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Opening Extract from...

No One Left to Tell

Written by Karen Rose

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NO ONE LEFT TO TELL

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Prologue

Six years earlier –

He was near. Crystal could hear his heavy breathing, feel him watching her. If she looked to the right, past the perfectly manicured hedge, she'd see him. His eyes would be hungry, his body aroused. But she didn't look at him. Wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Instead she glanced over her shoulder. The door to the gardener's shed was ajar, just as he had said it would be.

The gardener's shed. She lifted her chin. He could have had her meet him anywhere on the grand estate, but he'd chosen the gardener's shed. She'd make him pay for that. She'd make him pay for everything he'd done.

She quietly pushed at the door to the shed, taking a last look behind her. The party by the pool was in full swing, the music loud enough to be heard in the next county. Luckily the estate was as big as the next county or the cops would have already been here, handing out citations. She smiled bitterly, the very idea ridiculous.

The cops would never hand out citations here.

Which was a good thing for the dancers, she supposed. *And for me*. Everyone was so busy having fun that no one had seen her slip away. The partiers in the pool were having the most fun – coke and sex the party favors of choice. But not everyone was in the pool. The dance floor under the bobbing Chinese lanterns boasted its share of gyrating bodies. Every woman still clothed was dressed to the hilt, making Crystal grateful she'd had the good sense to go for the tiny, expensive dress and the even more expensive shoes. Her credit card was maxed out.

But I fit in. Well enough to get her *entrée* to the party of the season – and that was the important thing. She wanted – no, she *needed* to be here. To see his face when she told him who she really was. That she had evidence that would ruin him.

That she now owned him.

He'd be shocked. Stunned. He might even beg.

Crystal smiled. She really hoped he begged.

She flicked a final glance at the big house, looming large and powerful on the hill above the partying crowd. *He could have had me there, in one of the bedrooms*. There were, after all, ten of them, each one decorated like something out of a magazine.

But here she was, stepping into the gardener's shed. No matter. *Someday all of this will belong to me*.

She closed the door behind her and frowned. This really was a gardener's shed. It was filled with tools and smelled of gasoline. Meticulously organized, the walls were covered with anything and everything a gardener would need to keep up an estate this size. Two riding mowers took up most of the concrete floor. There was no convenient cot in the corner as she'd expected. Not really any room to do anything.

Crystal rolled her eyes. *Except maybe kneel*. It figured.

The door behind her opened, closed again. 'Amber,' he said.

Crystal took a moment to still her racing heart. *Amber*. That's how she'd introduced herself. If he'd known her real name, he never would have met her here. He would have ignored her, just as he'd ignored the phone messages she'd left with the damn butler up in the big house. That was the tricky part about blackmail. You actually had to get the target's attention to lay out the terms. She had his attention now.

Showtime, girl. Make this count. Your future rides on the next five minutes.

'You came,' she murmured seductively. 'I wasn't sure you would.'

He chuckled, the sound far from friendly. 'You knew I was there,' he said, 'watching you.'

She kept her voice smooth. 'Yes. I was hoping for somewhere a little more . . . comfortable. Somewhere we can . . . talk.'

He made a humming sound, considering. 'Talk? I don't think so. *Crystal*,' he added and her heart leapt to close her throat.

'You knew,' she whispered.

'Of course I knew. I had you followed. Pretty thing like you, coming on to me. I have to be careful. There are all kinds of bad people out there, Crystal. You never know who might try something stupid. Like blackmail. Are you going to blackmail me, Crystal?'

Fighting panic, she slowly lifted her arm to retrieve the lipstick-tube of pepper spray she'd slipped into her tiny handbag, glad she'd come prepared. Mentally she counted the steps to the door. Six steps. She could do six steps. She'd get by him.

She had to.

Go for the spray slowly. No sudden moves. Don't let him see your fear. He likes your fear.

He came closer and she could feel the heat of his body. 'You never should have come.' There was a mocking lilt to his voice that chilled her to the bone.

'I have pr—' Something silky brushed against her jaws a split second before it slid down to her throat and tightened. *Proof. I have proof.* But the words wouldn't come.

Can't breathe. She flailed instinctively, her nails clawing at her throat. She kicked backward, trying to hit his knees, his groin, anything she could reach, but he yanked her up until her feet no longer touched the ground.

No. Please. No. Her lungs were burning. She pawed at her purse, grabbing the pepper spray, fumbling as she pulled at the cap. *Just get away. Have to get away*.

She wrenched the cap from the tube. *I don't want to die. Please don't let me die*.

'Bitch,' he muttered. 'You come here, threatening me. My family. Did you think that would work? Did you think any of this would work?'

She aimed the spray, but his hand clamped over her wrist, twisting, forcing the tube lower. Forcing her finger to press. New pain shot through her eyes, burning, blinding her. She screamed, but her voice was trapped. She was trapped. She dropped the tube, her hands desperately rubbing her eyes.

Make it stop. Please, make it—

* * *

He stepped back, breathing hard. Her hands swung limply at her sides. He dropped her to the floor. She was dead. He'd killed her.

I did it. For a long time he'd wondered how it would feel to drain the life of another. Now he knew. He'd finally done it.

The bitch. *She thought she could come here. Control me*. She'd learned. The hard way. *Nobody controls me*. He wadded the silk scarf with which he'd choked her, shoved it in his pocket. Leaned over to scoop her purse from the floor and hid it under his coat. He opened the door a fraction.

Nobody was coming. Nobody was watching. Everyone was partying. Having a great time. The music of the band would have covered any sounds they'd made. He slipped from the shed and disappeared behind the hedge. It was done.

Chapter One

Baltimore, Maryland, Tuesday, April 5, 6.00 A.M.

Paige Holden pulled her pick-up into the last parking place in the lot, a scowl on her face. Of course it was the one farthest from her apartment. Of course it was raining.

If you were back home, you'd be pulling into your own garage right now and you'd stay warm and dry. You never should have left Minneapolis. What were you thinking?

It was the mocking voice. She hated the mocking voice. It seemed to slither into her mind when she was least prepared, usually when she was most exhausted. Like now.

'Fuck off,' she muttered, and the Rottweiler in her passenger seat gave a low growl that Paige took to be agreement. 'If we were back home, that little kid would still be with that bitch of a so-called mommy.' Her teeth clenched at the memory, only hours old. She wasn't sure she'd ever erase the sight of that child's terrified face from her mind. She didn't want to.

She'd accomplished something tonight. Someone was safe who otherwise wouldn't be. That was what she needed to hold on to when the mocking voice intruded. The faces of the victims she had kept safe were what she needed to remember when she woke from the nightmare. When the guilt rose in her throat, choking her.

Zachary Davis would be okay. Eventually. *Because I was there tonight*.

'We did good, Peabody,' she announced firmly. 'You and me.'

The dog pawed at the truck's door. He'd been cooped up with her in the cab for hours, patiently waiting out the night. Doing his duty. *Guarding me*.

That he did so made her feel safe. That she still needed a protection dog to feel safe in the dead of night annoyed her. That she still jumped when anyone made a sudden move pissed her off. But for now, that's how it was and she was learning to live with it. Her friends back home told her to give herself more time, that it had only been nine months, that recovery from an assault could take years.

Years. Paige didn't intend to wait that long. Briskly, she pulled her hood over her head, clipped Peabody's leash to his collar. She'd walk him, then grab a coffee and a shower before her next appointment.

And then she'd catch a few hours' sleep. When she got tired enough, she didn't dream. A few hours of dream-free sleep sounded like heaven.

Peabody made a beeline for his favorite spot, the lamppost where the neighborhood dogs stopped to pee. He was sniffing when her cell jangled. Juggling the umbrella, she glanced at the display before wedging the phone between her ear and shoulder. It was her partner of three months, who until she was a licensed PI, was really her boss.

'Where are you?' Clay Maynard demanded, bypassing any greeting as usual. He was brusque, maybe even a little rude, but he was very smart. And still grieving a devastating loss. Because Paige keenly understood his grief, she cut him some slack.

Under the gruffness resided a good man who, in the three months since she'd moved to Baltimore, had become more like a big brother than a boss. She'd trained with dozens of over-protective 'big brothers' just like him during the fifteen years in her old karate *dojo*, and she knew how to deal with his irritation. Keep it cool, make him laugh.

'Standing under a lamppost watching Peabody pee. If you want,' she added wryly, 'I can send a photo. Peabody won't mind an invasion of his privacy to ease your mind.'

There was a beat of silence, then a grudging chuckle. 'I'm sorry. I called your landline and you didn't answer. I figured you'd be home by now.'

Paige wanted to remind him she was thirty-four, not four, and that he was her partner and not her keeper, but she did not. He'd

found his last partner brutally murdered. He didn't want to feel responsible for anyone else's death, and this Paige completely understood, maybe even better than Clay himself.

Thea's face, always hovering somewhere on the edge of her mind, now barreled front and center. Terrified, with that gun to her head. Then dead.

And no matter how many Zachary Davises you save, she'll still be dead.

'I had to give my statement to the cops.' Thea's face faded to the edge of her mind, replaced with what she'd witnessed through a window just hours before.

'Had you seen anything like that before?' he asked.

'The mom snorting coke, sure.' It was one of her earliest memories, one she rarely shared. 'The mom letting her son be groped by her strung-out boyfriend, no.'

Six-year-old Zachary Davis was the subject of a brutal custody battle. Mom had developed a cocaine addiction. Dad filed for divorce and sole custody. Mom was fighting for joint custody, claiming she'd gone clean. Worrying the court would side with Mom, John Davis hired Clay to provide proof that his wife was actively using drugs.

Which was why Paige, as the junior member of Clay's PI agency, had been sitting outside Sylvia's apartment all night, taking pictures. They'd expected Sylvia to do coke. That she'd let her boyfriend put his hands on Zachary . . . Paige hadn't expected that.

'He would have raped a little boy,' Clay said evenly. 'You stopped that from happening. Now Sylvia will have a record – for possession and for prostituting her son.'

'I was lucky. A cruiser was a minute away when I called 911. If it had been any longer, I would have gone in myself, kicked in the door if I'd needed to. I couldn't have stood there watching that child be assaulted.'

'I couldn't have either, but the boyfriend had a gun. Your black belt wouldn't have protected you from a bullet.'

Paige found herself rubbing her shoulder where an ugly puckered scar marred her skin. Clay had been kind. He easily could have added, *like it didn't last summer*

Her palms suddenly clammy, she wiped them on her jeans, straightening her spine. 'I had my gun.' Which she hadn't that night. *I'll never make that mistake again*.

'He would have shot you first.'

'Then show me your commando tricks so I can enter a room without getting my head blown off,' she said, her voice gone hard and brittle.

Before becoming a PI, Clay had been a DC cop. Before that, he'd been a Marine who'd trained new recruits, which was essentially what she was – a PI white belt. Her years of martial arts had ingrained within her a deep respect for her teachers, so she softened her tone. 'Please,' she added quietly.

'I will. Tomorrow. You had a hard night and I need you sharp. Take the rest of today off.'

'Maybe I will. Or maybe I'll work from home. I've got work to do on Maria's case.'

'The case you took pro bono,' he said, slightly disapproving.

'You would have done the same, Clay.'

He sighed. 'Paige, every con in jail has a mama that thinks her boy's innocent.'

'I know you think I'm naïve,' she replied. 'All the evidence said Ramon Muñoz was guilty, but a few things don't add up. Worst case is I dig through trial transcripts, learning to structure a case of my own.' She thought of the tears in Maria's eyes as she'd begged for help. 'Best case, I give a mama some peace.'

'Just don't spend too much time on it, okay? We have to pay the electric bill.'

'Maria's stopping by this morning to give me some new information. If it's worthless, I'll quit. If it's got merit, I'll bring it to you. Gotta go. I need coffee.'

The squeal of tires had her spinning to face the road. The sight of the minivan racing toward her had her leaping out of the way, dragging Peabody with her. She landed hard on her knees in the mud as metal crunched behind her and for a moment she hung there, breathing hard.

Peabody's barking filled her ears and she looked up, still dazed.

'Sit,' she snapped and he dropped into a sit, but quivered, awaiting her next command.

'Paige? Paige!' Clay's shout was tinny coming from her cell phone a few feet away. She scrambled for the phone, twisting to stare at the van, her heart beating wildly.

'I'm okay. I'm okay.' She made herself calm. *Breathe*.

'What the hell happened?'

'A minivan.' That was now wrapped around the lamppost she'd been standing under only a minute before. Bullet holes were sprayed across the hatchback and the windshield and windows had been blown to oblivion. 'It's been shot up.'

'I'm calling 911,' Clay said brusquely. 'Get somewhere safe.'

She jumped to her feet, then came to an abrupt stop as her eyes shifted from the bullet holes to the driver-side sliding door. It was rust-colored while the rest of the van was blue. 'It's Maria's van.' Paige ran to the van and her heart stuttered. A woman was slumped over the steering wheel. Blood covered her upper body and the deployed airbag. 'Clay, tell 911 that a woman is bleeding to death. *Hurry*.'

'Stay with me on this line, Paige,' he commanded. 'I'll call 911 from another phone.'

Paige shoved her phone in her pocket without hanging up. *Déjà vu*, her mind hissed and she pushed the insidious memory away. 'Maria? Please.' She wrested the driver's door open and had to still her panic.

There were holes in Maria's threadbare coat. Bullet holes. She pressed her fingers to Maria's throat. A pulse. Faint, but there. *She's alive. Oh, thank God*.

Paige eased Maria back, then sucked in a breath. This was not Maria, but Elena, her daughter-in-law – Ramon's wife. Who would want to shoot—?

'Oh God.' Dread settled like a dark cloud. They'd had information. Her fear heightening, Paige looked over her shoulder for another car. Elena couldn't have driven far in this condition. Whoever did this must still be close by.

She unbuttoned Elena's coat, trying to find a wound to attend, but

there was too much blood. *I don't even know where to start*. 'Tell me what happened. Who did this?'

'No cops.' Elena's whisper was too soft, her breathing too shallow. 'Please.'

'Don't you dare die on me,' Paige said harshly. Hands trembling, she undid Elena's blouse. 'Dammit. I can't see where you were hit.'

Then she jumped as Elena's bloody hand grabbed her wrist. Elena's eyes blinked furiously, trying to open. 'No cops,' she whispered hoarsely. 'Just you. *Promise me*.'

'Fine,' Paige said desperately. 'I promise. Who did this to you?'

'Cops. Chasing me,' Elena mumbled. 'Bra.'

Paige heard the sirens approaching. *Thank you, Clay*. If nothing else, it would scare away the shooter, if he was still nearby. She pulled her scarf from around her neck, pressed it to what looked like the worst of Elena's wounds. 'Help is coming.'

'Flash. Drive.' Struggling to breathe, Elena clawed at her own chest, fumbling with the edge of the bra that was now dark, soaked with blood. She reached for Paige's hand, holding tight. 'Tell Ramon. I love him.'

'You can tell him yourself. You're going to make it.'

But Paige didn't believe that, nor, from the agony in her eyes, did Elena. 'Tell him I never stopped believing him,' Elena begged, her voice almost inaudible. '*Tell him*.'

'I will. I promise. But you have to promise to hold on.' Behind her the ambulance screeched to a halt and she heard the slamming of doors and pounding of feet.

'Miss, you have to move,' someone from behind her ordered. 'Control your dog.'

She glanced over her shoulder to see Peabody standing between her and a gathering crowd of onlookers, his teeth bared. But before she could move, she heard a whine like a mosquito and Elena's hand went limp. Horrified, Paige stumbled back.

There was a hole in Elena's forehead that hadn't been there before.

Numb, she could only stare, her hands clenched into bloody, impotent fists. And as her heart started to beat again, she realized

one fist clutched something hard. And small. A flash drive. Elena had hidden it in her bra. Had pressed it into her hand.

Cops. Chasing me.

Maria had been convinced the police had set up her son. It had sounded far-fetched at best. Now her daughter-in-law was dead, saying police had done it.

Whatever Paige held in her hand had gotten Elena killed.

Tuesday, April 5, 6.04 A.M.

Silas lowered his rifle. His hands were steady, but his heart pounded in his throat. *Goddammit*. He hadn't wanted to kill her.

The woman with the long black hair backed away from the wrecked van, her footsteps far less steady than they'd been minutes before. He'd thought the woman a goner when she stood in the minivan's path, and then she'd leapt like some kind of fucking ninja, dragging her monster dog with her.

Who the hell was she? Had Elena said anything to her? He hoped not. He'd hate to have to kill the woman too. He almost had.

Luckily she'd turned around when the medics arrived or he would have been forced to shoot her too, just to get her out of his line of fire. He wouldn't have liked that. He hated to kill unnecessarily. Unfortunately, Elena had signed her own death warrant.

He closed the lid on his rifle case, picked up the spent casing, dropped it in his pocket. People were screaming, just now realizing what he'd done. That Elena was dead. The paramedics were ducking behind their rig, per their procedure.

And . . . there was the cruiser, screeching to a stop. Two uniforms sprang from the vehicle, weapons in hand. Those in the crowd who hadn't fled were pointing vaguely, but close enough to his general direction.

Move your ass, boy. It wouldn't take the cops long to drop a surveillance net over this whole area. Crouching low, he made his way to the edge of the rooftop, dropped to the fire escape and took the steps two at a time.

He'd had only seconds to choose a spot from which to stop Elena. Luckily the small business park he'd chosen had offered a good view and access to an escape route.

He eased into traffic. Then on his cell, he dialed a number from memory. 'It's done.'

'She's dead?'

'Yeah,' he muttered. 'No thanks to that idiot Sandoval. He couldn't wait for me to finish it. He shot up her van before I could run her off the highway. I would have shot her more discreetly.'

There was a moment of very displeased silence. 'Why?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'Maybe you should ask him. Maybe you should ask him why he let her get that close to him to begin with.' *Then I wouldn't have had to kill her*.

'Maybe I won't bother to ask.'

Silas shrugged, knowing what would transpire. Denny Sandoval deserved it. Keeping records for Elena to find. Idiot. 'Make it look like a suicide.' He kept it a suggestion, knowing a command would not be tolerated. 'What she found out would have buried him anyway.'

There was another beat of silence. 'What did she find out?'

'That he'd been paid off to lie in court, that Muñoz's alibi was real, after all.'

'It would have been her word against his.'

'Unless she took proof with her. He was scared shitless enough to call me for help.'

'And obviously enough to follow her and fire at her vehicle.'

'He was sloppy. He went for the windows, not for the tires.'

'Why?'

'Probably because he wasn't a good enough shot to hit the tires while he was driving.' Probably because the moron was drunk. Again. 'She made it another five hundred feet, then turned into an apartment complex and hit a lamppost. I was just within range. If he'd shot her up a minute earlier, I wouldn't have been able to hit her.'

'But she *is* dead.'

'Yes.' He'd fired on enough people to know a kill shot when he saw one.

'Then thank you. You'll be compensated the usual way.'

Which meant a great deal of money deposited to his off-shore account with speed and efficiency. It had taken time to grow accustomed to such polite discussion of such a dirty deed. After all this time, it still made him cringe inside. 'Thank you.'

'One more question. Who else is implicated in whatever it was he kept?'

'I don't know. *I* didn't pay him off. That would have been you. Did you go as yourself or did you play dress up?' He wished the words back as soon as they exited his mouth. *Keep the sarcasm leashed or you'll be a 'suicide' yourself*.

Another beat of silence. 'I was disguised.'

'Then you have no worries,' he said, his voice mild.

'Again, thank you. I'll be in touch.'

Yeah, you do that. He wasn't sorry for the idiot Denny who'd signed his own death warrant by keeping incriminating evidence. And for what? Blackmail would have been suicide and insurance would have been unnecessary, had he kept his big mouth shut.

He did feel sorry for Elena Muñoz. She should have forgotten about her husband, gone on with her life. She'd still be alive. *And I'd have one less mark on my soul*.

Tuesday, April 5, 6.20 A.M.

Three and two and one. With a grunt, Grayson Smith pushed the weight bar back to the rack. *Two-ninety-five used to be a hell of a lot easier*. Then again, he used to be a lot younger. He was officially on the downslide to forty. Which bothered him a lot more than he'd expected it would.

He relaxed his shoulders onto the bench, gave his spotter a nod. Without missing a beat, Ben resumed the story he'd been telling before Grayson had started the set.

'So the punk sets off running and tosses the fucking gun down the goddamned storm sewer.' Ben made a disgusted face. 'It's gonna take me forever to get the smell out of my shoes. Asshole.'

'Did you find it?' Grayson asked.

'Hell, yeah. Guy's a three-timer. You'll be able to put him away.'

Which Grayson had heard from detectives more times than he could count. Unfortunately, 'putting them away' wasn't always as easy as it appeared. Still, he had one of the better conviction rates in the State's attorney's office. Knowing he'd put assholes like the one Ben had just cuffed behind bars let him sleep at night. Most of the time.

'It'll be my pleasure.' Grayson gripped the bar and prepared for his final set. He'd pressed three reps when phones started ringing all over the gym and all chatter ceased.

In a gym full of cops, this was a damn bad thing.

Grayson racked the bar and sat up, his eyes on the men and women around him. It looked like the officers called were out of the eastern precinct. 'What's going on?'

'I don't know,' Ben murmured. He waited until the guy closest to them had put away his cell phone. 'Well? What's gone down, Profacci?'

Profacci started for the showers. 'Sniper. Woman in a minivan hit. Sergeant's just called all hands to search for the gunman. Hell of a way to start the day.'

For a moment Grayson said nothing. His mind was racing back ten years to when a sniper had terrorized the DC Metro area. The closest victim to Baltimore had been a few counties over, but the entire area had lived in fear for three weeks. By the time the snipers were caught, ten people had died and three others were critically wounded.

He looked at Ben. 'I hope this isn't what we're all thinking it is,' he said, then turned to the woman at the front desk. 'Sandi, can you switch the channel to the news?'

Sandi complied and the sixty-three-inch plasma screen mounted on the wall above them switched from replays of last night's hockey game to the local station, where a reporter stood in front of a large sign that said *Brae Brooke Village Apartments*.

Seeing who the reporter was, Grayson had to swallow his annoyance. Phin Radcliffe shoved a mike in his face every time he left the courtroom. A lot of reporters shoved a mike in his face, but

Radcliffe always took it a step further. And stooped at nothing to get a story.

'. . . killed by a sniper's bullet,' Radcliffe was saying. 'The police have not yet given the all-clear, and residents are being told to stay indoors. We know that the victim is dead. We don't know the status of the shooter at this time, but we do have this exclusive footage of the events as they unfolded. Be warned. The following images are graphic and may upset some viewers.'

The image switched to a woman in the path of an oncoming minivan and Grayson found himself staring in disbelief. The woman went into a crouch and sprang, flying at least eight feet before she landed on her knees, dragging a big Rottweiler on a leash.

Milliseconds later, the minivan crashed into a pole. There was no sound on the video, but the dog was clearly barking like a lunatic. *And who could blame him?*

'Did you see that?' Ben demanded. 'Fucking gazelle.'

Grayson had seen it and he still wasn't sure he believed it. The camera ignored the minivan, zooming in on the woman's face, and Grayson slowly released the breath he'd been holding. Her eyes were black as night, large and stark against the paleness of her face. Her hair was black as well, pulled into a ponytail that hung halfway down her back.

Grayson couldn't tear his gaze from her face, and neither could whoever was doing the filming. Curiously, the lens stayed focused on the woman and not the wrecked van.

Instead of running away, the woman got up and ran toward the van, followed by the Rottweiler. The camera moved, focusing through the van's front passenger window where a female victim lay trapped in the driver's seat. The camera's angle remained constant, pointing down.

'The camera's on one of the apartment balconies,' Grayson said, his chest going tight with dread. A woman in a minivan was dead, Profacci had said. But not *her*, Grayson hoped, and felt instantly guilty. But he couldn't change the outcome, and one of them was dead. Nor could he stop himself from thinking, *Just not her. Don't let it be her*.

'And the cameraman's got a thing for the gazelle,' Sandi added.

'Can you blame him?' Ben asked. 'She's . . .'

The picture skipped, a clumsy edit. In the next frame the dark-eyed woman was frantically putting pressure against the victim's wounds. From the angle of the lens, the victim's face could not be seen. *A blessing for the family*, Grayson thought.

He knew what was coming, but found himself unable to turn away. One of the women would be dead in moments. The dark-eyed woman worked feverishly, her lips moving as she talked to the victim.

In the background the enormous dog could be seen planting himself between the minivan and the growing crowd. Nobody dared approach, although several in the crowd held out phones. More pictures. More video. *Vipers*, Grayson thought viciously.

But you're watching. What does that say about you?

An ambulance pulled up, EMTs spilling out. The woman turned to look over her shoulder at her dog and then . . . Grayson flinched as a portion of the screen became intentionally blurred, hiding the minivan, the victim and the dark-eyed woman.

The camera wobbled wildly, then stabilized, the angle now changed. "Whoever is filming this just dropped to his stomach," Ben murmured.

'Still filming,' Sandi said incredulously. 'Tough guy. Or totally stupid.'

The dark-eyed woman stumbled out of the blurred area, away from the minivan, her face frozen in shock. Grayson's shoulders abruptly relaxed. *Not her*. For a moment the woman stared, horrified, as shouts rang out around her. A uniformed police officer ran toward her, drawing his weapon when the dog lunged, teeth bared.

Bystanders were screaming and running and still the woman stood there, staring, motionless in a sea of chaos. Abruptly she blinked, looked at the cop whose gun was pointed at her dog. She grabbed the leash, bent at the waist and ran to the passenger side of the van for cover where she dropped to sit, the dog at her side. She draped her arm around the dog and closed her eyes, and again the camera zoomed in on her face.

Grayson couldn't tell if the moisture on her face was rain or tears. Probably both. But there was no more time to stare as the screen changed, splitting to show both Radcliffe and the morning anchor who was still flinching, her reaction sincere.

'Amazing footage,' the anchor said soberly. 'That poor woman. Do we have any more information, Phin? How is the Good Samaritan who stopped to help?'

'She appears unhurt,' Radcliffe said. 'The police haven't given the all-clear yet and to our knowledge, no further shots have been fired. When we're able, we'll move closer to interview the witnesses and the Good Samaritan who risked her own life.'

'And we'll have that for you live,' the anchor said to the viewers. 'While we wait, we have another video to show you, one uploaded to YouTube just minutes ago by one of the bystanders in which the events unfold from a different angle. Again, this clip is graphic and might upset some viewers.'

This video was significantly grainier, taken by a cell phone. The holder of the phone focused in on the snarling Rottweiler, grumbling that the dog was keeping him from getting a better view. The picture shifted to the victim. Once again the station had blurred her face and torso, but the abundance of blood was more than apparent as the Good Sam with the dark eyes struggled to stop the bleeding.

'Sonofabitch,' Ben said, shocked. 'Look at the minivan. It's shot full of holes. She was shot before she crashed. Somebody wanted that woman dead.'

But Grayson barely heard him. *No*. His brain tried to reject what his eyes were seeing as his heart began to beat hard and fast. *It can't be*. But it was. The victim had grabbed the black-eyed woman's arm, her hand just visible below the blurred portion of the video. Even covered in blood, the ring on the victim's middle finger was discernible. Unique. It was a cross, flared at the four ends, a large stone in its center.

It's not the same ring. It can't be the same ring.

'I've gotta go,' Grayson said. Leaving Ben and Sandi staring at the screen, he went to the locker room and brought up YouTube on his phone.

Sniper in Baltimore, he typed in the search field. The video already had thousands of hits. As he'd expected, the videographer with the cell phone hadn't blurred anything. The victim's face was there, for her family and all the world to see.

'Oh God,' he whispered, staring at the victim's face as she writhed in pain.

He knew this woman. He'd seen her not even a week before – when she'd come to his office to beg for a new trial for her convicted husband.

As he watched the video, Grayson flinched again when the sniper's shot came.

Elena Muñoz was dead.

Tuesday, April 5, 6.20 A.M.

'Miss? Miss! Are you hit? Do you need medical attention?'

Paige could hear the man, but kept her eyes closed tight. Her shoulder burned as memories churned, the images all jumbled in time. Yet each picture was crystal clear.

Her teeth were clenched to keep from replying. *Yes, I was hit. Just not today*. Nobody needed to know what happened nine months ago, that there were days she worried over her own sanity. *Because this isn't about me*. It was about Elena.

Paige held her body motionless against the minivan's tire, gripping Peabody for dear life. Her gun was pressing painfully into her back, but she didn't touch it. The cops hadn't called the all-clear and she and Peabody weren't moving a muscle until they did.

That cop had threatened to shoot Peabody. *Because you were in danger*. Paige heard the logical words in her mind and forced herself to grab on to them as a shudder shook her. She'd stood there, deer in the headlights, while a sniper had her in his crosshairs. *But he wasn't after me*. Still, his bullet had come so close.

On its way to Elena's temple. The bullet left a small hole. The exit wound wasn't so small. The back of Elena's head had simply disappeared, brain matter splattering.

'Is she hit?' a woman demanded.

'I don't think so,' the male voice said. 'Burke. Burke! Goddamm it, stay here.'

'If she's hit, she's not gonna bleed out,' the woman said. 'Not while I'm here.'

'Dammit, Burke.' The man's shout was furious. 'You're gonna get suspended.'

Paige flinched, hearing a sound next to her ear. Whoever Burke was, she was here. She felt a vibration. Peabody, growling. *Guarding me*. Wearily, she leaned against him.

'Are you hurt?' Burke asked softly.

'No,' Paige murmured. 'I'm not hurt.' *Not today*.

'Easy.' Burke spoke soothingly. 'I'm not going to hurt her, boy. What's your name?'

'Peabody,' Paige said dully. 'He's Peabody.'

'What's *your* name?' Burke asked.

Paige had to think a moment. 'Paige. Paige Holden.'

'Okay, that's good. I'm Dr Burke. I need to know if you're okay.'

'Why?'

'Because you look like you're hurt.'

Paige's brows knit as she tried to think. 'No. Why are you here if you're a doctor?'

'Oh.' The woman sounded a bit surprised by the question. 'Because I'm a resident, getting my field hours. Are you hurt, Paige?'

Paige drew a shuddering breath. 'No. I'm okay.'

'Then why are you holding your shoulder?' Burke asked kindly.

Because it burns, Paige wanted to snarl. Except . . . it didn't. She opened her eyes carefully to see her right hand clutching her left shoulder. Her shoulder didn't burn. Not any more. Not like it did when she woke from the nightmare in a cold sweat, the pain ebbing as soon as she realized where she was. *Not Minneapolis*. Not on the floor bleeding out, staring into Thea's dead eyes.

This is Baltimore. And today the dead eyes belonged to Elena Muñoz. *Déjà vu, baby*, the voice mocked. *When you fuck up, you do it right*.

Paige forced her self to relax. She dropped her hand from her

shoulder, brushing it against her coat before resting it on her knee. The flash drive was still in her pocket, hidden. It would stay that way. No cops. Elena had made her promise.

Until I know what really happened. Paige drew a breath, steeling herself for what she already knew to be true. 'Is she dead?' she asked.

'Yes,' Burke said quietly. 'I'm sorry.' She was young, maybe a few years younger than Paige. Her eyes were calm. She wore a bulletproof vest over her windbreaker.

Hell of a lot of good that would do against a bullet in the head.

'You shouldn't have come to me. The man said you'd be suspended.'

'I can't do anything for that poor woman, but I'd wasn't going to lose anyone else.'

'What do we do now?'

Burke shrugged again. 'We wait for the all-clear.'