



Protecting the Pregnant Princess

By Lisa Childs

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A princess and her doppelganger are missing, and a grief-stricken king turns to Aaron Timmer for answers. As a bodyguard to the king, Aaron's mission is clear when one of the women is found: keep her out of danger and find the abductor. But how can he do that when the mystery woman doesn't remember the events leading up to her disappearance?

Terror strikes a young woman when she wakes up in a private hospital with no idea who she is, how she came to be hospitalized...and whose baby she's carrying. But there is something about the man sent to protect her that makes her feel safe. As they seek the truth together—and the secrets of her past finally begin to resurface—they must prepare for the dangers that await them...and a desire that may be all too familiar.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Ever since Lisa Childs read her first romance novel (a Harlequin of course) at age eleven, all she ever wanted to be was a romance writer. Now an award winning, best-selling author of nearly fifty novels for Harlequin, Lisa is living the dream. Lisa loves to hear from readers who can contact her on Facebook, through her website www.lisachilds.com or snail mail address PO Box 139, Marne, MI 49435.

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Like a sledgehammer shattering her skull, pain throbbed inside her head—clouding her mind. She couldn't think. She could barely feel...anything but that incessant pain. Even her hair hurt, and her skin felt stretched, as if pulled taut over a bump. She moved her fingers to touch her head, but she couldn't lift her hand.

Something bound her wrist—not so tightly that it hurt like her skull hurt, but she couldn't budge her hand. Either hand. She tugged at both and found that her wrists were held down to something hard and cold.

She forced open her eyes and then squinted against the glare of the fluorescent lights burning brightly overhead. Dark spots blurred her vision. She blinked over and over in an attempt to clear her vision. But images remained distorted. To her it looked like she had six arms—all of them bound to railings of a bed like an octopus strapped down to a boat deck. A giggle bubbled up with a surge of hysteria, but the slight sound nearly shattered her skull.

The questions nagging at her threatened to finish the job. *What the hell happened to me? Where am I?* Because she had no answers...

She also had no idea why she was being held down—restrained like a criminal. Or a captive...

She fought against the overwhelming fear. She needed to focus, but her head wouldn't stop pounding and the pain almost blinded her, like the fluorescent light glaring down from the ceiling. It was unrelenting, and reminded her of the light in an interrogation room or torture chamber.

That light was all she could discern of her surroundings. Flinching against its glare, she looked down, but she couldn't see more than a couple of feet in front of her—not because of the pain but because she couldn't see beyond the mound of her belly.

Shock turned her giggle into a sharp gasp. *I'm pregnant?*

No...

Her swollen belly must have been like her seeing six hands, just distorted and out of focus. She wasn't pregnant.

In denial of the possibility, she shook her head, but the motion magnified her pain. She closed her eyes against the wave of agony and confusion that rushed over her, making her nauseous. Or was that sick feeling because of the pregnancy?

How far along was she? When had it happened? And with whom?

She gasped again, her breath leaving her lungs completely. Not only couldn't she remember who the father of her unborn child might be but she couldn't even remember who *she* was.

Aaron held out his phone to check his caller ID, surprised at where the call was coming from. Sure, as desperate as he'd been he'd reached out to everyone he thought might be able to help. He had called Charlotte's ex-partner with the U.S. Marshals. He'd tried calling her aunt, but there must not have been any cell reception in whatever jungle she was building schools or orphanages. And he'd called this man.

"Hello, Mr. Jessup." This man was America's version of royalty—the ruler of an empire of news networks and magazines and newspapers. Nothing happened anywhere without his knowing about it—unless a more powerful man, like King St. Pierre, had covered it up. "Thank you for calling me back."

Aaron was surprised that the man would speak to him at all. He was the last client of the security firm in which Aaron and Whit had been partners. He had hired them to protect the most important thing to him. And they had failed.

"Don't thank me yet," the older man warned him. "Not until you see if the lead pans out."

"You have a lead?"

"Someone called in a tip from a private sanatorium in northern Michigan, wanting to sell a story about Princess Gabriella St. Pierre being committed to the psychiatric facility."

From that destroyed hotel room to a private sanatorium? Given what she'd seen, what she must have gone through, it almost made sense. A tip like this was why Aaron had refused to give up. That and a feeling deep in his gut—maybe his heart—that told him Charlotte Green wasn't dead. She couldn't be dead—somehow he'd know if she was.

"Is she alone?" he asked.

"She's got a royal entourage," Jessup said, "including a private doctor and nurse."

Royal? But the king swore he knew nothing of their disappearance. And a man couldn't feign the kind of grief he was obviously experiencing.

"And a security detail?" Aaron asked. Or at least one very strong woman.

Stanley Jessup grunted. "Yeah, too much of it according to the source."

Hope fluttered in Aaron's chest. Was it possible? Had he found them both? "Is one of the guards a woman?"

"I don't know." The man sighed. "I'm getting this third hand—from the editor of a magazine who got it from an ambitious young reporter. I don't have details yet, but I'm going to check it out."

"Why?" The question slipped out.

Stanley Jessup grunted again, probably around the cigar he usually had clamped between his teeth. "It's a story—a damn good one since it involves royalty."

If only Stanley knew the real story.

But the women had been checked into that Parisian hotel under aliases. To prevent the paparazzi from hounding the princess, Charlotte had developed several alternative identities for them. She had been that thorough and that good.

Still was—she couldn't be dead. Aaron had already lost one woman he thought he might have been falling for—Stanley Jessup's daughter.

"Why call me?" Aaron asked the newsman. "Why talk to me at all?"

"I don't blame you or Whit for what happened three years ago," Jessup assured him. "Neither should you."

Stanley, despite grieving for his daughter, might have found a way to absolve them of any culpability. But Aaron hadn't.

"Do you want me to call you back after I get more details?" Stanley asked. "I'm going to talk to this young reporter to verify he really has a source inside the sanatorium. Then I'll see if he can get a picture to prove it's actually her."

"No," Aaron replied. He couldn't trust anyone else to do that. No one else would know for certain which woman she really was. "Just tell me the name of this psychiatric hospital."

"Serenity House," Stanley divulged freely. "I'm going to have that reporter follow up with his source, too, Aaron. Anything Princess Gabby does is newsworthy, and this story is a hell of a lot more exciting than her attending a fashion show or movie premiere. And she hasn't even hit one of those in a few months—maybe longer. In fact, she's kind of dropped off the face of the earth."

Or so everyone had believed. But if it really was her.

"I know I don't have any right to ask you for a favor."

"You said that when you called the first time," Jes-sup reminded him, "when you asked me if I'd heard anything recently about the princess."

"So I definitely don't have any right to ask you for a second favor," Aaron amended himself.

"That's BS," Stanley replied with a snort of disgust. "You can ask me anything, but I have the right to refuse if you're going to ask what I think you are."

"I'm not asking you *not* to run with the story," Aaron assured the man. He knew Stanley Jessup too well to ask that. "I'm just asking you to run in place until I get there."

"So hold off on printing anything?"

"Just until I get there and personally confirm if it's really Princess Gabriella."

Stanley snorted again. "Since she was ten years old, Princess Gabriella St. Pierre's face has been everywhere—magazines, newspapers, entertainment magazines." Most of those he owned. "Everybody

knows what her royal highness looks like."

Everyone did. But unfortunately she was no longer the only one who looked like her. The woman committed to the private sanatorium wasn't necessarily Princess Gabriella.

"Just hold off?" Aaron asked.

Stanley Jessup's sigh of resignation rattled the phone.

"Sure."

"And one more favor—"

The older man chuckled. "So what's this? The third one now?"

"This is important," Aaron said. "I wouldn't have bothered you if it wasn't..." If Charlotte wasn't missing, he would have never been so insensitive as to contact Stanley Jessup again. He hated that probably just the sound of his voice reminded the man of all that he had lost: everything.

"I can tell that this is important to you," the older man replied. "So what's this third favor?"

Maybe the most important. "If Whit calls, don't tell him what you've told me."

"About the explosion not being his fault?"

Aaron snorted now. It had been Whit's fault; he'd convinced him that the safe house was really safe. That was why he couldn't trust another woman's safety to his former partner. "Don't tell him about Princess Gabriella."

"He'll read it for himself."

"Let him find out that way, and let *me* find out first if it's really the princess." Or Charlotte.

"You don't trust Whit?"

Not anymore. Whit had always cared more about the money than Aaron had. Maybe he cared too much. Maybe he'd been bought off—three years ago and now. Both times there must have been a man on the inside. Aaron hated to think that that man was one he'd once considered a friend—a man at whose side he'd fought. But war had changed so many veterans. Whit had changed. Maybe he'd gone from killing for his country to killing for the highest bidder.

"Promise me," Aaron beseeched his old client.

Jessup grunted. "You make it all sound so life and death. She's just a spoiled heiress who's probably been committed to this private hospital to get cleaned up or dried out."

Aaron had only interacted with the princess for a couple of months before her disappearance. Even at parties she'd never had more than a few sips of champagne and she had never appeared under the influence of drugs, either.

If this really was Princess Gabby at Serenity House, she wasn't there for rehab.

She stared at the stranger in the mirror above the bathroom sink. The woman had long—very long—caramel-brown hair hanging over her thin shoulders. And her face had delicate features and wide brown eyes. And a bruise on her temple that was fading from purple to yellow.

She lifted her hand and pressed her fingertips against the slightly swollen flesh. Pain throbbed yet inside her head, weakening her legs. She dropped both hands to the edge of the sink and held on until the dizziness passed. She needed to regain her strength, but even more she needed to regain her memory.

She didn't even recognize her own damn face in the mirror. "Who are you?" she asked that woman staring back at her through the glass. She needed a name—even if it wasn't her real one. She needed an identity. "Jane," she whispered. "Jane Doe."

Wasn't that what authorities called female amnesiacs...and unidentified *dead* female bodies?

Drawing in a shaky breath, *Jane* moved her hand from her head to her belly. Her flesh shifted beneath her palm, moving as something—*somebody*—moved inside her.

She didn't recognize her face or her body. What the hell was wrong with her? Maybe that was why she'd been locked up in this weird hospital/prison. Maybe it was for her own damn good. Her belly moved again as the baby kicked inside her, as if in protest of her thought.

"You want out of here, too," Jane murmured.

A fist hammered at the door, rattling the wood in the frame. The pounding rattled her brain inside her skull.

"Come out now, miss. You've been in there long enough."

The gruff command had her muscles tensing in protest and preparation for battle. But she was still too weak to fight.

The door had no lock, so it opened easily to the man who usually stood guard outside her room. Unlike the other hospital employees who wore scrubs, he wore a dark suit, and his black hair was oily and slicked back on his big, heavily featured head. His suit jacket shifted, revealing his holstered weapon. A Glock. As if familiar with the trigger, her fingers itched to grab for it.

But she would have to get close to the creep and if she got close, he could touch her, probably overpower her before she ever pulled the weapon from the holster. A cold chill chased down her spine, and she shivered in reaction.

A nurse moved around the guard. "You're cold," she said. "You need to get back into bed." The gray-haired woman wrapped an arm around Jane and helped her from the bathroom to the bed. The woman had a small, shiny metal nameplate pinned to her uniform shirt. *She* had a name: Sandy.

Jane found herself leaning heavily against the shorter woman. Her knees trembled, her legs turning into jelly in reaction to the short walk. With a tremulous sigh of relief she dropped onto the mattress.

"Put the restraints on her," the gruff-voiced guard ordered. He spoke with a heavy accent—some dialect she

suspected she should have recognized if she could even recognize her own face right now.

"No, please," Jane implored the nurse, not the man. She doubted she could sway *him*. But the woman... "Sandy, please."

The nurse turned toward the man, though. "Mr. Cen-terenian, do we have to? She's not strong enough to—"

"Put the restraints on her!" he snapped. "You remember what happened to her the last time you didn't..."

Deep red color flushed the woman's face and neck. But was her reaction in embarrassment or anger?

What had happened the last time Jane hadn't had on the restraints? She hadn't simply fallen out of bed...if that was what he was trying to imply.

Jane doubted the bruise on her head had come from a fall since she had no other corresponding bruises on her shoulder, arm or hip. At least not recent ones. But she had a plethora of fading bruises and even older scars.

More than likely the bruise on her face had come from a blow. She glanced again at the holster and the gun visible through Mr. Centerenian's open jacket. The handle of the Glock could have left such a bruise and bump on her temple. It also could have killed her.

From the loss of her memory and her strength, she suspected it nearly had. This man had attacked a pregnant woman? What kind of guard was he? He definitely wasn't there for her *protection*.

The nurse's hands trembled as she reached for the restraints that were attached to the bed railings.

"Sandy, please." Jane implored her.

But the nurse wouldn't meet her gaze. She kept her head down, eyes averted, as she attached the strips of canvas and Velcro to Jane's wrists.

"Tight," the man ordered gruffly.

Sandy ripped loose the Velcro and readjusted the straps. But now the restraints felt even looser. The nurse snuck a quick, apologetic glance at Jane before turning away and heading toward the door. Sandy couldn't open it and leave though. She had to wait, her body visibly tense, for the man to unlock it.

Mr. Centerenian stared at Jane, his heavy brows lowered over his dark eyes. He studied her face and then the restraints. She sucked in a breath, afraid that he might test them. But finally he turned away, too, and unlocked the door by swiping his ID badge through a card-reading lock mechanism. The badge had his intimidating photograph on it, above his intimidating name.

Jane Doe was hardly intimidating. What the hell was her real name?

Once the door closed Jane was alone in the room, and she struggled with her looser restraints. She tugged them up and down, working them against the railings of the bed, so that the fabric and Velcro loosened even more. But she weakened, too.

Panting for breath, she collapsed against the pillows piled on the raised bed and closed her eyes. Pain throbbed in her head, and she fought to focus. She needed to plan her escape.

Even if Jane got loose, she didn't have the ID badge she needed to get out of the room. But then how could she when she didn't even have an ID? Of course she was a patient here—not an employee.

But the slightly sympathetic nurse didn't have one, either. The only way Jane would get the hell out of this place was to get one of those card-reading badges off another employee.

The guard was armed, and Jane was too weak and probably too pregnant to overpower Mr. Centerenian anyway. So whatever employee or visitor stepped into her room next would be the one she ambushed.

Images flashed behind her closed eyes, images of her fists and feet flying—connecting with muscle and bone, as she fought for her life.

Against the guard?

Or were those brief flashes of memory of another time, another fight or fights?

Who the hell was Jane Doe really?

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Effie Phillips:

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