



Protective Instincts (The Precinct Series Book 7)

By Julie Miller

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He'd saved Melissa Teague's life once—long before she had a son. The boy would be safe with Sawyer, but she wasn't so sure how she could bear his presence again, not when their feelings endangered them both. A man that powerful— however gentle—scared her, no matter how right Sawyer fit. But this time her protector would not walk away, not with his family's lives on the line. This was his sworn duty.

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Editorial Review

Review

"PROTECTIVE INSTINCTS (4 1/2 stars-Top Pick!) is a first-class action-adventure and a tender love story." -- *Romantic Times Book Reviews*

About the Author

Julie Miller is an award-winning author--with a National Readers Choice, a Daphne du Maurier and a PRISM among other prizes. She's been a finalist in several other venues, including the Golden Heart and Romantic Times Career Achievement Award. Some of her 30+ books have appeared on the USA Today and Waldenbooks bestseller lists. Find out more at www.juliemiller.org.

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Sawyer Kincaid hated the rain.

He hated the sound of it beating against the green canvas tent top. He resented the clingy mist of it masking the tears on his mother's pale cheeks, as though it could somehow wash away her grief. He loathed the springtime chill of it running down the back of his neck beneath his collar.

But mostly he hated the way it beaded atop the black stripe that bisected the nickel-and-brass badge he wore on his chest—the way the moisture attached itself to every KCPD badge here.

Of course, he could move closer to the somber ceremony instead of standing back at the fringe of family and friends and colleagues. He could get under the tent, get out of the rain. But he was just too big a man to be standing at the front of the crowd if anyone else behind him wanted to see. Besides, getting closer wouldn't make the rain stop.

Getting closer wouldn't make the pain go away, either. "...but come ye back when summer's in the meadow, or when the valley's hushed and white with snow..."

For a moment Sawyer tore his attention away from the rain's gloomy rhythm to listen to his youngest brother Holden's rich, melodic voice. Their father would have loved his a cappella rendition of "Danny Boy."

But how the twenty-eight-year-old baby of the Kincaid family could sing at a time like this was beyond Sawyer's understanding. Maybe the kid was more put together than he'd given him credit for. Sawyer could barely push the thank-yous and glad-you-cames and Dad-would-be-pleased-to-see-you-heres beyond the tight constriction of his throat. A neck as thick as his wasn't built for wearing button-down shirts and black silk ties. The last time he'd worn his police dress uniform had been when he'd received his detective's shield. His dad had been there that day, too, shaking his hand and beaming proudly.

Today, Thomas Sawyer Kincaid was burying his father in the ground.

In the damn rain.

This ain't right.

The nagging mantra had plagued him since that phone call from the commissioner five days ago. "Your father's dead, Detective. John was murdered. His body was found in Swope Park—though the lab says that

isn't the primary crime scene. I assure you, we're giving this case top priority. John was a good man. A good cop. He was my good friend. If there's anything I can do for any of you, let me know. I'm so sorry."

Sawyer spotted the lady commissioner standing at the front of the crowd, waiting to say a few words about her colleague and friend. Commissioner Shauna Cartwright-Masterson had been a real class act about the whole thing—paying a couple of visits to his mother, Susan, and steering the press away from the family. But the commissioner could talk until she was blue in the face. There just weren't enough good words that anyone could say to make this right.

John Kincaid had survived walking a beat in downtown K.C. He'd survived being a detective in vice and homicide. Last year he'd led an organized-crime task force that had brought down the Wolfe International crime syndicate.

He should have survived a damn run in the park. Sawyer shrugged the dampness and injustice of it all off his big shoulders, and concentrated on staying in the moment. He had to focus on the now, not the past, not the future—or else he'd start cussing or blubbering like a baby. An emotional outburst like that in front of all these people would be a real tribute to his father.

Like hell it would.

He blinked the stinging wetness from his eyes and inhaled a deep breath to cool his lungs. He turned away from troublesome thoughts and emotions and visually sought out the rest of his family.

Holden was wearing his dress blues, too. Standing at the foot of their father's flag-draped casket, he finished his song, saluted John Kincaid's memory, then resumed his seat beside their mother in the front row of chairs.

Another brother, Atticus, was in uniform as well, as he sat on the opposite side of Susan Kincaid with a stoic, unreadable look behind his dark-rimmed glasses. Atticus was the cool, calm and collected one. Though they'd all been spending time at the house these past few days, Atticus could keep it together better than any of them and provide the rock of support their mother would need.

The soil squished beneath Sawyer's size thirteens as he subtly shifted his stance to locate his oldest brother in the crowd of mourners. There, even farther from the main gathering than Sawyer, unshaven and scowling, leaning on his cane beneath an overhang of dripping pine boughs, stood thirty-five-year-old Edward Rochester Kincaid. Though he'd made lieutenant more than two years ago, Edward had refused to wear his uniform today. He'd reminded their mother that he was on disability leave from the force and wearing it would be awkward with all the veteran and active-duty officers in attendance. But Sawyer knew better. His mother knew better. Awkward didn't begin to describe what Edward must be feeling with all these people around. At a funeral. He hadn't just been out of touch with the department since the tragic attack that had robbed him of so much. He'd been out of touch with his friends and family. Out of touch with life. The fact that he'd shown up at all was a concession to Susan Kincaid's grief, and a nod of respect to their father.

But they were all here—Edward, Sawyer, Atticus and Holden. John Kincaid's four sons. Bonded by brotherhood. Forged into men by the badges they wore. Reunited by grief.

Knowledge of those family ties eased the constriction in his chest and Sawyer inhaled a deep, grounding breath.

"It isn't easy, is it."

Sawyer clenched his fists at his sides to mask his startled reaction to the voice beside him. He could do this. If his grieving mother could make nice with well-meaning friends who wanted to offer comfort and sympathy, and maybe find a little for themselves, then so could he. He angled his head toward a black umbrella and the distinguished gentleman who'd come up beside him. "No." This sucks. Nah, Mom wouldn't like him to say that here—even to an old family friend. He swallowed the emotion that seemed to paralyze his throat. "It's not."

There. He got some words out. Decent ones, too. "Hang in there, son." William Caldwell reached up to squeeze Sawyer's shoulder. He wore his black suit with the same impeccable style as the gray streaking his temples. But underneath the businessman's facade, Sawyer knew there lurked a man who was more fraternity brother and army buddy to John Kincaid than wealthy entrepreneur and owner of his own computer technology company. "These are tough times. It's the second funeral for a friend I've been to since the beginning of the year. Your dad and I should be gearing up for retirement. Enjoying ourselves. It shouldn't end like this."

Sawyer and his brothers had gone hunting or fishing with Bill Caldwell and their dad more times than he could remember. They'd shared crazy stories over campfires. He'd absorbed words of wisdom from the old pros about catching fish and tracking game, talking to girls and living life like a man.

But Sawyer still wasn't ready to hear the speeches. He wasn't ready to join in the prayers. He wasn't ready to talk about the injustice that burned him right down to his soul.

Probably sensing the tenuous control Sawyer held on his civil demeanor, Caldwell patted his arm and pulled away. "You take care now."

Take care of what? Sawyer planed his hand down his face to clear the rain from his eyes and mouth. He needed to be doing something. He needed to move, to go. His palms were itching with the need to grab somebody by the throat and make them pay.

Even John Kincaid's easygoing, good-ol'-boy son had a temper inside him. And it was brewing. The emotions would boil over if he didn't do something about this travesty soon.

So there on the spot, standing in the rain, he gave himself a job to do.

There were plenty of folks here, honoring his father. Missing him. But amongst the honor guards, police and government officials, extended family and friends like Caldwell, Sawyer concentrated on something more important than tamping down his sorrow or anger.

He studied each face huddled inside the tent, standing beneath umbrellas and taking shelter under the green, soggy branches of the towering oaks and ash trees and pines lining the road that twisted through the hills of Kansas City's Mount Washington Cemetery. But he wasn't looking for familiar friends or comfort.

Sawyer was looking for a face that didn't fit. He was looking for someone watching the gathering and admiring the success of his handiwork—someone whose curiosity might be bolder than his brains. A smile of satisfaction amongst all the sorrow. He was looking for the man who'd beaten his father bloody and fired a bullet into his chest.

He was looking for his father's killer.

"IS THIS A JOKE?"

Sawyer switched the phone to his left ear and paced to the opposite end of the large country kitchen. Staring out the window over the sink into the blackness of the backyard he'd grown up in, he jerked the knot loose on his tie and unhooked the top two buttons of his soggy white shirt.

Finally, he had something useful to do to take his mind off the funeral and the friends and family who'd come to his mother's house afterward. But he'd trade almost anything for a different assignment.

"I wish. All three of them have vanished. Including our pal Longbow." Friend and fellow cop Detective Seth Cartwright, the commissioner's son, hadn't shown up for the potluck dinner after leaving the cemetery. Now Sawyer understood why. A nightmare from the organized-crime investigation they'd worked together last year had reawakened.

"He's no friend of mine."

"Mine, either. I know what that bastard can do." Like try to murder Seth's wife.

Sawyer knew Ace Longbow as a hulking, temperamental enforcer for the mob. In exchange for testifying against his former boss, he'd been given the opportunity to spend the rest of his life rotting away in prison, instead of facing a lethal injection himself. But something had gone very, very wrong at a courthouse in Jefferson City...

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Gary Kruse:

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