



Protecting the Pregnant Witness (The Precinct Series Book 14)

By Julie Miller

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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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Protecting the Pregnant Witness (The Precinct Series Book 14) By Julie Miller Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #146969 in eBooks
- Published on: 2011-08-01
- Released on: 2011-08-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

4 1/2 stars! "The long-awaited end to the Rich Girl Killer saga within Miller's popular KCPD series is a terrifying ride into the mind of a lunatic and a look into the battered heart of a man afraid to love." --Pat Cooper, RT BookReviews

About the Author

Julie Miller is an award-winning, USA TODAY bestselling author of breathtaking romantic suspense--with a National Readers Choice Award and a Daphne du Maurier among other prizes. In 2009 she earned an RT BookReviews Career Achievement Award. For a complete list of her books, monthly newsletter and more, go to www.juliemiller.org

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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. Som...

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