Cassie Miles

THE GIRL WHO WOULDN'T STAY DEAD



MILLS & BOON
HEROES

Cassie Miles

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Аннотация

Old friend, new protectorEmily Benton-Riggs would be dead if her best friend hadn't shown up in time. Now lawyer Connor Gallagher won’t let her out of his sight. Emily has always had powerful feelings for Connor. And giving into their desire is the best reason to fight for her life.

After more than one attempt is made on her life
an old friend steps in as her protector...

Emily Benton-Riggs would be dead if her best friend hadn't shown up in time. Someone doesn't want her to inherit her ex-husband's Aspen estate, and now attorney Connor Gallagher won't let the widowed art dealer out of his sight. Emily has always had powerful feelings for Connor. As they give in to the desire flaring between them, she suddenly has the best reason of all to fight for her life.

CASSIE MILES, a *USA TODAY* bestselling author, lives in Colorado. After raising two daughters and cooking tons of macaroni and cheese for her family, Cassie is trying to be more adventurous in her culinary efforts. She's discovered that almost anything tastes better with wine. When she's not plotting Mills & Boon Heroes books, Cassie likes to hang out at the Denver Botanic Gardens near her high-rise home.

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The Girl Who Wouldn't Stay Dead
Cassie Miles

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To Annie Underwood Perry and the latest addition to her family.

And, as always, to Rick.

Contents

Cover

Back Cover Text

About the Author

Booklist

Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Extract
About the Publisher

Chapter One

She had to wake up. Someone was trying to kill her.

Her eyelids snapped open. Her vision was blurred. Every part of her body hurt.

Emily Benton-Riggs inhaled a sharp gasp. The chilly night air pierced her lungs like a knife between the ribs. Slowly, she exhaled, then drew a breath again and tried to focus. She was still in the car but not sitting upright. Her little Hyundai had flipped, rolled and smacked into the granite side of a mountain at least twice on the way down, maybe more. The car had landed on the driver's side.

Likewise, her brain was jumbled. Nothing was clear.

Even in her dazed state, she was glad to be alive—grateful and also a little bit surprised. The past few years of her life had moments of such flat-out misery that she'd come to expect the worst. And yet, recently, things seemed to be turning around. She liked her rented bungalow in Denver, and her work was satisfying. Plus, she'd just learned that she might be a very wealthy woman. *I can't give up.* It'd take more than crashing through the guardrail on a narrow mountain road near Aspen and plummeting down a sheer cliff to kill her.

Her forehead felt damp. When she pushed her bangs back and touched the wet spot above her hairline, her pain shot into high gear. Every twitch, every movement set off a fresh agony. Her hand came away bloody.

Her long-dead mother—an angry woman who didn't believe in luck or spontaneous adventure or love, especially not love—burst into her imagination. Her mom, with her wild, platinum

hair and her clothes askew, took a swig from her vodka bottle and grumbled in harsh words only Emily could hear, "You don't deserve that vast fortune. That's why you're dead."

"But I'm not," Emily protested aloud. "And I deserve this inheritance. I loved Jamison. I did everything I could to stay married to him. It's not my fault that he slept with...practically everybody."

Her voice trailed off. She never wanted to relive the humiliating final chapter of her marriage. It was over.

"You failed," her mother said with a sneer.

"Go away. I'm not going to argue with a ghost."

"You'll be joining me soon enough." Unearthly, eerie laughter poisoned her ears. "Look around, little girl. You're not out of the woods. Not yet."

Mom was right. Emily was still breathing, but her survival was not a sure thing.

With her right hand, she batted the airbag. The chemical dust that had exploded from the bag rose up in a cloud and choked her. She coughed, and her lungs ached. When she peered through what was left of the windshield, which was a spiderweb of shattered safety glass, she saw boulders and the trunks of pine trees. Literally, she wasn't out of the woods.

With the car lying on the driver's side, her perspective was off. She couldn't tell if her Hyundai had careened all the way to the bottom of the cliff or was hanging against a tree halfway down. The headlights flickered and went dark. She saw steam

rising from around the edges of the crumpled hood.

In the movies, standard procedure dictated that when a car flew off the road, it would crash and burn. The idea of dying in a fire terrified her. Her gut clenched. *I have to get out of this damn car.* Or she could call for help. Desperately, she felt around for her purse. Her phone was inside. She remembered tossing her shoulder bag onto the seat beside her.

She twisted her neck, setting off another wave of pain, and looked up. The passenger side had been badly battered. The door had been torn from its hinges. Her purse must have fallen out somewhere between the road and here. Through the opening where the door should have been, she saw hazy stars and a September crescent moon that reminded her of the van Gogh painting.

Trying to grasp the edge of the roof on the door hole, she stretched her right hand as far as possible. Not far enough. She couldn't reach. When she turned her shoulders, her left arm flopped clumsily inside the black blazer she'd worn to look professional at the will reading. The muscles and joints from shoulder to wrist screamed. Blood was smeared across her white shirt; she didn't know if the gore came from her arm or the head wound matting her blond hair.

A masculine voice called out, "Hey, down there."

She froze. The monster who had forced her off the road was coming to finish the job. Fear spread through her, eclipsing her pain. She said nothing.

"Emily, is that you?"

He knew her name. Nobody she'd met with in Aspen counted as a friend. She didn't trust any of them. Somehow, she had to get out of the car. She had to hide.

Carefully avoiding pain, she used her right hand to manipulate the left. The problem was in her forearm. It felt broken. If she'd known first aid, she might have fashioned a splint from a tree branch. Her mind skipped down an irrelevant path, wishing she'd been a Girl Scout. If she'd been a better person, she wouldn't be in this mess. *No, this isn't my fault.*

She cursed herself for wasting precious moments by being distracted. Right now, she had to get away from this ticking time bomb of a car and flee from the man who wanted her dead. Holding her arm against her chest, she wiggled her hips, struggling to get free. When she unfastened the latch on the seat belt, the lower half of her body shifted position. The car jolted.

With her right knee bent, she planted her bare foot on the edge of her bucket seat and pushed herself upward toward the space where the passenger door had been. The left leg dragged. Her thigh muscles and knee seemed to work, but her ankle hurt too much to put weight on it. Inch by inch, she maneuvered herself. Using her right arm, she pulled her head and shoulders up and out. The cold wind slapped her awake. She was halfway out, halfway to safety.

Her car hadn't crashed all the way down the cliff. Three-quarters of the way down, an arm of the forest reached out and

caught her little car. Two giant pine trees halted the descent. The hood crumpled against the tree trunks. The back end of the car balanced precariously.

"Emily? Are you down here?"

The voice sounded closer. She had to hurry, to find a place to hide.

She hauled herself through the opening and tumbled over the edge onto the ground. Her left leg crumpled beneath her. Behind her was the greasy undercarriage. The pungent stink of gasoline reminded her that she wasn't out of danger.

Unable to support herself on her knees, she crawled on her belly through the dirt and underbrush toward the security of the forest where she could disappear into the trees. Breathing hard, she reached a cluster of heavy boulders—a good place to pause and get her bearings. With her right arm, the only body part that seemed relatively unharmed, she pulled herself into a sitting posture, looking down at her car.

Exhaustion and pain nearly overwhelmed her. She fought to stay conscious, clinging to the rocks as though these chunks of granite formed a life raft on the high seas. She heard a small noise. Not the fiery explosion she'd been expecting, it was only the snap of a dry twig. The sound filled her with dread.

He was close.

She had to run. No matter how much it hurt, she had to get to her feet. She struggled to stand but her injured leg was unable to support her. She sat down hard on the rock. A fresh stab of pain

cut through her. Before she could stop herself, she whimpered.

A silhouette of the man separated from the surrounding trees. He turned toward her. *Please don't see me. Please, please.*

"Emily, is that you?"

Quickly, he came toward her. She hoped he'd kill her fast. She couldn't take any more pain.

He sat on the rock beside her. Starlight shone on his handsome face. She knew him. "Connor."

Gently and carefully, he maneuvered his arm around her. She should have put up a fight, but she didn't have the strength, and she couldn't believe Connor wanted to hurt her.

"I already called 9-1-1," he said. "The paramedics will be here soon. I don't want to move you until they arrive with their gear to stabilize your back and neck."

He wasn't here to kill her but to save her.

She leaned against him, rested her head on his shoulder and inhaled the scent of his leather jacket. Though he felt real, she couldn't believe he was here. They'd talked yesterday. She'd been in Denver. He'd been in Manhattan. They'd both been summoned to the reading of her late ex-husband's will in Aspen, and she'd told her lawyer, Connor, not to bother making the trip. She didn't plan to attend. Why should she? She hadn't expected to receive a dime, and showing up for the reading had seemed like a lot of bother for almost zero reward.

At the last moment, she'd changed her mind. This might be her final opportunity to face the Riggs family, and she had a few

choice words for them. Emily had no reason to be ashamed. Early this morning before she left Denver, she'd texted Connor about her decision to go.

"Emily, are you okay?"

"No," she mumbled.

"Dumb question, sorry," he said. "I came as soon as I could. After I got your text, I caught a direct flight from JFK to Denver, then a shuttle flight to Aspen airport, where I grabbed a rental car."

Though his deep voice soothed her, she couldn't relax until she'd told him what had happened. But her throat was closed. Her eyelids drooped.

"If I'd flown in last night," he said, "we would have made the drive together. You wouldn't have had this accident."

Accident? She wanted to yell at him that this wasn't an accident.

She heard the screech of the ambulance siren. Her mind went blank.

* * *

IN A PRIVATE hospital room in Aspen, Connor Gallagher stood like a sentry next to the railing on the right side of Emily's bed. She lay in an induced coma after four hours in surgery. Her condition was listed as critical. The doctors and staff were cautiously optimistic, but no one would give him a 100 percent guarantee that she'd fully recover. He hated that she'd been hurt. Emily had suffered enough.

Her breathing had steadied. He watched as her chest rose and fell in a rhythmic pattern. Her slender body made a small ripple under the lightweight blue hospital blanket. Though the breathing tube for the ventilator had been removed, it was obvious that something terrible had happened to her. There were three separate IV bags. Her broken left arm was in a cast from above the elbow to the fingers. A bad sprain on her left leg required a removable Aircast plastic boot. Bandages swathed her head. Her face was relaxed but not peaceful. A black-and-blue shiner and a stitched-up wound on her forehead made her look like a prizefighter who'd lost the big bout.

Being as gentle as he could, Connor held her right hand below the site where the IV was inserted. Her knuckles and palm were scraped. The doctors had said that her lacerations and bruises weren't as bad as they looked, but a series of MRIs showed swelling in her brain. The head injury worried him more than anything else.

Bones would mend. Scars would heal. But neurological damage could be a permanent disability. She'd fallen unconscious after he found her on the ground close to the wreckage of her car. During the rescue and the ambulance ride, she'd wakened only once.

Her eyelids had fluttered open, and she gazed steadily with her big blue eyes. "I'm in danger, Connor."

Her words had been clear, but he wasn't sure what she meant. "You're going to be all right."

"Stay with me," she'd said. "You're the only one I can trust."

He'd promised that he wouldn't leave her alone, and he damn well meant to honor that vow. She needed him. Even if his presence irritated the medical staff, he would goddamn well stay by her side.

The emergency doctor who'd supervised her treatment made it clear that he didn't need Connor or anybody else looking over his shoulder. The doc had curly blond hair and the bulging muscles of a Norse god. Appropriately, his name was Thorson, aka Thor's son.

Thorson opened the door to her room, entered and went to the opposite side of Emily's bed, where he fiddled with the IV bags and checked the monitors. Connor sensed the real reason the doctor had stopped by was to assert his authority.

Without looking at Connor, Thorson said, "She's doing well."

Compared to what? Death? Connor stifled his dislike and asked, "When can she be moved?"

"Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the next day."

"Be more specific, Doctor. No offense but I want to get her to an expert neurologist."

"I assure you that our staff is highly regarded in all aspects of patient care."

Connor took his phone from his pocket. While Emily was in surgery, he'd done research. He clicked to an illustration of state-of-the-art neurological equipment. "Do you have access to one of these?"

"We don't need one."

"I disagree."

Thorson glared; his steel blue eyes shot thunderbolts. When he folded his arms across his broad chest, his maroon scrubs stretched tightly over his huge biceps.

Connor wasn't intimidated. At six feet three inches, he was taller than the pseudogod, and he seldom lost a fight, verbal or physical. Connor returned the glare; his dark eyes were hard as obsidian.

"Tell me again," Thorson said. "What is your relationship to the patient?"

"I'm her fiancé."

"There's no diamond on her finger."

"I haven't given her a ring."

Connor avoided lying whenever possible, but he'd discovered it was easier to facilitate Emily's treatment if he claimed to be her fiancé instead of her lawyer. He'd already played the sympathy card to get her into a private room in this classy Aspen facility, where she wasn't the wealthiest or most influential patient. The nurses had been touched by the tragic story of the pretty young woman and her doting fiancé.

"No ring?" Thorson's blond eyebrows lifted. "Why not?"

"I'd like to explain in a way you could understand. But there are complex issues involved in our relationship."

That was true. Emily used to be married to his best friend, and they both used Connor as their personal attorney. Her ex-

husband, a hotshot Wall Street broker, had moved his business to a more important law firm. Six weeks ago, her ex died. Complicated? Oh, yeah.

Thorson pursed his lips. "I couldn't help noticing her last name, *Benton-Riggs*. Any relation to Jamison Riggs?"

Aha! Now Connor knew why the doc was hostile. The Riggs family was a big deal in Aspen, and she'd been married to the heir, the golden boy, for seven years. She and Jamison had been separated for over a year, but the divorce wasn't final until three months ago. "Back off, Thorson."

"I should inform her family."

Hearing the Riggs clan referred to as Emily's family stretched Connor's self-control to the limit. Those people never gave a rat's ass about her. Years ago, when Jamison brought her to Aspen for the first time, Connor had tagged along. Why not? Jamison was his good buddy, a fellow Harvard grad. The two of them could have been brothers. Taller than average, they were both lean and mean, with brown hair and brown eyes. They also had the same taste in women. When Jamison introduced him to Emily, emphasizing that she was his betrothed, Connor felt his heart being ripped from his chest. She should have been with him.

The Aspen branch of the Riggs family accepted Connor, assuming that because he'd gone to an Ivy League school he came from good stock. They were dead wrong, but he didn't bother to correct them, didn't want to talk to them at all when he saw how snotty they were to Emily. She didn't wear designer clothes,

didn't ski and didn't know one end of a Thoroughbred horse from another. Her laugh was too loud, and her accent was a humble Midwestern twang. Connor thought one of the reasons Jamison had married her was to drive his family crazy.

Connor growled at Thorson. "Don't call the Riggs family."

"I'm sure they'll want to be informed."

"You've seen the advance directives for Ms. Benton-Riggs, correct?" In the first years of their marriage, Jamison and Emily had asked Connor to file their living wills, powers of attorney and proxy-care forms. They had named him as the decision maker, and those papers were in effect until the divorce and the dissolution of his friendship with Jamison, who had made other arrangements. Emily, however, had never bothered to make a change. "I'm in charge of her medical care, and I don't want anyone named Riggs anywhere near her."

"You aren't thinking straight."

"The hell I'm not," Connor replied without raising his voice.

There was a light tap on the door before it opened. Standing outside was a clean-cut young man in a Pitkin County sheriff's uniform. He touched the brim of his cap. "Mr. Gallagher, I'm Deputy Rafe Sandoval. I have a few questions."

"I didn't actually witness the accident, but I'm happy to help." He gave Thorson a cold smile. "The doctor was just leaving."

As soon as Thorson stormed out, the deputy entered. Rather than hovering at Emily's bedside like the doctor, the cop motioned for Connor to join him near the door. He spoke in a

hushed tone. “I don’t want to disturb her while she’s asleep.”

“She’s in an induced coma.”

“But can she hear us?”

Connor had wondered the same thing. While she was unconscious, did Emily have the ability to hear his words or comprehend what he was saying? Did she know he was at her side and would destroy anyone who attempted to hurt her? “I’d like to think that she can hear, but I don’t know.”

Still keeping the volume low, Sandoval asked, “Why were you on that road?”

“I was on my way to the home of Patricia Riggs for the reading of her cousin’s will. Unfortunately, I got a late start from New York.” As soon as he spoke, he realized that the deputy would need to talk to the Riggs family about the accident. As much as Connor wanted to keep them away from Emily, the police would have to contact them. “Have you spoken to the Riggs family?”

“Not yet,” he said. “Why did you pull over, Mr. Gallagher? You didn’t see the accident happen, but you quickly arrived at the scene.”

“There are no lights along that stretch.” The two-lane road that led to Patricia’s château hugged the mountain on one side. The outer lane had a wide shoulder and a guardrail at the edge of a sheer cliff. “Her headlights were shining like a beacon.”

“So you stopped,” the deputy prompted.

“I saw the damaged guardrail. That’s when I looked over the ledge.”

He'd never forget the flood of panic that had washed over him when he saw the wreckage. At the time, he hadn't known that the twisted remains of the bronze Hyundai belonged to Emily. When the headlights went off and darkness consumed the scene, he'd known what he had to do. No matter who was trapped inside, Connor had had to respond.

"This is very important, Mr. Gallagher. Did you see any other vehicles?"

"No."

"You're certain."

Connor was beginning to have a bad feeling about this visit from the deputy. It was after two o'clock in the morning. What was so important that it couldn't wait? "Is there something you need to tell me about the accident?"

The young man straightened his shoulders. His nervous manner was gone. His gaze was direct. "After my preliminary investigation, I strongly suspect that Ms. Benton-Riggs was forced off the road."

"What are you saying?"

"Someone tried to kill her."

Chapter Two

Emily knew she was asleep and dreaming hard. There was no other explanation for the weird images that popped into her mind and distracted her. She needed to wake up. There was something she had to find. The object or person or place was unclear, but her quest was urgent—a matter of life and death.

But she couldn't ignore the field of psychedelic flowers that reminded her of a Peter Max poster from the sixties, and she couldn't pause as she waltzed into a paint-splattered Jackson Pollock room with a series of framed paintings on the walls. Some were classics: melting Dali timepieces, a servant girl with a pearl earring, Tahitian women bathing by a stream. Others were by the not-yet-famous artists that she was showing in her Denver gallery. The corridor took on a more formal aspect, and it felt like she was on a personal tour of the Louvre Museum, accompanied by a grinning Mona Lisa.

Swiveling, she found herself surrounded by mist. Pink clouds spun like cotton candy around her feet and knees. When she tried to push them away, her left arm wouldn't move. From shoulder to wrist, the arm was frozen. Pursing her lips, she blew, and the haze cleared.

Connor Gallagher strode toward her. This was the Manhattan version of Connor, dressed in a tailored charcoal suit with a striped silk necktie. Though neatly groomed, his brown hair was unruly, curling over his collar. His cocoa-brown eyes penetrated her defenses.

She sighed as she placed this moment in time—a memory from several months ago when she had been trying to decide whether or not to file for divorce. She'd already left Manhattan, separated from Jamison and was working hard to establish a new life in Denver, her hometown. Connor had come all the way from New York to talk business with her. As soon as she saw him

strolling up the sidewalk to her bungalow, she forgot about the contracts, documents and the prenuptial agreement she'd signed.

Connor filled her mind. She liked him...a lot. He frequently starred in her erotic fantasies. In real life, she hadn't seen him without his swimming trunks, but she suspected he could give Michelangelo's naked sculpture *David* a run for his money. In addition to her appreciation for his body, she was fascinated by his moods, the sound of his laughter and the shape of his mouth.

Her memory continued. They'd met. They'd hugged. He'd smelled warm and spicy like cinnamon. And then Connor had mentioned Jamison, asking if he also favored divorce.

She didn't give a damn what Jamison Riggs wanted. Any love she'd had for him was over. She'd been living apart from him since the night when she'd found him in bed with the head partner from his Wall Street investment firm, a tall redhead with incredibly straight hair and who never smiled. Jamison had expected Emily to forgive him. He'd told her not to worry, that he was only trying to sleep his way to the top. As if that was supposed to be okay.

Emily huffed. She didn't believe a single word that spilled from his lying lips. Other people had warned her about his cheating, and it didn't take long for Emily to find evidence of other infidelities with at least three other women. Jamison had been having a wild, sexy ride. Frankly, when she asked Connor to come to Denver, she'd been hoping for a taste of the same.

Sure, there were plenty of legitimate business interests they

could discuss, but those weren't foremost in her mind. She wanted Connor to embrace her, caress her and sweep her off her feet. She deserved an affair of her own. But no! Technically, she was still married, and Connor had too much integrity to betray his friend, even if Jamison was a dirty dog who didn't deserve the loyalty.

The day after Connor returned to his Manhattan law practice, she'd contacted a lawyer in Denver and started the paperwork. The divorce had taken months. So many other things had happened, a whirlwind of events.

Her unconscious mind played calliope music. *Boop-boop-beedle-deedle-doop-doop.* She was on a carousel, riding a painted pony. She hadn't known Jamison was sick until he was terminal, and she only saw him once before he died. In light of his unexpected death, her divorce seemed cold and unfeeling. Even in a dream state, she felt a little bit guilty. If she'd known he was ill, she might have forgiven him and nursed him through his final days. Or not.

Leaving the merry-go-round, she hiked up a grassy knoll to an old-fashioned boot hill cemetery. She'd wanted to attend Jamison's funeral and memorial service, but his maiden aunt Glenda, matriarch of the family, had made it clear that she was unwelcome. The family had kept her away, almost as though they were hiding something.

Jamison shouldn't be her problem anymore. They were divorced, and he had died. But there seemed to be a connection.

Her car had been run off the road after leaving the Riggses' house. Someone wanted her dead, had tried to kill her. She had to fight back. She needed to wake up. *Oh, God, I'm too tired.*

Someone held her hand and comforted her. For now, that would have to be enough. She drifted back into silent stillness.

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, Connor sat beside the hospital bed and patted Emily's right hand. She hadn't moved, but one of the monitors started beeping. A sweet-faced nurse whose name tag said *Darlene* came into the room and made adjustments to silence the alarm.

"Has she spoken?" Darlene asked.

"Not yet," he said. "But her eyelids have been moving. It's like she's watching a movie inside her head."

"Rapid eye movement, we call it REM. Nothing to worry about," she said in the perky tone of a confirmed optimist. "I'll notify the doctor. We don't want her to wake up too soon."

"Why is that?"

"They use the induced coma to protect the brain and let it relax while the swelling goes down. She needs plenty of rest."

Though he didn't know much about neurological sciences, he'd talked to a brain surgeon in New York who advised him about Denver-based referrals. His brain surgeon friend had given him an idea of all the stuff that could go wrong, ranging from stroke to seizure. Amnesia was a possibility, as was epilepsy. Head wounds were unpredictable and could be devastating.

He wished he could be as cheerful as Darlene, but Connor was a realist. "It seems like she wants to wake up," he said. "That's a good sign, right?"

"Well, I certainly think so." Nurse Darlene pressed her fingers across her mouth as if she'd said too much. "I'm not qualified to give opinions. But if you're asking me, this young lady is going to make a full recovery and come back to you."

And maybe she'll bring the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus with her. Connor forced a smile. The nurse wanted him to be happy, but she really didn't know—nobody knew, not for certain—if Emily would be all right. "Thank you, Darlene."

She patted his shoulder on her way out of the room. "Try to get some sleep, Connor. If you need anything, push the button and I'll be here in a flash."

Sleep was an excellent idea, but he didn't dare relax his vigilance; Deputy Sandoval had told him that Emily's accident wasn't an accident. Somebody had tried to kill her, and Connor needed to keep watch.

There was a lot to be done today. First order of business this morning would be to hire a private detective. He'd checked with the investigator who worked for his law firm in Manhattan and had got the name of a local guy. Though Connor didn't doubt Sandoval's competence, the young deputy might appreciate outside assistance from a PI—a guy who could do computer research and help him figure out why Emily had been targeted.

And Connor also needed to hire a bodyguard. The county

sheriff and Aspen police didn't have the manpower to provide a cop who could stand outside her hospital room and keep watch 24/7. Also, Connor wasn't sure he trusted the locals. There was a high probability that the cops knew the Riggs family and wouldn't consider them to be a threat, even if they strolled into her hospital room carrying two crossbows and a loaded gun.

He squeezed Emily's hand and smoothed the dark blond curls that weren't covered by bandages. Even with a shiner and stitches across her forehead, she was uniquely beautiful. Her nose tilted up at the tip. Her bow-shaped lips were full. He brushed his thumb across her mouth. He'd never kissed those lips, except in a friendly way, and he was tempted to remedy that situation. Not appropriate. Kissing her while she was in a coma ranked high on the creepiness scale.

Besides, he wanted her to be awake when he finally expressed his pent-up longing. He whispered, "Emily, can you hear me?"

She said nothing, didn't open her eyes and didn't squeeze his hand.

He continued in a quiet voice, "There was a deputy who came in here last night. His name is Sandoval. He looks young but said he was thirty-two, and he's smart."

Her silence disturbed him. It was too passive. Being with Emily meant activity, laughter and a running commentary of trivial facts, usually about art.

"Sandoval investigated," he said. "He found skid marks on the road that might indicate two vehicles. One was your Hyundai,

and the other had a wider wheelbase, like a truck. He couldn't re-create the scene perfectly, but he thought the truck bumped your car toward the edge. You slammed on the brake, but it wasn't enough. You crashed through the guardrail."

She must have been scared out of her mind. If Sandoval's theory was correct, a lot more investigation would be required. The sheriff's department would need to haul the wreckage of her Hyundai up the hill so the forensic people could go over it. And Sandoval could start looking for the truck that had forced her off the road.

"Do you remember? Why would someone come after you?"

His only answer came from the *blips* and *beeps* from the machines monitoring her life signs while she was in the coma.

He asked, "Did you see who was driving?"

Even if it was possible for her to comprehend what he was saying, she might not be able to identify her attacker. He continued, "I don't have evidence, but the attack on you has something to do with the Riggs family. If not, the timing is too coincidental."

He could easily imagine a member of the family or one of their minions chasing her in a truck and forcing her car off the road. It would help if he knew why. There had to be a reason.

"On the phone, you told me not to come," he said. "You expected things to get ugly between you and the Riggs family, and you didn't want to force me to take sides. Don't you know, Emily? I'm on your side, always."

Jamison's dumb-ass infidelities had pretty much ended their decade-long friendship. Connor was outraged by the betrayal of Emily. He hated the humiliation she'd endured. When she left Jamison, he'd worked with her Denver lawyer to make sure that she was financially cared for. By juggling the assets she shared with her wealthy husband, he'd finagled a way for her to have enough cash to cover her move back to her hometown of Denver, rent a bungalow and set up her own little art gallery. When that money had run dry, Connor dipped into his own pocket.

He wanted her to have a good life, a beautiful life. As a friend, he'd always be close to her. It wasn't hard to imagine being more than a friend. If only Jamison hadn't met her first in Manhattan, he and Emily would have been a couple.

After he brushed a light kiss across her knuckles, he placed her hand on the blanket, went to the window and raised the shade. The mountain view was incredible as night faded into pale dawn. If the window had been open, he would have heard birds chirping while the sunlight spread across rock faces, dark green conifers and a bright golden stand of aspens.

For a long moment, he stood and drank in the spectacular landscape. Between his Brooklyn apartment and his Manhattan office, he hadn't come into contact with this much nature in weeks. This scenery knocked him out.

He checked his wristwatch. Five minutes past six o'clock meant it was after eight in New York. He pulled out his phone to check in with his assistant. Cases were pending, but there was

nothing that required his immediate attention.

It was more important to deal with Emily's medical issues. Last night, he'd culled the list of reputable neurologists and neurosurgeons down to a few. He needed to talk to them, to select a doctor for her. Then, he'd arrange for transportation to the hospital in Denver.

When Sandoval opened the door, Connor pivoted away from the window. Instantly alert to the possibility of danger, he added a mental note to his list: buy a weapon. A handsome black man with a shaved head followed the deputy into the room. He extended his hand and introduced himself. "I'm Special Agent in Charge Jaiden Wellborn, FBI."

"This isn't the first time I've seen you," Connor said as he shook SAC Wellborn's hand. "You were at a memorial service for Jamison Riggs. Two weeks ago in Manhattan."

"The service was well attended, two hundred and forty-seven people. Was there a reason you noticed me?"

"I liked your suit." Connor didn't usually pay any attention to men's clothing, but Wellborn had stood out. His attire had been appropriate for a memorial service but not lacking in style. The man knew how to dress. Even now, at a few minutes after six in the morning in a hospital in Aspen, the agent looked classy in crocodile boots, jeans, a leather jacket and a neck scarf. "Your suit was dark blue, perfectly tailored."

"Anything else?"

"You weren't milling around in the crowd and seemed more

interested in taking photos with your phone. That made me think you might be a reporter. Then I spotted your ankle holster. I had you pegged as a cop, Agent Wellborn."

He didn't bother denying Connor's conclusion. "Did it surprise you to see a cop at your friend's memorial?"

"I knew there was an investigation underway." Whenever a healthy, young man succumbs to a mysterious illness, suspicions are raised, especially when the victim is filthy rich and deeply involved with complex investments and offshore banking. Supposedly, the cause of death was a rare form of cancer, but Connor didn't believe it. "The medical examiner ran a lot of tests, and the police were reluctant to release his body for cremation."

"Our only significant evidence came from the autopsy," Wellborn said. "You might have heard that the real COD was a sophisticated, untraceable poison that was administered over an extended period of time."

"Is that true?" Connor asked.

"I can't say."

"Is it classified?"

"I don't have a definite answer about the poison. He didn't suffer much until the last week to ten days, and the doctors focused on treating symptoms and saving his life rather than identifying obscure poisons."

Connor glanced toward the bed where Emily lay quietly. It didn't seem right to talk about this in front of her. Though she and Jamison were divorced, they'd been married for almost seven

years. “Can we take this conversation into the hallway?”

“Go ahead,” Sandoval said. “I’ll stay with Emily.”

After being cooped up in the hospital room with all the beeping and blipping monitors, he was glad to step outside for a moment. The pale yellow corridors and shiny-clean nurses’ station were a welcome relief. He led the way around a corner and down a flight of stairs to a lounge with vending machines. Though the coffee was fresh brewed and free, the vending-machine snacks were a typical array of semistale cookies and candy. The selection looked good to Connor, which meant he must have really been starving.

He fed dollars into the machine and pulled out two chocolate bars with almonds. As he tore off the wrapping, he said, “I heard the investigation centered on Jamison’s Wall Street investment firm.”

“And involved several agencies, including the SEC and NASDAQ,” Wellborn said as he poured himself a coffee and added creamer. “I’m with the FBI’s White-Collar Crime Unit. We found a couple of shady glitches in his dealings, but nothing that rose to the level of fraud or insider trading. A few people in his office hated his arrogance. There were clients who felt cheated.”

“There always are.”

“Bottom line, our investigation covered all the bases. We didn’t find a significant motive for murder.”

“Nobody contacted me,” Connor said as he peeled the

wrapper off the second candy bar. “Technically, I haven’t been Jamison’s attorney for years, but I stay in touch with Emily. Did you investigate her?”

“Not as much as we should have. The attack last night was proof of that.”

“Are you implying that Emily had something to do with her ex-husband’s death?” It seemed preposterous since Emily and Jamison hadn’t seen each other in months, much less had enough time together for a long-term poisoning.

Wellborn shrugged and sipped his coffee. Apparently, the feds hadn’t ruled out Emily—in the role of hostile ex-wife—as a suspect.

“Why are you here?” Connor asked.

“I’m looking into the attack on Emily as it might relate to her ex-husband’s death.”

“As far as I know, there was very little contact between them.”

“You didn’t know the terms of the will. She inherited a seven-bedroom mansion in Aspen plus all the furnishings. The artwork alone is valued at nearly fourteen million.”

A pretty decent motive for murder.

Connor’s phone rang. The caller was Sandoval.

The young deputy’s voice was nervous. “Connor, you need to get back to Emily’s room. Right away.”

Candy bar in hand, Connor dashed through the hospital corridors and up the stairs. Darlene the nurse beamed at him as he ran past her.

The door to Emily's room stood open.

Her bed was empty.

Chapter Three

She was gone.

The hospital machines that monitored her condition were dead silent. Connor stared at her vacant bed. Rumpled sheets were the only sign that Emily had been there. Panic grabbed him by the throat. He couldn't breathe, couldn't move. The thud of his heartbeat echoed in his ears. His fingers, white-knuckle, gripped the edge of the door.

He'd promised to never leave her. She needed his protection, had asked for his help and he had failed her. She was gone, lost.

"Son of a bitch," Wellborn muttered.

"Hush, now." Relentlessly cheerful, Darlene bounced up beside the two men and said, "This is a good thing—a blessing. Emily's family has come for her."

"The Riggs family," Connor said darkly.

"Such lovely people! Did you know our Dr. Thorson is dating Patricia Riggs? He signed Emily out."

"Where did they take her?" Connor was aware of at least three different residences, not including the one she had inherited from Jamison. "Which house?"

"I can look up the address for you." She bustled down the hall toward the main desk, talking as she went. "They hired a private nurse to take care of her at home. So thoughtful! I know Emily's in a coma, but I think she's aware of all these people who are

concerned."

"The deputy that was watching her, where is he?"

"It was the craziest thing," Darlene said. "Deputy Sandoval tried to stop them."

"Why didn't he?"

"He called his boss, and the sheriff had already talked to Patricia. She told him it was okay, and the sheriff ordered Sandoval to stand down."

Connor had only been out of the room for a few moments. "How did they get this done so fast?"

"When Patricia speaks, we shake a leg."

"Ambulance," Connor said. "Are they taking Emily in an ambulance?"

"Well, of course."

He'd been with Emily when the paramedics had brought her in; he knew where the ambulances parked and loaded. If the Riggs family got her moved and settled in their home, it would be harder to pry her from their clutches. He had to act now.

He turned to Wellborn. "I've got to stop them."

"How are you going to do that?"

"Come with me and see."

"You bet I'm coming. I wouldn't miss this circus for the world."

Racing against an invisible clock, Connor flew down the corridor. Ignoring the slow-moving elevators, he dived into the stairwell, rushed down four floors and exited on the first.

Wellborn followed close behind. Having him along would be useful. An ambulance driver might ignore Connor but wouldn't refuse a direct order from a fed.

At six thirty in the morning, the hallways were relatively calm. Though this was a small hospital, the floor plan was a tangled maze of clinics, waiting areas, pharmacies, shops and offices. During the four hours Emily was in surgery, Connor had explored, pacing from one end of the hospital to the other. He now knew where he was going as he dodged through an obstacle course of doctors and nurses and carts and gurneys. In the emergency area, he burst through the double doors. Outside, he spotted two ambulances.

Dr. Thorson stood at the rear of one ambulance. As soon as he saw Connor, he slammed the door and signaled the driver.

No way would Connor allow that vehicle to pull away. He vaulted across the parking lot, crashed into the driver's-side door and yanked it open.

The guy behind the steering wheel gaped. "What's going on?"

"Turn off the engine and get out."

"Those aren't my orders."

Connor had a lot of respect for paramedics and the mountain-rescue team that had climbed down the steep cliff and carried Emily to safety. Their procedures had been impressive, efficient and heroic. Not to mention that these guys were in great physical condition.

"Sorry," Connor said, "but you've got to turn off the engine."

"Listen here, buddy, I advise you to step back."

Respect be damned, Connor needed cooperation. He turned to Wellborn. "I need your gun."

"Not a chance." The fed displayed his badge and credentials. "Agent Wellborn, FBI. Please step out of the vehicle."

Further conversation became moot when Deputy Sandoval drove into the lot, his siren blaring and flashers whirling. He parked his SUV with the Pitkin County Sheriff logo in front of the ambulance. Nobody was going anywhere.

Connor stormed toward the rear of the ambulance with only one thought in mind. *Rescue Emily.* He didn't know how he'd move her from the ambulance or where he'd take her, but he sure as hell wouldn't allow her to be carried away by the Riggs family.

Dr. Thorson stepped in front of him. "Slow down, Connor."

Some people just don't know when they're beat. "Get out of my way."

"Everything has been taken care of. I've got this."

"Beg to differ."

"I assure you that—"

"Stop!" Since the doctor didn't seem to understand direct language, Connor decided to use his well-practiced techniques as an attorney whose job required him to deal with contentious personalities. He straightened his shoulders and leveled his voice to a calm monotone. "We can handle this situation in one of two ways. First, there's the legal way, where I point to the documents that state—very clearly—that I'm in charge of all

decisions regarding Emily's medical care. If you don't honor the signed and notarized advance directive, rest assured that I will sue the hospital and you personally."

Thorson's tanned forehead twisted in a scowl.

"The second way," Connor said as he dropped the lawyerly persona, "is for me to kick your muscle-bound Norwegian ass."

"I'd like to see you try."

Wellborn stepped between them. "Gentlemen, let's take this conversation inside."

"I'm not leaving Emily," Connor said as he reached for the latch on the rear door. "This facility isn't secure, and there's reason to believe she's in danger."

When he yanked open the door, he saw long-limbed Patricia Riggs scrunched into the ambulance. He hated that she was near Emily, close enough to disconnect an IV line or turn off one of the machines. Thank God the paramedic was there, keeping watch.

Patricia pushed a wing of dark brown hair off her face to reveal tears welling in her eyes and streaking down her chiseled cheekbones. "Oh, my God, Connor, I can't believe this terrible accident happened to our dear, sweet Emily."

He wasn't buying the tears. Patricia was a hard-edged businesswoman, a lady shark who knew as much about the investment game as her cousin, Jamison. The only type of tragedy that would cause her to weep was when the Dow dropped four hundred points. Still, he played along, needing to get her

out of the ambulance and away from Emily. He reached into the vehicle, grabbed her manicured hand and pulled her toward the open door. "You're upset, Patricia. Let's get you a nice latte."

"Are you patronizing me?"

"Let's just say that I'm as sincere as your tears."

"You don't get it." She dug in her heels. "I need to be with Emily when we take her home for the last time."

The last time? Though Emily's condition was listed as critical, none of the doctors who had seen her thought she was terminal...except for Thorson, Patricia's boyfriend.

"No more games," he growled. "Get out of the ambulance."

"But I—"

"Emily is going to recover."

"But Eric said—"

"Dr. Thorson isn't the best person to listen to. I warned him, and I'll play the same tune for you. When you interfere with Emily's care, you're breaking the law."

"Don't be a jackass." Her upper lip curled in a sneer as she came toward him. Her tears had dried, and her dark eyes were as cold as black ice. "We want the best for Emily, even if she did divorce my cousin and tear off a big chunk of the family fortune."

Connor knew precisely how much Emily had received in settlement. Considering that she'd been entitled to more in the prenup, the amount she'd actually collected shouldn't have been enough to ruffle Patricia's feathers. "You're talking about the house Jamison left her."

"It's an estate," she snapped. "Why the hell would he leave it to her? In the past few years, they hardly ever came to Aspen. After the separation, not at all. My brother, Phillip, had to move in and take care of the property. If anyone should inherit it, it's Phillip."

"I remember when Jamison and Emily first got married," Connor said. "They stayed at the Aspen house whenever they had a spare moment. They even had a name for the place."

"Jamie's Getaway," she muttered. "Appropriate for a bank robber."

Or for a man who appreciated a place where he felt safe. Connor understood why he'd left the house to her. Jamison had been acknowledging the happier times in their marriage. His sentimental gesture wasn't enough to make up for his cheating, but it reminded Connor of why he had liked Jamison Riggs. "Here's the deal, Patricia. I make the medical decisions for Emily. If you or anyone in your family interferes, you will regret it. Jamison was once my friend, but that won't stop me from going after his family."

"You'll sue?"

"Damn straight."

Patricia stepped out of the ambulance and stalked over to her boyfriend. With her smooth dark hair and his blond curls, they made a handsome pair. Though Connor wanted to hear Wellborn question them, he turned his back and entered the rear of the ambulance. He had to see Emily, to make sure she was all right.

The paramedic was one of the men who had participated in

the rescue last night. Connor was relieved to see him. “It’s Adam, right? How come you’re still on duty?”

“I caught a couple of z’s, then came back to pick up an extra shift for a friend.” He lifted a thermal coffee mug to his lips and took a sip. “Your girlfriend is looking good, considering how we found her.”

He’d hooked Emily to IVs and portable machines similar to those in her hospital room, including a cannula that delivered oxygen to her nostrils. Throughout the long night, Connor had observed the digital readouts and knew what the numbers were supposed to show. He had no cause for alarm. “Are her vitals within normal range?”

“You bet. Transferring her into the ambulance went real smooth.”

Still, Connor worried. “The woman who was in here, Patricia, did she get in the way?”

“You bet she did. Man, I was tripping over Riggses. There was Patricia and her bro and an older lady—maybe her mom.”

“Aunt Glenda,” Connor said.

“And a couple of other guys.”

“Minions.” The Riggs brood was a high-maintenance family, requiring many people to manage their affairs. “Did any of them touch Emily?”

“Not on my watch,” Adam said. “What’s got you so jumpy?”

“Just a feeling.”

He was scared—an undeniable tension prickled along his

nerve endings and tied a hard knot in his gut. He didn't like having emotions interfere with his actions. Not only had he grown up tough but Connor was a lawyer who had learned how to manage his behavior. That veneer of self-control was wearing thin. In addition to feeling fear, he was angry. If he'd followed his natural instincts, he would have grabbed Wellborn's gun and blasted each and every one of the Riggses who got in his way.

No doubt, one of them was responsible for running Emily off the road. If that wasn't enough, they'd snatched her from her hospital room as soon as his back was turned. He needed to get her away from here.

He tucked a blanket up to her chin and studied her face. Her cheeks glowed with a soft pink, more color than when she'd been indoors. Her full lips parted, and she almost looked like she was smiling. He couldn't wait to see her smile for real and to hear her laughter. "It's chilly out here. How can you tell if she gets cold?"

"I can take her temperature or I can do it the old-fashioned way, like your mama did. Feel her forehead. Touch her fingers and toes."

Connor's heart had been beating fast and his adrenaline pumping hard. His own temperature was probably elevated, but he did as suggested. Her forehead was smooth and cool. The white bandages protecting her head wound and the EEG sensors contrasted her dark blond hair and her complexion. Oddly, he was reminded of her snowy-white bridal veil. On her wedding day, eight years ago, she'd been so fresh and pretty and young,

only twenty-two. He and Jamison had been twenty-five, just getting started with their high-power careers. Jamison had joined his investment brokerage firm as a junior vice president and had already been able to afford to buy a small apartment in Battery Park. Connor had been in Brooklyn, jumping from one law firm to another as he built his client list and his reputation.

While Jamison was furnishing his place, he'd gone to an art gallery. That had been where he met Emily. By sheer luck, he'd found her first.

On their wedding day, Connor had forced himself to celebrate. He was the best man, after all. He had to make a toast and tell the newlyweds that they were going to be happy and their love would last forever—not necessarily a lie but not what he really wanted. He'd felt like a jerk for his interest in his best friend's bride, but he couldn't help it. He should have been the man with Emily. When it came time for him to kiss the new bride, he'd chickened out and gave her a peck on the forehead. He'd been terrified that if he kissed her on the lips, he wouldn't be able to stop.

Sitting beside her in the back of the ambulance, he took her hand, pretending to check if she was cold but hoping he'd feel her squeeze his fingers. He desperately wanted her eyes to open. There had been a few moments in her room where her lashes fluttered. REM sleep was what Darlene had called it. Emily wasn't moving now. Her face was still and serene, which he told himself was for the best. She wasn't supposed to wake up. Her

brain needed time to heal.

He cleared his throat. “Is it dangerous to move her?”

“Not if I’m in charge.”

Agent Wellborn poked his head into the rear of the ambulance, flashed his credentials to Adam and spoke to Connor. “I’m going to get started talking to these people before they call in their lawyers. Have you made any decisions about Emily’s care?”

“I want to get her away from here. A couple of specialists in Denver have agreed to take her case. The problem is transportation.” He looked toward Adam. “Can you arrange a Flight For Life helicopter?”

“I’ll set it up with my dispatcher,” he said. “Shouldn’t be a problem, but it might take some time, an hour or more.”

Connor gave a quick nod. After this incident with Thorson, he had cause to worry about the personnel assigned to take care of Emily. “I trust you, Adam. Can you come with us on the chopper?”

“Sure thing.” He grinned. “I can always find something to do in Denver.”

“Let’s get moving,” Wellborn said. “Connor, I want you to come with me when I talk to these people. You know them. You might notice something that doesn’t register with me.”

“I’d be delighted to do anything that might disturb the Riggs family.” He glanced back at Adam. “While I’m with Special Agent Wellborn, you need to keep everyone away from Emily.”

"You got it."

"One more thing," Connor said. "Patricia suggested that Emily wasn't going to wake up. Is there something I haven't been told?"

"I don't know all the details," Adam said, "but the screen on the EEG monitor shows normal brain activity for an induced coma. Seriously, dude, as long as we keep an eye on the monitors, she'll be okay. She's a fighter."

Connor agreed, "She looks like a delicate flower, but she's tough."

It seemed impossible that someone would want to murder this gentle but courageous woman. Somehow, he had to keep that fact at the front of his mind. She was in danger. It was his job to keep her safe.

* * *

EMILY COULDN'T TELL where she was, but she sensed a change in surroundings. Through her eyelids, she was aware of the light fading and then becoming bright and fading again. The calliope music still played—*boop-boop-beedle-deedle-doop-doop*. But the tone was different. And she heard a man's voice.

"She looks like a delicate flower," he'd said.

It was Connor...or had she imagined the smooth baritone? She tried with all her might to listen harder and wished she had one of those old-fashioned ear trumpets with a bell shape at the end to vacuum up sound. *Speak again, Connor. Say something else.*

There was something important she needed to tell him. At the reading of the will, there were details she wanted Connor to

know.

When she'd arrived at Patricia's super-chic, nine-bedroom mountain chalet for the reading of the will, an avalanche of hostility roiled over her. Patricia hated her. Aunt Glenda had always looked down her nose at Emily. Phillip and his buddies, some of whom were good friends of Jamison, eyeballed her with varying degrees of suspicion and contempt. If Connor had been there, the atmosphere would have been different. He would have called them out and shamed them.

Though she was capable of standing up for herself, Emily didn't really want to fight with these people. Seeking refuge, she'd locked herself into the bathroom—an opulent, marble-floored facility with three sinks, gold-tiled walls, a walk-in glass shower big enough for four adults, a toilet and a bidet. She'd actually considered spending the rest of the night in there.

Staring in the mirror, she'd given herself a pep talk. *You have every right to be here. You were called to be here, for Pete's sake. You can tell these people that they're mean and interfering. After tonight, you never have to see them again.* She'd lifted her chin, knowing that she looked strong and healthy. She'd been doing renovations at the gallery and was probably in the best physical condition of her life. During the past few months in Denver, her chin-length, dark blond hair had brightened. Natural highlights mingled with darker strands. There were women who paid a fortune for this look.

She'd applied coral lipstick and given herself a smile before

she opened the bathroom door. Voices and laughter had echoed from the front foyer and bounced off the ornate crystal chandelier. The sound had been disproportionately loud. She'd recoiled and covered her ears. Not ready to rejoin the others, she'd slipped down the corridor to a library with a huge desk and floor-to-ceiling shelves of leather-bound books.

The cream-colored wall opposite the curtained windows had displayed framed photos of various shapes and sizes. Many were pictures of Patricia with celebrities or heads of state or family members. None had showed Patricia's ex-husband, a man who she and Jamison had referred to as "dead to her." *Do I fall into that category?* She'd searched the wall for a sign of her relationship with Patricia. There had been several photos of Jamison, but Emily saw none—not even a group photo—with her own smiling face. Patricia had erased her from the family. So typical!

The door had opened, and a woman had stepped into the library.

Embarrassed to be caught looking at photos, Emily had taken a step back. "Are they ready to start?" she'd asked.

"Not quite yet," the woman had said. "I thought I saw you come in here. I wanted a chance to meet you before the reading."

Emily's gaze had focused on the Oriental carpet. She hadn't been really interested in mingling or meeting people. With trepidation, she'd looked up. The woman's legs were a mile long, and she was dressed in the height of Aspen chic. Her hair

was long, straight and a deep auburn. Her face had had a hard expression that Emily would never forget.

"We've met," Emily had said.

"I don't think so." Not even a hint of a smile. This woman had been as cold as a frozen rainbow trout.

The first time Emily had seen her, she'd been preoccupied—tangled in the sheets and having sex with Jamison. "You're Kate Sylvester."

"Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

Emily hadn't refused, even though she doubted she'd be much help. She hadn't talked to Jamison in months, and she'd heard that Kate was living with him. Why had she wanted to ask so many weird questions about Jamison's finances?

In her unconscious state, she heard the distant sound of alarm bells. At Patricia's chalet, she'd been more preoccupied with keeping her equilibrium after the Riggs family's open contempt had thrown her off her game. She hadn't given Kate a second thought.

But now? After the attempt on her life?

Everything about the will reading took on a much darker tinge.

When she woke up, she had to remember to tell Connor about this connection that spanned the country from Aspen to Jamison's New York investment firm.

Chapter Four

In a vacant office near the emergency exit, SAC Wellborn

assumed the position of authority behind the desk. Patricia and Aunt Glenda sat opposite him while Connor remained standing with his back against the closed door. The only thing keeping him awake was a fresh surge of adrenaline, and he thoroughly resented that the Riggs women held coffee mugs from the hospital cafeteria in their manicured hands.

He hadn't seen Aunt Glenda in four or five years. She hadn't aged, which was a testament to plastic surgery and stringent maintenance procedures. He knew for a fact that she was in her late seventies. Her straight hair—solid black without a trace of gray—was pulled up in a high ponytail, showing off her sharp features. Though the never-married matriarch of the Riggs family might be described as a handsome woman, Connor thought she looked like a crow with her black hair and beady eyes.

"Where's Phillip?" he asked.

"Dealing with another matter," Patricia said. Her upper lip curled in a sneer. She really didn't like him.

The feeling was mutual. Connor couldn't resist baiting her. "Your baby brother should be here. Whatever he's doing can't be more important than talking to the FBI."

"Phillip is accompanying Dr. Thorson." Her hostility flared. "Because of your absurd accusations, Eric is in trouble with the hospital administration. Phillip went with him, hoping to smooth the waters."

Reading between the lines, Connor figured that Phillip would

get Thorson off the hook with a big fat juicy donation to the hospital. Not only was the Riggs family wealthy, but they'd been in Aspen for a long time and wielded a lot of influence. Some of the cousins were on the city council, and Phillip had considered running for mayor. Their uncaring manipulation of power made Connor want revenge. Suing them wasn't enough. He wanted blood.

Wellborn placed a small recording device on the desk. "I'll be making a permanent record of this conversation." He stated the date, the location and the people in the room.

Before he could proceed, Patricia rapped on the desktop. "Excuse me, should we have a lawyer present?"

"That will not be necessary," Aunt Glenda pronounced. "We wish to do everything possible to be helpful. I feel partially responsible for Emily's accident. When she left, I should have sent someone along with her or had her followed."

"Why is that?" Wellborn asked.

"Isn't it obvious? After hearing about her inheritance, she was so thrilled and excited that she couldn't keep her little car on the road." Glenda spoke with absolute confidence. "We'll do whatever we can to take care of Emily. That includes opening my home to her and hiring a nurse to watch over her."

Patricia backed up her aunt with a barrage of commentary, describing the facilities at Glenda's sprawling cattle ranch, which included a barn, a bunkhouse and a hangar for a small single-engine airplane—none of which seemed pertinent to the care of

a woman in an induced coma. But Patricia was on a roll, babbling about how much she liked Emily and how much they had in common and many, many, many other lies.

Wellborn interrupted, "Why didn't you consult with Mr. Gallagher before moving the patient?"

Glenda held up a hand to silence her niece. "It simply never occurred to me. I don't know what Connor has been telling you, but he has no relationship with Emily."

Wellborn looked toward Connor. "I thought you were her fiancé."

"No."

Patricia took her shot. "You lied. So pathetic! You've always been insanely jealous of Jamison. You envied his success, his style and now his wife. What's the matter, Connor? Can't find a girlfriend of your own?"

Rather than going on the defensive and trying to justify his lying, he sidestepped. "Aunt Glenda is right. My relationship with Emily is irrelevant. However, her advance directive documents give me durable power of attorney and appoint me as the decision maker for her medical care. I'll be happy to show you the paperwork."

"Which brings me back to my initial question," Wellborn said. "Why not talk to Connor before transporting an unconscious woman to your ranch?"

Glenda looked down her beak. "How would I know he was responsible?"

"Thorson knew," Connor said. That fact was indisputable.

"But I didn't." Glenda sniffed as though she'd caught a whiff of rotten eggs. Apparently, she had no problem throwing the blond doctor under the bus, blaming the whole incident on him.

Patricia leaped to his defense. "My fiancé saved Emily's life. He's—"

"You're engaged to Dr. Thorson," Wellborn said.

"Yes, I am." Proudly, she stuck out her left hand so they could admire her flashy Tiffany-cut diamond. "We'll be married next year."

"Or sooner," Aunt Glenda said. "Patricia mustn't wait too long, doesn't want to add any more wrinkles before the wedding. She's fourteen years older than the doctor, you know."

"Please, Aunt Glenda." Patricia pinched her thin lips together. "The FBI doesn't need to know about my personal affairs."

"Agent Wellborn might want to watch out," Aunt Glenda continued. "He's a very attractive man, and he's wearing a Burberry scarf."

"You'll have to excuse my aunt," Patricia said.

"It's no secret that you prefer younger men. You're a cougar, my dear, and a successful one. You should be pleased with yourself."

"How dare you!"

"Cougar."

Their infighting made him sick. Connor hated that Emily had wasted some of the best years of her life in the company of these

harpies, and he vowed to never again complain about his huge Irish family in Queens. Sure, the Gallaghers did a lot of yelling. But there were also hugs, apologies and tears. Under all their blarney and bluster, there was love.

"Ladies," Wellborn said, "I'd like to get back to the central issue. Did you move Emily on the advice of Dr. Thorson?"

"We wanted to take her to the ranch," Patricia said before her aunt could throw another barb at her fiancé. "You must have forgotten, Aunt Glenda, but we spoke to Eric about our plan, and he told us there might be a problem with the paperwork."

"I didn't forget," Glenda snapped. "My mind is as sharp as it ever was."

"Of course it is." Patricia's voice dripped with condescension, and she rolled her eyes. Not a good look for a bona fide cougar. "We were so concerned about Emily that we didn't pay enough attention to Eric's advice. It was for the best, we decided, to avoid a confrontation with Connor. Emily needs to be home and surrounded by family before she passes on."

"She's not dying," Connor said.

Patricia schooled her expression to appear sympathetic. "I understand the denial. But, Connor, you must be aware that Emily flatlined on the operating table. It happened twice. She was technically dead. Her heart stopped."

He hadn't heard this before. Though he wouldn't put it past Dr. Thorson to make up a story like this if it suited his purposes, there had been other doctors present. No one had told him that

Emily was so near death. “You’re lying.”

“Think what you want,” Aunt Glenda said. “That girl is hanging on by a thread.”

It wouldn’t do any good for him to explode. Connor threw up a mental wall, blocking their innuendo and deceit. Glenda and Patricia wanted Emily under their control; they’d admitted as much. But why?

“If Emily died,” he said, hating the words as soon as they passed his lips, “what would happen to the house she inherited?”

“You seem to be acting as her attorney,” Patricia said. “You tell us.”

It was an interesting question—one he needed to research. As far as he knew, Emily had no living relations. She’d been an only child. Her parents were older when they had had Emily, and they’d died from natural causes when she was a teenager. He doubted she had a current will reflecting her divorce. There were documents he’d drawn up when she and Jamison were first married, but that was a long time ago.

A further complication when it came to ownership of the house she’d inherited was the actual transfer of property. Emily didn’t have a deed. The probate court would surely step in. He handled transactions like this on a regular basis, and the paperwork was intense.

While Patricia launched into another diatribe about how her brother had been taking care of the property and deserved compensation, Wellborn leveled an assessing gaze in her

direction. Connor had the sense that the good-looking black agent was accustomed to dealing with self-obsessed rich people who wouldn't stop talking. He maintained an attitude of calm. The only sign of his annoyance was the way he tapped his Cross pen as though flicking ashes from a Cuban cigar.

"Last night," Wellborn said, "was the reading of the will for Jamison Riggs. Start at the beginning and tell me everything that happened."

Patricia settled back in her chair and sipped her coffee. "I should probably start with the list of individuals who had been invited. My assistant has a copy, as does our family attorney."

Inwardly, Connor groaned. This conversation or interrogation —whatever Wellborn called it—could take hours. He couldn't spare the time. Emily needed to be moved to Denver, where he could make sure she was safe.

When Adam, the paramedic, texted him to let him know that they were ready to transfer Emily to the helicopter, he was relieved to get away from the Riggs women.

With a wave to Wellborn, he opened the door to the office. "I'll stay in touch."

* * *

IMPRESSED WITH THE efficiency of Adam and the other medical emergency personnel, Connor watched as they carried Emily on a gurney into the orange-and-yellow Flight For Life helicopter. They moved slowly and with extreme care but couldn't help jostling her.

Though she showed no sign of being disturbed, every bump made Connor think he might be making a mistake. Transporting her to Denver, where she could get the best care, seemed rational and prudent. He'd spoken to Dr. Charles Troutman, a neurologist with a stellar reputation who had taken a look at Emily's brain data and had agreed to take her case. Connor's instincts told him he was doing the right thing, getting her away from the place where she'd been threatened. But what if moving her caused her condition to worsen?

With the big cast on her left arm and the plastic boot on her left leg, she was hard to handle. But Adam and his associates managed to transfer her onto the bed where they readjusted the IVs and monitoring equipment. Connor stared at the wavy lines and the digital numbers on the screens. The emergency medical transport was equipped with all the equipment in the hospital and more. The crew included a pilot, an EMT copilot, a nurse and Adam, who vouched for the others.

Connor couldn't take his eyes off Emily. Even when she was being moved, the monitors showed very little change. Though that was what the doctors wanted—a smooth transition—he longed to see a reaction from her or to hear her speak—just a word. He wanted some kind of sign that she was all right.

When she was safely secured, belted himself into a jump seat and watched her as the chopper swooped into the clear blue skies. Through the window, he glimpsed snowcapped mountains. Soon, it would be winter. The golden leaves of autumn would be gone,

and snow would blanket the tall pines and other conifers.

"You'll be better by then," he said to Emily.

"What?" Adam looked up from the equipment he'd been monitoring.

"I was talking to her," Connor said without shame. Even if she couldn't hear him, he felt the need to reach out to her and reassure her. He unbuckled his seat belt and moved closer to her. With the back of his hand, he caressed her cheek. Taking full responsibility for her, making life-and-death decisions, was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

Adam bumped his arm as he reached across her bed to slide a pillow under the plastic boot on her ankle. "Sorry, Adam, I need to step away. I've got a couple more things to check.

"We've got everything under control."

Not only did Connor appreciate the skill and competence of this young man but he trusted Adam. "You're doing a great job. If there's ever anything I can do for you, name it."

"Well, let me think." He grinned. "I'm already hooked up with a season ski pass, my rent isn't too bad and I've got a kick-ass girlfriend. All in all, my life is good."

"I'll get out of your way."

Back in his jump seat, he flipped open his laptop. He envied Adam's simple but fulfilling lifestyle. Connor had never been a laid-back guy. He had needed to fight to win a partial scholarship to Harvard, and when he was there he took on the role of a super achiever. The struggle hadn't ended with graduation. He'd

worked his way through several law firms until he'd found the perfect match at Shanahan, Miller and Koch, where he was well on his way to partnership.

Lately, his fire had dimmed. During these hours he'd spent rescuing Emily, he'd felt more alive than he had in years.

Using his computer, he contacted his assistant at the law firm. Last night, he'd hired a security firm, recommended by the investigator who had done work for him in New York. The bodyguard—a former marine—was scheduled to meet them at the airport before they continued on to the hospital.

If all went smoothly, Dr. Troutman would be waiting for them at the hospital. He was associated with one of the top neurosurgeons in the country, a woman who had developed techniques to treat stroke victims. Troutman hoped Emily's condition wouldn't require an operation, but they should prepare for the possibility.

During the flight, Connor texted back and forth with his assistant—a fresh-from-law-school junior partner who was capable of handling most of Connor's caseload with minimal direction from him. Projecting that he wouldn't be back to work for at least two weeks, maybe longer, Connor suggested which cases could be postponed and which should be reassigned to other attorneys in the firm. A few years ago, when his ambitions had been burning brightly, he never would have passed on these projects. But he didn't hesitate now. He'd proven himself to be a hard worker, so that wouldn't be in question. Plus, Emily's well-

being was more important.

Adam called to him, “Connor, you should come over here.”

Immediately, he disconnected his laptop and went to Emily’s bedside. She lay motionless, breathing steadily. The machines that monitored her vital signs hadn’t changed, but the EEG monitor showed flashes of brain activity. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Could it be the altitude?” Tension sent Connor’s heartbeat into high gear. “Maybe it’s the movement.”

“All I know,” Adam said, “is that she’s waking up. The nurse wants you to put in an emergency call to the neurologist in Denver. He’ll tell us what to do.”

While Connor punched in the phone number, he asked, “If she wakes up, what happens?”

“Maybe nothing,” Adam said. “There might be no problem at all.”

“Worst-case scenario?”

“She could have a seizure. There might be an internal bleed or a clot that would cause an aneurysm.”

An aneurysm and internal bleeding could lead to irreparable damage or death. As soon as Connor had the doctor on the phone, he handed it to the nurse, who rattled off a barrage of medical terminology. Sitting as close as possible, Connor held her small delicate hand and watched her face, trying to read what was going on inside her head. She looked the same as she had a few hours ago at the hospital in Aspen, except her eyelids were twitching.

Her breathing became more emphatic. He saw variations in the rhythm of her heart and her blood pressure.

Keeping the desperation from his voice, he said, "If you can hear me, Emily, I need you to listen. You need more sleep, more rest. Don't wake up, not yet."

He felt the tiniest squeeze on his hand. Had he imagined it? Though he wanted to see her awake, talking and interacting, that wasn't the best treatment for her. "Stay asleep, Emily."

Gently, he caressed the line of her chin and her stubborn jaw. She'd never been a woman who blindly followed orders or instructions. Being asleep and unable to react would never be her first choice. He tried to reassure her, telling her that there was nothing to worry about. "I've arranged for your medical care and hired a bodyguard because... You know."

Though she knew that someone had run her off the road, he probably shouldn't talk about it while she was in a coma. Her brain might pick up the threat and become alarmed, pumping out spurts of adrenaline that would cause her to wake up. He should be talking about better times, evoking positive thoughts. One topic always made her happy: art.

"There's a special exhibit at that little gallery you always liked in Brooklyn," he said. "It features posters, and they even have a couple from Toulouse-Lautrec."

While the nurse unhooked one of the IV bags, Adam said, "We've got a solution."

"What does the doctor think?"

"It's got to be the sedation. It's not keeping her in the coma. I changed the IV bag on the ambulance ride to the airport." And now the nurse changed the bag again. "It's possible that the one I used didn't have the correct dosage to keep her asleep."

Connor doubted the wrong dosage was an accident. Patricia and Dr. Thorson had been near Emily in the ambulance. Either of them could easily have switched the bags. "Don't throw that bag away. There might be fingerprints."

"You got it." Adam stepped aside as the nurse prepared a hypodermic needle. "She's going to give Emily a shot that should keep her calm until we get to Denver. We're only about a half hour away."

The chopper shuddered. "Is it safe to do that while we're bouncing around?"

"Trust me," Adam said. "I'm usually in the back of an ambulance racing around hairpin turns at a million miles an hour. This chopper ride is smooth."

When a needle was jabbed into Emily's arm, Connor stared at the monitors. It was probably unreasonable to expect immediate results, but he needed some kind of reaction. How long would it take for the sedative to enter her bloodstream? When would he see the change? He needed to know.

Adam was back on the phone, talking to the doctor. He, too, watched the screens. The EEG showing brain activity continued to flare in multicolored bursts—green, red and yellow. Connor held his breath, waiting for a sign. After a few tense moments,

her blood pressure and pulse gradually started to drop.

Adam reported the numbers to the neurologist, and then he gave Connor a thumbs-up. “This seems to be working.”

Relief breezed through him. He lifted her hand and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. “You scared me, Emily.”

Her lips parted. Faint words tumbled out. “Handsome... Sleeping... Kiss.”

He leaned closer. “What is it?”

Her eyelids separated. Through the narrow slits, she stared at him. And she whispered, “Snow White... Kiss.”

Adam shoved his shoulder. “You heard the lady.”

With a smile, the nurse concurred, “Kiss her.”

Leaning over her, he planted a light kiss on her lips. This brief contact wasn’t meant to be the least bit erotic, but he felt a jolt of awareness. His senses heightened. He’d been in the dark, and now a light bulb had come on.

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