clothes you're wearing—there, how does that feel?"

"Izzy, I—"

"Oops—hold still—these wimples are a bit tricky... Okay. I think that's got it. Now listen carefully. You're going to have to keep your head down, okay? I doubt anybody is going to look past the habit, anyway, but just to be on the safe side. Take my car—it's out there in the driveway beside the fountain—the white Toyota. The keys are in it. Oh, and I—ahem—took the liberty of borrowing the plates from Father Francis's secretary's car. She took the train down to San Diego for a conference and won't be needing them for a few days. I really hope she doesn't mind contributing to the cause...." Having finished adjusting the disguise to her liking, she took Rachel firmly by the arms and gave her a small shake. "Now. Listen carefully, dear. You'll need to stop as soon as you're safely away and put the right plates back on—they're in the trunk—so you don't get stopped for having the wrong ones, okay?"

A dozen questions surged through Rachel's mind. She managed to verbalize the most urgent. "But Izzy, what about you? How will you—I can't think what Carlos will do when he —"

Strong hands gripped hers. "Nothing is going to happen to me. Carlos may be a ruthless criminal, a mob boss, but he's also a devout Catholic—even he won't dare to harm a nun. Or sister." Rachel could hear the smile in her voice. "I intend to stay right here in the dark for as long as it takes someone to get suspicious and come to check on you. The longer the better, obviously, so you'll get a good head start. If all goes well, you should be able to disappear before anyone here knows you're gone. Then, you can look up that grandfather of yours. If you want to, of course. If he can't protect you, maybe he can at least provide you with the money to start a new life somewhere, with a new identity."

"My own private witness protection program," Rachel said on a small note of sobbing laughter. "Izzy, I don't know what to say. How can I ever thank you?"

"Thank me by having and raising a happy, healthy baby, somewhere away from all this violence and danger, that's how. And do not try to get in touch with me, understand? Who knows what resources Carlos Delacorte has at his disposal. Now go, before—oh, wait. Forgot the most important thing." There was a faint whisper of sound, and Sister Mary Isabelle placed something in Rachel's hands. She closed Rachel's hands around the object, folded within her own.

“Your rosary,” Rachel whispered. “Izzy, I can’t. Really.” She gave a nervous laugh. “Besides, I don’t think I’ve prayed since high school.”

“Keep it anyway,” Sister Mary Isabelle said firmly. “You never know when the mood might strike you. And just because you’ve forgotten how to pray doesn’t mean God’s forgotten how to listen. Speaking of which...” There was a moment of silence, followed by a whispered, “Amen...” and the familiar little flurry of movement that was Sister Mary Isabelle crossing herself. Then the strong, capable hands—physician’s hands—took hers once more.

“Now—remember. No driver’s license, no identification, no credit cards. Right? Do you have any money? Cash?” Rachel shook her head. “Well, never mind—I left some for you in the car. Not much, but it should get you to your grandfather. No cell phone—oh, that’s right, you don’t have one. Just as well. If television cop shows are right, they could probably track you that way. So—have I forgotten anything?”

“I can’t imagine what,” Rachel said with a laugh, and added in a shaky whisper, “Izzy, what if I—”

“You’re going to be fine.” The fabric of the habit rustled as Sister Mary Isabelle pulled her close in a quick, hard hug. “Now go.” And after a pause, she added a fervent, “Vaya con Dios.”

Go with God. If only I believed that, Rachel thought.

The reality was, it was all up to her now. Izzy had given her the chance she needed, but finally, she would have to do what

was necessary to save herself and her baby.

She took one last breath, the deepest she could manage, and whispered, “Bye, Izzy. Thank you.” Then she opened the door and slipped into the hallway.

After the darkness, the indirect lighting in the hallway, subdued as it was, struck her like a spotlight; she almost expected to hear sirens blaring and steel doors clanging shut. Her heart thumped so hard it hurt her chest as she hurried toward the stairs. Remembering to keep her face lowered, she took courage from the knowledge that it would be shielded from the watchful eyes of the security cameras by the starched wings of the wimple.

A hard grip on the banister didn't entirely prevent her hand from shaking, and she found herself clutching the rosary in her other hand, thrust deep in the folds of the habit. She'd meant what she'd told Izzy, about not knowing any longer how to pray, and in fact she didn't know if she even believed in such things now. But somehow, as the rosary beads pressed hard into her flesh, she felt a sense of purpose come over her. Purpose, resolve, strength—a surge of power that seemed to rise from some place deep within her. Maternal instinct of some sort, probably. The absolute certainty that she would do whatever it took to protect the tiny life nestled beneath her heart.

A life that was becoming increasingly impatient with its confinement, it seemed. Halfway down the curving staircase she had to pause for a moment to wait for the steel band that had tightened around her belly to relax. Braxton Hicks contractions,

she told herself. Although this was the strongest she'd felt yet, she knew they were still nothing to worry about.

The tightening eased, and she continued down the stairs, head bowed. The security guards in the cavernous entry gave her a lazy glance when she stepped onto the quarry tile floor. Their eyes were flat and expressionless, although they both nodded with a modicum of respect—the habit, again. As she swept past them, habit swishing over the baked adobe, one of the guards even stepped ahead of her to open the heavy, ornately carved doors. Then he stood and watched her descend the steps at the slow and stately pace befitting a nun in full habit—or a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy. Rachel could feel those hard, cold eyes on her as she crossed the brick-paved courtyard, but her newfound courage kept her from giving in to the urge to look back or hurry her steps.

She found that she felt both shielded and bolstered by the voluminous folds of the habit, as if it was a suit of armor rather than mere cloth. The wimple that hid her face from the eagle eyes of the security guards and cameras also kept her focused, her own eyes firmly concentrated on her immediate goal: Walk to the car...don't hurry...open the door...ease in behind the wheel...not too tight a fit, thank God Izzy's bigger than I am...keys in ignition...turn on...put car in gear...drive away...don't hurry...don't hurry...slowly...slowly.

The big iron gates slid open as she approached...then silently closed behind her. At the bottom of the drive she paused, left-

turn blinker off-sync with the frantic rhythm of her pounding heart. She made the turn and rolled slowly down the curving street, every part of her wanting to step on the accelerator and screech away at all possible speed. But she forced herself to go slowly...slowly. She rounded the first bend, and the red tile roofs of the Delacorte compound were now hidden from her view. She let out her breath in a gust, and wondered how long she'd been holding it.

For the moment, yes, she was free. But she had a long way to go before she—and her baby—would be safe.

Her game plan was simple. She would head east on the interstate as fast as traffic and the law allowed, and go as far as roughly half of the almost-full tank of gas in Izzy's car would take her. After that, she would get off the main roads, buy herself some food and as much gasoline as the money Izzy had left her would buy, and cut back north and west across the desert to the remote southern Sierra Valley where her grandfather's ranch was. She would avoid places with people, so as to leave as few witnesses as possible. She would not risk going to the police or any other public agency for help; she didn't know how far the Delacorte family's influence might reach. Best to stay anonymous. Play it safe. Trust no one.

Before getting on the freeway, though, mindful of Izzy's instructions, she drove to a shopping center she remembered from the days when she was free to come and go as she pleased, and drove into the center's underground parking structure. She

found a remote and relatively unused level and parked in the shadow of a support pillar. She took off the habit—with regret; she'd liked the feeling of safety it had given her—and put it in the trunk of the car. It had occurred to her that leaving it might serve as a marker, a signpost for those who might be trying to track her down, like a footprint or a broken twig. Better to leave no traces of herself behind.

She found the license plates Izzy had left in the trunk, along with a screwdriver, and was pleased to note as she took the borrowed plates off and put the correct ones on that her hands didn't shake. She no longer felt terrified. Keyed up, excited, euphoric almost, but not afraid. That alone was a wonderful and amazing thing. She'd been afraid for so long.

Back on the freeway, which was moving relatively swiftly at that time of evening, she opened her window, shook her hair free of the elastic band that had held it back from her face and reveled in the sensation of the cool spring wind lifting strands off her shoulders, tickling her ears and temples.

This is what freedom feels like.

But then a pair of headlights came zooming up behind her and, as her heart leaped into her throat, whipped impatiently around her on the left and sped away in the fast lane. After that, heart hammering, she kept checking her rearview mirrors even though the anonymous headlights she saw reflected there had nothing to tell her.

Just past the Ontario Airport she turned off onto Interstate

15, heading northeast toward Las Vegas. Several times already the almost constant pressure on her bladder had forced her off the freeway in search of a public restroom, and during one of these pit stops she had bought a map. She had studied it while munching cheese-flavored popcorn and bottled water from the rest stop's vending machines, and had plotted what she thought seemed like the best route—meaning the most devious, the least likely. Just past the town of Barstow where I-15 intersected with I-40 she had discovered a numbered highway that seemed to run in a reasonably straight line northward to Death Valley. Perfect, she thought. Who would ever think to look for her in Death Valley?

Having settled on her travel route, Rachel still had decisions to make. Looking at the map, the road she'd chosen, though a numbered state route and therefore probably fairly well maintained, seemed lonely and remote, and she wasn't quite brave enough—or stupid enough—to chance it alone at night. Neither would she feel safe in a motel anywhere in a major crossroads like Barstow, which would be the obvious place for Carlos to look for her. Even a maintained rest stop seemed too exposed, too risky.

Maybe she was being overly paranoid, but she'd learned a lot about the Delacorte family in the two years she'd been a part of it, and she wouldn't make the mistake of underestimating its resources. Not when her life and the future of her unborn child depended on it.

So, after making one last bathroom stop and replenishing her supply of snacks and drinking water, she pulled off onto a minor paved road leading into the desert. The pavement fizzled out after only a quarter of a mile or so, but since she could no longer see the lights of traffic on the interstate, she felt it would be a reasonably safe place to spend what was left of the night. Not that she expected to sleep; the night was chilly, the baby was restless and her back ached. But she crawled into the backseat anyway, and curled up on her side with her head pillowed on one folded arm, the other hand resting on her swollen belly. She closed her eyes, and within minutes, as they so often did, images of Nicky came to fill the blank screen of her mind.

Happy images, at first—memories of when they'd first met, on the grounds of UCLA. She'd been premed, and Nicky—well, who knew what his major was? Undeclared, probably, but he'd been taking a few classes she'd shared, just to see, he'd told her, if medicine held any interest for him. She remembered his smile, the sparkle of mischief in his beautiful dark eyes. She'd led a protected life up to that point, and the aura of danger that seemed to surround him had been...exciting.

His face filled her mind now, and she braced for the pain. Pushed against it, like worrying a sore tooth with her tongue. The memory came less easily now, six months after his death, and she felt a brief surge of panic when she couldn't seem to find it at first. Then it swept over her and she pressed her hand against the spot in the middle of her chest where the pain was sharpest.

Pressed against it and gasped in sharp breaths, fighting it back. She both welcomed and dreaded the pain, knowing that when the day came she could no longer summon it, Nicky would be truly, finally gone.

But for now...the pain seemed familiar, almost comforting. She let it settle over her and the tears ooze from beneath her lashes and trickle in cool trails down the side of her face and into her hair while memories, images played through her head. Happy memories, these were...the two of them together at the beach, on the sailboat in Newport, skiing in Park City, riding down Pacific Coast Highway in Nicky's Porsche with the top down and the wind blowing through her hair. Laughing. Making love in all sorts of places, Nicky smiling down into her eyes while their bodies moved together in lovely harmony. Telling him she was pregnant, hearing the delighted whoop of his laughter, watching his eyes dance with almost childlike joy.

Then...they were dancing together, swaying to the music of old-fashioned bands, holding hands across a table lit by candlelight, and Nicky was placing the ring on her finger. Now... their wedding day, a blur of people and flowers and champagne, and Nicky's family—Carlos had scared her a little even then, but Nicky had told her they wouldn't have to be a part of the Delacorte organization, they would have their own lives, raise their children the way they wanted to.

And she had believed him then.

More music...more dancing...but the mood had darkened.

She didn't know what it was, but something was wrong. Nicky was different. She didn't know why, but she felt...afraid.

We're dancing, Nicky and I...and suddenly we're not dancing, but running, running, and Nicky has hold of my hand and I'm running as fast as I can trying to keep up with him. Somehow we're not in a ballroom anymore, but in an alley, and Nicky pushes me down behind a trash bin. I hear the roar of car engines, the chirp of sirens and then the world explodes in gunfire. Funny—I've never heard gunfire before, but I know instantly what it is. Nicky calls out to me, calls my name. I look over at him and I see blood. It's everywhere, on his clothes and on my hands. His eyes are open, looking at me, and they aren't sparkling, laughing, gleaming with mischief. They look so frightened. Terrified. And then...there is nothing.

Someone grabs me, pulls me, half carries me, pushes me into a car and everything is chaos. But I remember the guns, and the smell of blood and gasoline and smoke, and I remember the bodies lying in the wet and dirt of the alley. I remember... I remember.

Chapter 2

She woke up, struggled to sit up in the cramped confines of the car. Her heart was hammering, her body stiff and aching in the early morning chill. For a moment she was unable to grasp where she was. The light outside the car windows was the cold gray light of dawn, not the glaring, pulsing hellish kaleidoscope of colors, of nighttime and police lights and spotlights. The vista beyond the windows was barren, empty, a landscape of pastels dotted with dark splotches and freckles of lava rock, not a canyon of steel and concrete and oily black pavement glistening with rain and blood.

The only thing left from her nightmare was the fear. The sense of danger and doom.

The baby stirred beneath her ribs. And she remembered.

Izzy. Izzy came in her habit. This is Izzy's car. I'm driving Izzy's car, and I'm free of the Delacortes at last. Free!

Yes, she was free, but alone out in the middle of nowhere. She still had to get to someone who could help her, someone she could trust. She had to find a safe place, which meant a place where Carlos would never find her. If there is such a place.

She ran her hand under her belly, and the letter she'd taped there crackled faintly. Sam Malone's letter. Would the grandfather she'd never known, the grandfather who had never acknowledged her or lifted a finger or spent a dime to help her

or her grandmother, would such a man be able to help her now? Was he even alive? If he was, as distasteful as it was to her to have to ask for help, it seemed her only choice. She would go to the place, this place called June Canyon Ranch, and after that... well, she would have to wait and see.

Meanwhile, the pressure on her bladder was intense, and she was a long way from any public restroom. She climbed stiffly out of the car and relieved herself, as awkward and embarrassing as that process was, then stretched her legs by walking gingerly around the car several times. Her back ached terribly, but she supposed that was to be expected after spending a night in the backseat of a Toyota, nine months pregnant.

After a breakfast of bottled water and a package of bite-sized chocolate chip cookies that did little to calm her hunger pangs, Rachel consulted her map once more, then eased herself behind the wheel. She started up the car, managed to get it turned around without getting stuck in the soft sand and headed back to the interstate. Backtracking toward Barstow, she found the exit she wanted, the one for the numbered state route that ran north toward Death Valley. Exhilaration filled her as she made the turn, and saw the ribbon of asphalt stretching out into the lava-rock-studded hills. As the sun rose she saw that the hills weren't barren at all, but tinged a lovely shade of green and splashed here and there with the vibrant yellows and purples and oranges of desert spring wildflowers.

Oh, but it felt good, so good to be free.

She drove fast—maybe too fast—and met a few cars at first, probably coming from one of the tiny dots she'd seen on the map, settlements too small to be called towns. At this hour they'd be heading into Barstow to school or work, she guessed. Then the sun rose and there were fewer cars. The miles sped by and the mountains seemed no closer. She hadn't expected such distances between signs of civilization.

Though the desert seemed endless, it wasn't empty and parched as she'd expected. The landscape alternated between plains where wildflowers made a solid yellow carpet between clumps of sagebrush and those greenish rock-strew hills. The road ran straight across the plains and wound through some hills, then seemed to follow a dry wash, or ravine. There were no other cars now. Rachel was alone, just her and the empty ribbon of highway stretching out to where the pale blue sky met the pastel-colored earth.

She hadn't expected it to be so beautiful. There—was that a patch of poppies blooming over on the hillside?

She glanced back at the road ahead—which suddenly wasn't empty anymore. Incredibly, there was a dog—or, good Lord, could it be a coyote?—smack in the middle of the road. Trotting down the road as if he had the right-of-way—which, Rachel supposed, he did, really.

She had already jerked the wheel to the right, reflexively. Now, realizing she was about to drive into the sand and sagebrush, she overcorrected to the left. The next thing she knew,

the little Toyota was careening wildly through the brush and cactus, and she was hanging on to the steering wheel, frozen in fear.

The brake! Step on the brake!

She did, but too late. The Toyota had enough momentum to continue up an embankment before toppling slowly down... down...to rest with a crunch, nose-first in the soft sand at the bottom of the dry wash.

For a few moments Rachel sat absolutely still. Stunned. Then the first coherent thought came: My baby!

Terrified, she held her breath and took stock. Okay. Nothing hurts. Besides my back, anyway.

Nothing seemed amiss. In fact, thanks to that last-minute stomp on the brake pedal, she'd evidently landed in the wash with so little impact the air bag hadn't even deployed. And her seat belt had kept her belly from hitting the steering wheel. Still, she was pressed up against it. Which couldn't be good.

She opened the door—which required little effort, thanks to the angle of the car—released the seat belt and half slid, half fell onto the steeply sloping bank of the ravine. She pulled up her feet and sat there braced and hugging herself, waiting until she felt her legs were steady enough to hold her.

Stupid. How could I have been so careless? Stupid, stupid!

What now?

She'd never be able to get the car out of the ravine without a tow truck. But of course she had no cell phone, no way to call for

help. Hopefully, a car would come along, but then... what if... In her vulnerable state, the paranoia of the night before returned.

Oh, God, what if Carlos is out looking for me? What if he's somehow managed to track me here?

No, she didn't dare flag down a passing stranger. She had to get to some sort of settlement—one of those tiny dots on the map. Surely there would be someone there with a telephone. She could walk—it couldn't be that far. She'd been driving for what seemed like forever. She had to have already covered most of the distance to the next one.

Holding on to the open door, she pulled herself to her feet. Though it was a tight squeeze, she managed to stretch across the seat and retrieve the map and what remained of her water and snacks from where they'd slid onto the floor during her wild ride and final descent into the ravine.

So far, so good. But now she became aware of the sun beating down on her unprotected head, and any idiot knew about the dangers of walking in the desert without proper protection.

Then she remembered the habit. Izzy's habit, that she'd tossed so casually into the trunk after she'd made her escape from the Delacorte estate. It would be rather like the robes desert Arabs wore, wouldn't it? Perfect.

She pulled the trunk release—gratified to discover it still worked—then managed make her way back up the dirt bank, pulling herself along the side of the car, until she could reach the trunk. She lifted the trunk lid and gathered up the pile of fabric

that was Izzy's habit, then had to bend over with it clutched to her chest as pain unlike anything she'd ever known before gripped her back and pelvis like a giant vise.

For a moment she bore it in stoic silence, before she remembered there was no one to hear her, so what did it matter. She let out a primal roar that surprised her almost as much as the fact that it actually seemed to help.

There. It's going away now. Yes. Thank God.

But then, as the pain diminished panic rushed in to take its place.

Oh, my God. That was a contraction. A real one. Not Braxton Hicks. Oh, my God. I'm in labor.

First order of business: Rachel, do not panic!

She leaned against the back of the car and took deep breaths to calm herself. She'd had enough medical training to know that, for the moment, at least, she was in no real danger. This was her first baby. Labor could, and probably would, go on for hours and hours. Plenty of time. Her original plan—to walk to the nearest site of human habitation—would still appear to be the best option. And if she kept reasonably close to the road, she could still flag down someone if it came to that.

If worse came to worst. If she absolutely had to take the chance.

But she wasn't there yet. So far, just that one contraction, and as long as the contractions stayed far apart she'd be okay. No need to panic. She had water, and protection from the sun. She'd

be fine.

Determinedly putting all the terrible thoughts and possibilities out of her mind, Rachel stood on the edge of the wash, gazing at the endless panorama of desert and mountains stretching away to cloudless blue skies. My God, she thought, I truly am alone. Utterly and completely alone!

As if in contradiction of the thought, a little breeze came skirling along through the brush and picked up the wings of her long black hair, tugging it gently at first, then with more urgency. Hurry up! it seemed to say. Come along, you're wasting time!

Oddly enough, the knowledge that she was indeed on her own, and completely dependent on her own devices, made her feel stronger. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, opened them again and began to methodically sort out the folds of the habit.

A few minutes later, Rachel set out across the desert, with Izzy's rosary beads clutched in one hand and her last bottle of water in the other.

Sheriff's Deputy J. J. Fox did not take lightly the 911 dispatcher's report of someone walking alone in the desert—nun or otherwise. Fact was, the desert killed people. All the time. Maybe not as often as before cell phones and GPS, but it still happened. Maybe less likely now when the weather was relatively benign as compared to the coming heat of summer, which would be just plain suicidal.

"Some people are too damn stupid to live," he said to his passenger, who was sitting upright on her haunches in the

middle of the backseat of the sheriff's department patrol vehicle, drooling on J.J.'s right shoulder. "Too bad we can't just let nature take its course...Darwin's Law, you know? Weed out some of these idiots." Getting only panting sounds in reply, and considerably more dog drool, he gave a gusty sigh. "Yeah...s'pose not. But just between you and me, Moonshine..."

He hoped it was a false alarm, a mirage or...maybe wind-blown clothing hung up on a cactus. But he had a feeling it wouldn't be; the notion of a woman—a nun!—walking alone in the desert was just nutty enough to be true.

"Really," he said to the drooler, "you couldn't make this stuff up."

As he approached the mile marker the dispatcher had given as the approximate location of the nun sightings, he slowed down and turned on his lights. Crawling along the shoulder at walking speed, he scanned the terrain on both sides of the highway. Nothing he could see, except for the usual scrubby bushes—he was no botanist, so as far as he was concerned they all came under the heading "sagebrush"—now afloat in a sea of golden flowers, with here and there a clump of cholla cacti or Joshua trees to break the monotony. If there had been anybody walking out there, he couldn't see her now, and that wasn't good news.

Swearing to himself, he pulled to a stop on the sandy shoulder. In the backseat, the hound dog of undetermined pedigree licked her chops lustily and wriggled in anticipation while J.J. unhooked his seat belt. He spoke briefly to his shoulder mic, then opened

the door of the vehicle and stepped out onto hot white sand. “Okay, Moonshine, how about you and me go and do what they pay us for?”

Rachel dreamed of Nicholas again. They were together at the beach, a rare hot day in Malibu. She was hot, unpleasantly so. She wanted to get up and run down to the waves to cool off, but for some reason she felt heavy...so heavy she couldn't get up. Then she saw that Nicky was laughing, laughing because he'd buried her up to her neck in the sand. He thought it was all in fun, but she began to be frightened and she begged him to dig her out of the sand and let her up. But he just kept adding more sand, and it was heavy, and the pressure was weighing her down, and then a wave came and splashed her in the face and she woke up, gasping.

Except she thought she must still be dreaming, maybe that twilight dreaming where you are almost awake but not quite enough to make the dreaming stop. Because now, instead of a mountain of sand weighing her down, there was something big and heavy and warm—and alive!—sitting on her chest. And instead of cold saltwater bathing her face, it was something slobbery and raspy and odd-smelling. And whatever it was, it was making horrifying snuffling, whimpering sounds.

Terrified, she tried to lift her arms to fend off whatever it was, but found she couldn't move because it was sitting on her arms, too.

“Moonshine! That's enough—come 'ere, girl. What are you

trying to do, drown her or smother her?”

Moonshine?

But the slobbery, snuffly, smelly something stopped bathing her face, and the weight lifted abruptly from her chest.

Rachel drew breath in a gasp and opened her eyes. She looked up...and up at a long, tall silhouette against a blue-white sky—but for only an instant, because almost at once the silhouette folded up and came down on one knee beside her in the sandy shade of a clump of Joshua trees. Now she wondered if she could still be dreaming, because she found herself gazing at a face that seemed to have come straight out of a Western movie. Steely blue-green eyes stared down at her from the shadows cast by the broad brim of a cowboy hat, eyes that were squinting in apparent concern, causing a fan of lines to radiate from their corners. Sandy blond hair straggled from beneath the hat's brim to feather over a khaki shirt collar, and a thick growth of reddish-brown whiskers failed to hide a mouth that stretched in a thin, unsmiling line.

Once again, she struggled to sit up, but now it was a hand planted firmly on her shoulder that kept her where she was.

“Take it easy, miss...uh, Sister. We're gonna get you some help, okay?” The voice spoke with unmistakable authority. It was deep and scratchy, and matched the weathered and rough-hewn face perfectly. There were traces of an accent, too. Southern, she thought.

The face came closer, bending over her, and fingers touched

her face with unexpected gentleness. “Can you tell me who did this to you?” And the voice was at the same time softer and more dangerous. “Are you hurt, uh, anywhere else?”

Two things occurred to Rachel then. One, that she was wearing a nun’s habit, which explained her Good Samaritan’s reticence—even embarrassment—regarding her person. And two, he’d obviously noticed the bruises on her face.

And following close on the heels of those two realizations came a third: She was probably due for another contraction. Any second.

How was she going to explain that?

She pushed at the hand holding her down and managed to prop herself on one elbow. “I’m not hurt,” she said, trying not to hold her breath or clench her teeth. Trying to breathe. Normally. Trying not to give away the fact that she hurt everywhere. “I was just—I got a little tired, and thirsty and I thought I’d rest a few minutes in the shade. I guess I must have dozed off. I’m okay—really.”

The truth was, she’d gotten scared when she’d noticed several cars slowing down as they passed on the highway. That was when she’d hidden behind the grove of spiky Joshua trees. And there’d been a couple of contractions—bad ones—and after that, she’d curled up on her side to rest. . . just for a minute. She couldn’t have been asleep for very long.

The man put his hand under her elbow and helped her to sit up, while at the same time he unhooked a canteen from his belt.

He had a lot of other things attached to his belt, she observed as he unscrewed the lid to the canteen and offered it to her. One of which was a gun. And there was a metal star pinned to his shirt. Which she supposed explained a lot of things. And did not reassure her.

Now that he seemed satisfied her circumstances weren't dire, his eyes regarded her more with suspicion than compassion. They narrowed again as he watched her drink. "You want to tell me what you're doing out here in the middle of the desert? Alone?" His voice was a typical lawman's voice: hard and without much expression. "And how you came to have those bruises on your face?"

"Bruises?" The innocent and slightly puzzled frown came easily to her; distrust of law enforcement was automatic now. Awareness of that fact drifted like cloud shadows through her consciousness, along with a sense of sadness and guilt. I'm sorry, Grandmother. I know you didn't raise me to be like this.

But the shadows weren't dark enough to stop reflexive responses of caution and cover. "Oh," she said, feigning sudden enlightenment as she wiped water from her lips with the back of her hand. She touched one still-tender cheekbone. "I guess that must have happened when I..."

"When you..." her Good Samaritan prompted when she paused.

Rachel closed her eyes and exhaled. "I feel so stupid. You see, I swerved to miss a—I guess it must have been a coyote—well,

I'd never seen one, and I was distracted, and the next thing I knew, I was careening across the desert, and, um, I wound up in a ditch. Thank God for air bags!" She crossed herself and cast her gaze prayerfully skyward—a rather nice touch, she thought, considering what she was wearing.

I wonder if he bought it.

In his long and not always illustrious career as a homicide detective with the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, J. J. Fox had been lied to many times. Although never before, he was fairly certain, by a nun. He knew what bruises left by human fists looked like. Plus, now that he'd had a chance to examine these more closely, he was pretty sure they were at least a couple of days old.

But who in the hell would beat up a nun?

"When did this happen? This...accident?"

A frown etched delicate pleats between her eyes. Dark eyes, almost black, so dark he could see himself reflected in them. Eyes fringed with thick black lashes, and with a slightly Asian cast, he noted. Probably mixed blood, and if he'd had to guess, given her size, he'd have said maybe Cambodian or Vietnamese.

"This morning...I guess it must be afternoon now, right? I've kind of lost track of time..."

J.J. fingered the radio mic on his shoulder. "We'll get someone out here to take care of your car, ma'am—uh, Sister. Can you tell me whereabouts this happened?"

Again the frown. And this time she nibbled delicately on

her lower lip. A very soft and full lower lip, he noted, and immediately felt ashamed of himself. The woman was a nun, for God's sake. No disrespect intended.

“Oh—I don't know! I think it was...back that way—no, wait...I'm so confused. I've been wandering around...maybe I've been going in circles, do you think so?” Her gaze lifted to his with helpless appeal.

Which might have had more effect on him if he hadn't seen something else in her eyes, something he'd seen all too often, in his line of work, in the eyes of suspects and witnesses alike: a mixture of calculation and fear. This woman really did not trust him. And plainly, she did not want him to find her car. He wondered why.

It didn't bother him too much that she wouldn't give him the location of her vehicle; there had to be evidence of where she'd left the road, which should make it easy enough to locate. But no doubt about it, something about this woman and her situation was off—way off. Here was a nun, fairly young—judging from her flawless and unlined skin—of Eurasian ancestry and tiny in stature, out in the middle of the desert, miles from any outposts of civilization, on foot and sporting bruises that had almost certainly come from a beating. Small wonder his cop-radar was pinging like crazy.

He stood up and pivoted away from the woman while he got Katie on his radio and instructed her to send a tow truck out south on Death Valley Road. “Tell Bucky he'll have to hunt for the tire

tracks—don't have the exact location, but I'm guessing it's gonna be south of my location a couple miles, at least.”

“Got it,” Katie said. And after a pause: “So...is she?”

“Is she what?” Although he knew.

“A nun?”

“Remains to be seen,” J.J. said, and signed off.

When he turned back to the woman, she was on her hands and knees trying to get up and not being graceful about it. Evidently the lady had gotten herself tangled up in her habit, which seemed to him a little strange. He'd have thought someone used to wearing one of those things would have figured out how to manage it by now. Mentally rolling his eyes, he bent down and got a hand under her elbow and hoisted her to her feet.

No sooner had he done that, than she gave out with a groan, uttered a very un-nunlike word and folded right back up again, while hanging on to his arm with the desperation grip of someone in immediate danger of drowning.

Damn woman might have mentioned she was hurt! Swearing both aloud and mentally, J.J. scooped her up in his arms and hollered for Moonshine, who was panting in the Joshua tree's shade a little way off. He set out with long strides across the sand, and about halfway to his car it occurred to him that, for a little bitty thing, this woman was a whole lot heavier than she looked. Then he looked down at what he was carrying.

What the hell?

What he saw gave him one of the biggest shocks of his life,

which was probably why he burst out with the question before he thought how ridiculous it was going to sound. “Sister, are you pregnant?”

She didn’t even open her eyes. Just went on sort of panting and groaning at the same time, and she had one hand on the huge belly now plainly visible beneath the draping of the habit.

Just holding her against him, he could feel how stiff and seized up she was.

Great. Just great. Not only pregnant, but in labor.

He kept walking, making for his vehicle, until he felt the woman in his arms relax and start breathing somewhat normally again. Then, without slowing his steps, he gritted his teeth and said, “Please tell me you’re not really a nun.”

She opened one eye and glared up at him. “Is that relevant?”

Relevant? He snorted and walked while he considered that. Probably it wasn’t, in her present circumstances. He tried to think whether it bothered him, the thought of a nun being pregnant, and decided against all reason that it did. He couldn’t have said why; he wasn’t even Catholic, having been raised more or less Baptist, growing up, like most everybody else he’d known back then. But some things were just, well...sacred.

“How far apart are your contractions?” He thought he said it pretty calmly, considering.

“I don’t know, I don’t have a watch. But I’ve been counting. I think...about two or three minutes.”

J.J. wasn’t a doctor, and it had been a long time since those

first aid and emergency childbirth classes way back in his training days, but he was pretty sure that wasn't good news. This just keeps getting better and better, J.J. thought. He didn't say anything, though, because they'd arrived back at his patrol vehicle, where Moonshine was waiting impatiently for him to open the door, doing a little dance as she tried to keep her feet off the hot sand.

"You're riding shotgun," he said to the dog, and then, without much sympathy, to his burden, "You gonna be okay if I set you down?"

"I'm fine," she said. But he noticed she was looking paler than she ought to, considering the heat and the sheen of sweat he could see on her forehead and the bridge of her nose.

"Okay, then, easy does it..." And he wondered why he couldn't seem to make his voice sound nicer. At least gentler. Sure, he didn't like being lied to, and he wasn't used to being distrusted, at least not by supposedly innocent law-abiding citizens. But this probably wasn't any of her fault; he doubted any woman in her condition would be out here in the middle of the desert by choice. And there were those bruises.

Again with the glare—both eyes, this time. "I'm not made of glass. Just put me down."

So he did. And the minute her feet touched the ground she sort of gasped and clutched at her belly, then whispered, "Oh, God." It wasn't a prayer.

Moonshine whimpered and moved off a little ways, looking

perturbed.

J.J.'s stomach lurched. "What?"

Half doubled over, not looking at him, she said tensely, "I think my water just broke."

Chapter 3

J.J. uttered a string of words he wouldn't use in the presence of a real nun and got another of her fierce black looks in return. This one, though, seemed to hold less anger and more of what he interpreted as mute appeal. Help me. Words he was beginning to suspect this particular woman wouldn't find easy to utter out loud under normal circumstances.

He touched on his radio mic. "Katie, I'm gonna need an ambulance out here, ASAP. Uh...scratch that," he said as the woman abruptly sagged against the side of his patrol vehicle and began doing that pant-moan thing again. "Make that a chopper. And give me an ETA."

"I'm on it. Let me get back to you on that ETA..."

The radio went silent. J.J. opened both driver's side doors and waited while Moonshine jumped in ahead of him and clambered across to the passenger seat, then sat in the driver's seat and got the SUV's engine started and the air conditioner going full blast. When he went back to see how his pregnant nun was doing, he found that she'd taken off the head thing—wimple?—and was using one corner of it to mop sweat off of her face and neck. It came as no surprise to him that her hair, which she'd twisted into a knot at the back of her head, was ink-black and also soaking wet.

The radio crackled. "Uh, Sheriff? J.J.?"

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“Dispatch wants to know the nature of the emergency. Are we talking MVA trauma or heatstroke?”

“Uh...that’s a negative on both. Make that...woman in labor.”

“Labor?” Katie’s voice rose to a squeak—not very professional of her, in J.J.’s opinion. “Are you telling me this is the nun?”

J.J. grunted, being involved at the moment in helping the “nun” in question into the backseat of his patrol vehicle. He watched her sort of crumple onto her side and pull her knees up onto the seat before he closed the door. She was whimpering softly now. There was a knot forming in his belly as he turned his back to her and spoke to his radio mic. “Yeah, well, that seems doubtful. The nun part, not the labor. You got an ETA on that chopper?”

“Uh...that’s the problem. Ridgecrest’s choppers are out on a multi-vehicle MVA up on 395. No idea how long they’ll be.”

J.J. looked up at the sun-washed sky and swore. He was pondering his best course of action when his radio crackled to life again.

“I could get you somebody out of Barstow, but it would probably be just as fast if you take her in to Ridgecrest yourself, that would be the closest. How far along is she?” Katie had three kids, which probably made her the closest thing he had to an expert at the moment.

“In months? I’m guessing...nine.”

“No, I mean the labor.” She didn’t say the word dummy. J.J. being her boss, but he could hear it in her voice just the same.

“How the hell should I know?” he said. “Her water just broke.”

“Yikes,” said Katie. “Well, that could mean...just about anything, actually. She could have hours yet. Or minutes.”

“Well, don’t ask me,” J.J. growled. “I’m not a doctor.”

“I...am.” That came, surprisingly, from the backseat.

He jerked around to look at the woman, who he could see was now half propped up on one elbow. Her exotic eyes seemed huge in her chalk-white face. “You are what? A doctor?”

She nodded, then closed her eyes and sank back onto the pillow of her folded arm. “Well...sort of. I never finished my internship. But I know enough—” she broke off for a couple more pants and groans, then finished with clenched teeth “—to know I haven’t got hours.”

Grimly, J.J. relayed to his mic, “She doesn’t think she’s got hours.”

“How far apart are the contractions?”

“Hell, I don’t know. Seems to me they’re more or less continuous.”

“Oh, Lord,” said Katie. “That’s not good.”

“If you’re going to take me to a hospital, you’d better get going,” came the faint, gasping voice from the backseat, at the same time Katie’s voice on the radio was saying, “Well, you’d better hurry. I’ll let Ridgecrest know you’re coming.”

“Ten-four.” He put the SUV in gear and made a U-turn, tires

spitting fine gravel.

“Okay, drive safe.” The radio went silent.

He didn’t turn on his siren, since it would only make the dog miserable, and there weren’t any other vehicles in the immediate vicinity anyway. He brought the speed up to what he considered the maximum for safety, then glanced in his rearview mirror.

“How you doin’ back there?”

No answer for a moment. Then, “Just lovely, thank you.”

He couldn’t believe he was even thinking of smiling.

As he drove, although his attention was totally focused on the road ahead, part of his mind kept jumping and skittering every which way, so full of the questions he wanted to ask, his head felt like a nest of spooked jackrabbits. For a long time he didn’t ask any of the questions because he couldn’t decide which one to ask first. Finally, though, when it seemed one kept popping up more often and more insistently than the rest, he looked up to his rearview mirror and said, “Ma’am, if you’re not a nun, what’s with the habit?”

Her voice sounded tired, out of sorts and groggy. “No... obviously...I’m not a nun. The habit—and the car—belong to a friend of mine. When I drove the car into that ditch...when I knew I was going to have to walk for help, I thought the habit might help protect me from the sun. You know, like the robes Arabs wear.”

J.J. nodded. He was thinking, Okay, she’s no dummy. But he wished he could see her face, because to him the speech sounded

a little too long, a little too glib, like something she'd practiced in her mind ahead of time. It sounded plausible, might even be true—as far as it went. But he had a feeling there was more—a good deal more—she wasn't telling him.

And it sure didn't explain those bruises.

He said, "You ready to tell me the truth about how you got those bruises on your face?"

This time the only answer he got was some loud groans and whimpering cries, which he found both alarming and frustrating. Frustrating, because for all he knew she could be faking, or at least exaggerating her situation to evade the question. But if the sounds she was making were for real...

His radio coughed and Katie's voice said, "Okay, J.J.? I've got Ridgecrest on the phone. Just in case."

Just in case. Swell. He didn't like the sound of that. "Copy," he said on a gusty exhalation, but Katie wasn't through.

"Okay, I gave them what you told me, about the water and all, and the contractions. They want to know if she's feeling the urge to push."

J.J. mashed the button to answer, but before he could get a word out, here came one of those gut-wrenching groans.

"Wow," Katie said, "I heard that."

Heart pounding, J.J. said, "Ma'am, are you all right?"

What he got for an answer was a sound that raised the hair on the back of his neck—a primal sound somewhere between a growl and a scream. It even got to Moonshine, who whimpered

and licked her chops nervously.

“Ridgecrest says don’t let her push,” Katie’s voice crackled from his shoulder.

“Ma’am, you got that?” J.J. was trying hard to keep his voice calm, and on the whole wasn’t displeased with the results. So far. “You’re not supposed to push. Try not to push, okay?”

“Okay.” She said that in a thin, pitiful voice, like a scared child’s. And in the next second, sounding like someone trying to bench press a Harley, “I...can’t...stop!”

“She says she can’t stop,” J.J. relayed to Katie. And he was shaken enough to add, “What the hell am I supposed to do?”

There was a pause, and then, “Ridgecrest says get her to pant.”
“Pant?”

“You know. When she feels the urge to push, tell her to take in a breath and blow it out through her mouth in short puffs.”

“Ma’am? You got that?”

“Yeah. Okay...” Now she sounded like a little kid trying to stop crying.

“Oh, and J.J.? Ridgecrest says that won’t work indefinitely. It’ll only slow things down, and unless you’re less than ten or fifteen minutes out, you might want to pull over sometime soon.”

J.J. swore, muttering under his breath. The woman in the backseat was silent, for the moment, thank God. And for a moment, hope flared within him. Maybe...just maybe, she was slackening off this pushing business. Maybe things would ease up enough to give him time to get her to the hospital in Ridgecrest.

Maybe...

“J.J., you copy?”

The woman in the backseat picked that moment to start with that awful noise again, causing Moonshine to whine and flop down on the seat with her head on her paws. J.J. bet she'd have put her paws over her ears if she could. He wished he could.

“Don't push! Take a deep breath and blow!” he yelled over his shoulder, then said to his radio, “Yeah, copy. Ten-four.” Back to the woman again: “Like this—” And he was puffing like a steam engine, all the while craning to see the backseat in his rearview mirror.

“The hell with this,” he muttered, and pulled onto the wide dirt shoulder and jerked to a stop in a rising cloud of dust. He left the motor running for the air-conditioning and got out of the vehicle, telling Moonshine to stay put—not that it was necessary; the dog obviously wasn't going anywhere except maybe to hide under the seat.

When he opened the back door, his passenger raised herself on both her elbows and stared at him, and this time her eyes were bottomless wells of fear. That kind of got to him, more so than the fact that she was breathing hard and her face was wet with sweat so that wisps of her black hair clung to her pale cheeks like seaweed on a drowned corpse.

“Why are we stopping?”

He really wished he had a more gentle and nurturing nature, but in his defense, those weren't exactly qualities that made for

a good homicide cop—or probably any kind of cop, for that matter. Still, he tried his best to be patient. “Because you’re about to have a baby, ma’am, and I can’t be much help to you if I’m driving.”

It wouldn’t have seemed possible for her face to get any whiter or her eyes any blacker, but he could have sworn they did. “No! We have to go to the hospital!” She struggled to sit up, at the same time yelling, fierce and stricken at the same time, her words tumbling from her with gasping breaths. “I can’t have my baby here—I can’t. I won’t push. I promise—just don’t let me—Oh... God!” And then she was doubled up, hands gripping her drawn-up knees, face contorted, making that awful sound.

J.J. looked over his shoulder, then up to the sky, as if there might be some form of help coming from either of those quarters. Which there wasn’t. Of course there wasn’t. It was all up to him. And he’d never felt so helpless in his life.

The contraction seemed to be passing, thank God. The woman was only sobbing now, which at least was something more like what he was used to. In homicide, everybody did a lot of crying—family and friends of the victim, traumatized witnesses, even the perps, when they got caught. This he could handle.

“I’m sorry,” she wailed, then hiccupped loudly. “I can’t help it. I just...can’t keep from p-pushing.”

“Well, ma’am,” he said, trying a firm and authoritative approach, “since we are going to do this thing, I guess there’s no need for you to stop pushing. But I’m going to need you to do

some things, okay? I'm gonna need you to help me out here. It's been a long time since they told me how to do this, so I'm pretty rusty. I'm sure you know a lot more than I do. So you need to stay calm, okay?"

"Okay," she whispered, sniffing. She swiped at her wet cheeks with one hand. "What do you want me to do?"

"Well, for starters," J.J. said, giving her a smile he was sure wouldn't fool anybody, "since it looks like I'm about to help your baby into the world, I'd like to be able to call you something besides 'ma'am.' Could you tell me your name?"

She hiccupped again and gave a funny little laugh. "Rachel. It's...Rachel."

Rachel.

The name sounded strange, coming from her own lips, like a word in a foreign language. The person named Rachel seemed to her like someone she might have known a long time ago, or perhaps in another life. Another universe.

The one she occupied now was a strange, dreamlike world where nothing seemed real and time had no meaning. How long had it been since she'd driven Izzy's car into that ravine, since she'd put on Izzy's habit and set out walking across the desert? One moment it seemed like hours—she knew it must have been hours—and the next she felt it had could have been only seconds. Right now she felt as if she was still out there plodding along, one foot setting itself down in front of the other in endlessly repeating sequence, sometimes without any direction from her.

I'm so tired. She wanted desperately to stop, to lie down somewhere. But her body kept pushing her on, forcing her on.

"I want to stop," she said. "I have to rest."

She heard a soft deep chuckle, and the face from the Western movie swam into view. "Afraid you can't do that, Rachel, honey. Looks like you're gonna have your baby right here, like it or not."

What? Here? Ridiculous! She shook her head, adamant, furious. "No. I can't. You're taking me to the hospital. I have to go to the hospital."

But then she felt her body being wrenched out of her control again, and now it seemed it was trying its best to turn itself wrong-side-out. Again and again she was caught up by terrible, powerful forces and was utterly helpless to stop what was happening to her. The only thing she could think of to compare it to was once when she and Nicky had been at the beach, swimming, and she'd gotten caught in a huge breaking wave. She'd felt herself being tossed and twisted and dashed down into swirling sand and seawater, arms and legs going every which way like a rag doll in a washing machine, and her mind, disconnected from her body, had thought, Oh, wow, I'm drowning. And she'd felt no fear, she remembered, only mild surprise.

Someone—the stranger named Rachel—was screaming. Belly-deep, grinding screams that sounded like something being torn in half. She felt unbearable pressure, pressure she was sure she couldn't stand another second. She heard someone bellow, "I can't..."

“Shh...yes, you can...you’re doin’ fine, darlin’...just a little bit more...” The voice was deep and growly, like a tiger purring, and seemed to be very close to her ear.

It was him again, the man from the Western movie. He even sounded a little like a cowboy, she thought, with that accent. A little bit like John Wayne. For some odd reason she found that reassuring. She realized that he was holding her, and that his arms were very hard and strong and that his shirt front was warm and slightly damp where her forehead pressed against it. She was sorry when he eased her away from him. She opened her eyes and watched his face as he laid her down. She noticed that he wasn’t wearing his cowboy hat now. His hair was damp and there was a groove around his head from where it had been. She wondered what had happened to his hat.

She closed her eyes and whimpered, feeling ashamed, “I’m so tired.”

“I know...rest a little bit now, okay? Just rest...that’s right.”

I can’t believe this is happening. My baby, Nicky’s baby—Carlos Delacorte’s grandson—is going to be born in a cop car. Delivered by a cop!

That struck her as terribly funny. She wanted to laugh, but when she started what she thought was a laugh, tears squeezed from her eyes and ran down into her ears.

“Easy, now...you’re gonna be okay,” the growly voice said. But then another voice—a woman’s voice—rode right over it and drowned it out.

“J.J., Ridgecrest wants to know what’s happening. Um...like, what can you see?”

See? “Uh...Lord, I don’t know...hold on a minute,” J.J. said.

This was all happening much too fast for him. He ran a hand over his face while he regarded the woman, who was now lying back on the seat. She appeared to be crying. He could see her face, with tears streaming down the sides and into her already soaking-wet hair. Other than that, she looked to him like a great big mound of clothing. He knew what he was going to have to do next, and the only thing he could think of he’d have dreaded more was breaking the news to somebody that their loved one was dead. That was the worst. But peeling nun’s clothes off a woman in labor was right up there close.

“Ma’am—uh, Rachel, I want you to listen to me, okay? I’m gonna need you to take off whatever you’ve got on under that gown you’re wearing. Can you do that?”

He didn’t know what he’d expected—protests, maybe, or some shyness? But she didn’t bat an eye. Just sniffled and said, “Okay...” But then she only plucked ineffectively at the habit, like she didn’t know what to do with it.

He took a deep breath...heaved a silent sigh. “Need some help?”

She nodded and muttered, “I’m all wet.”

It struck him then, that this must be something Mother Nature provided, this temporary suspension of modesty that made it possible for a woman to tolerate being intimately exposed to total

strangers. Knowing that she truly wouldn't mind made it easier for him, somehow.

It also occurred to him that the habit made a pretty damn good drape.

Still, it wasn't easy, getting her out of her wet clothes. Especially since she wasn't able to be of much help. She kept having contractions that doubled her up and seemed to take her off into a place where she wasn't even aware of him and what he was doing. By the time he had her shoes off—at least they were good quality sensible athletic shoes—and her wet socks, and started tugging on her slacks, he was almost as wet with sweat as she was.

But he got them off, finally, and her underwear, too. And that was when he ran into something unexpected. When he pulled off her underpants, something came with them—an envelope. It was thick and white and addressed by hand, with no stamp or postmark, just some tape around the edges, the kind used to hold bandages in place, the kind that doesn't irritate the skin.

What the hell? His cop radar was pinging again, this time clear off the scale. A pregnant woman wearing a nun's habit—some kind of disguise, he now figured—clearly having suffered a fairly recent beating, found walking alone in the middle of the Mojave Desert—what was she doing with an envelope taped to her stomach?

He'd have given a lot to know what was in that envelope, but right now he had more pressing things on his mind.

“J.J.? Are you there?”

“Copy...”

“Ridgecrest wants to know what’s happening, and so do I.” Katie’s voice came tensely from his shoulder.

“Uh...hold on...” He took mental note of the name on the envelope—Rachel Malone Delacorte—and the address, a very pricey part of Beverly Hills, then laid the envelope on top of the pile of shoes and clothing on the floor where they’d be out of the way. Then, hoping his hands weren’t going to shake, he lifted the edge of the habit.

“Uh...okay, looks like the baby’s right there.”

“Ridgecrest says, can you tell if it’s the head.”

“Uh...yeah, seems to be.”

“Okay, Ridgecrest wants to know, which way is it facing—up or down?”

Jeez. “Too soon to tell,” he said tersely. He gulped in air to fight off the beginnings of queasiness and looked over the top of the draped habit. Smiled wretchedly. “Hear that, Rachel? Won’t be much longer now...” Lord, I hope.

“J.J., Ridgecrest says you better get ready. Have you got anything to catch the baby with.”

Catch the baby? Envisioning a giant-sized catcher’s mitt, he felt an absurd impulse to laugh.

“And something to tie off the cord.”

“Copy.” He leaned across the mound of Rachel’s draped knees and said, “I’m just gonna go and get—”

Which was as far as he got before a hand clutched at the front of his shirt, a very small hand with a whole lot of strength to it. “Don’t...leave...me.”

He didn’t know why he did what he did then—he sure didn’t think about it beforehand. He cupped his hand behind her head and kissed her forehead, then pressed his cheek against her wet hair. Under the salty smell of sweat, he caught something sweet and exotic, like tropical flowers.

“I’m not gonna leave you,” he said huskily. “We’re doin’ this together, you and me. I’ve just got to get some things out of the back of the vehicle to help us. Okay?” He pulled back and waited for her to look at him and nod her comprehension, then he kissed her forehead again. “Be right back...”

For a moment then, he stood upright in the bright sunlight, pulling in big gulps of hot desert air, trying to get his bearings. Then he went around to open up the back of the SUV and took out the first aid kit and a blanket. When he got back to Rachel, she was lying back quietly, evidently resting, so he took a moment to open up the first aid kit and check the contents. Scissors...cotton balls, bandages, disinfectant...all good. Even a bulb-thing for suctioning out airways, which he seemed to recall he’d probably need. It was good to know some of what he’d learned in his training days was coming back to him.

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