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# Vintage INTRIGUE

**Case File: Canyon Creek,  
Wyoming**

**PAULA GRAVES**

Mills & Boon Intrigue

Paula Graves

**Case File: Canyon Creek, Wyoming**

«HarperCollins»

## **Graves P.**

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What was supposed to be a quiet vacation in scenic Wyoming turned deadly when Hannah Cooper became the target of a serial killer. Although she survived the attack, the ordeal was far from over. But she wasn't alone. Not when Riley Patterson appointed himself her protector. Beneath Riley's strapping, solemn exterior hid a hard-driving sheriff who would stop at nothing to catch a killer. He promised Hannah safety, but it was the danger he posed that drew her in. Riley was as much a mystery as the man who sought to take her life. Trapped on his ranch, with no one but each other to trust, only justice could set them free...and possibly separate them forever.

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## **What if he couldn't keep her safe on his ranch?**

His hand lingered against her cheek, his touch warm and firm, full of strength tempered by gentle concern.

“It felt real,” she said, tears stinging her eyes. She'd felt the man's anger. His hate.

“Nobody's out there,” Riley assured her, pushing her wet hair out of her face.

Her breath hitched, catching somewhere in the middle of her chest.

She gazed up into his shadowed eyes, where something glittered, fierce and white-hot, stealing the air from her lungs. His fingers tangled in the hair at her temples, trapping her.

He was going to kiss her. And she was going to let him. Right now she needed comfort, she needed something good to wipe out what she'd been through, if only for a short time.

As she rose to meet him, his mouth descended, hard and hungry against hers.

She needed Riley.

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## **Case File: Canyon Creek, Wyoming**

### **Paula Graves**



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For my brother Dennis, who taught me how to fish, and whose wild imagination always sparked my own.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alabama native Paula Graves wrote her first book, a mystery starring herself and her neighborhood friends, at the age of six. A voracious reader, Paula loves books that pair tantalizing mystery with compelling romance. When she's not reading or writing, she works as a creative director for a Birmingham advertising agency and spends time with her family and friends. She is a member of Southern Magic Romance Writers, Heart of Dixie Romance Writers and Romance Writers of America.

Paula invites readers to visit her Web site, [www.paulagraves.com](http://www.paulagraves.com).

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Hannah Cooper**—After barely escaping a roadside attack, the fishing camp guide puts her vacation on hold and her life on the line to help a driven Wyoming lawman catch an elusive killer. But will she risk her heart on the widowed cowboy, as well?

**Riley Patterson**—Since his wife, Emily, was murdered three years earlier, the Wyoming cop has been obsessed with finding her killer. Hannah could be the key to solving the case—and breaking down his barriers.

**Jack Drummond**—Riley's brother-in-law is back in town for the first time since his sister's funeral. Will his new friendship with Hannah get in the way of Riley's investigation?

**Jim Tanner**—The Teton County sheriff wants Hannah to be the bait in a trap to catch the killer. Is he putting her in danger without calculating the risks?

**Joe Garrison**—Riley's boss and best friend understands Riley's driving need for justice. He needs to keep his friend from crossing the line in his hunt for the killer.

**Ken Lassiter**—Hannah's fishing client seems like an ordinary guy. But should she trust anyone while a killer is on the loose?

**Aaron Cooper**—When a Wyoming cop shows up in Alabama, warning him that his little sister is in trouble, the deputy sheriff springs into action.

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## Chapter One

The flashing blue light in the rearview mirror came out of nowhere, cutting through the cool shadows of the waning afternoon. Hannah Cooper glanced at the rental car's speedometer needle, which hovered just under sixty. The speed limit was sixty-five on this stretch of Wyoming's Highway 287, so she wasn't speeding.

Maybe he just wanted her to move aside to make it easier to pass her on the two-lane highway. She edged the Pontiac toward the narrow shoulder, but the car behind her slowed as well, making no attempt to go around her. The driver waved out the window for her to pull all the way over.

Damn it. She released a slow breath and looked for somewhere to pull to the side. The highway shoulder barely existed on this stretch of winding road, the grassy edge rising quickly to meet the dense stand of pines lining the highway. Hannah spotted a widening of the shoulder a few yards ahead. She slowed and pulled over, cutting the engine.

Tamping down a nervous flutter in her belly, she lowered the window with one hand while pulling her wallet from her purse with the other. Outside the window, footsteps approached. She turned to face the lawman. "Is something wrong?"

She got a brief glimpse of weathered jeans and a shiny silver belt buckle before the man's hand—snugly tucked into latex gloves—whipped up into the window and sprayed something wet and stinging in her face.

Her gasp of surprise drew a spray of fiery heat into her mouth and throat, and her eyes slammed closed, acid tears seeping from between her lids. Pepper spray, she realized, gagging as fire filled her lungs with every wheezing breath. Coughing, she tried to reorient herself in a world turned upside down.

She felt a rough hand on the back of her neck, pushing her forward toward the steering wheel with a sharp thrust. She threw herself sideways, avoiding all but a glancing blow of her cheekbone against the steering wheel. The shock of pain faded quickly compared to the lingering agony of the pepper spray. Panic rose as she felt the man's hand groping for her again.

Don't ever let them get you out of the car.

The warning that filled her foggy mind spoke in her brother Aaron's voice. Aaron, the cop, who never let pass any opportunity to give her advice about personal safety.

If they get you out of your car, you're dead.

The man's hand tangled briefly in her hair then retreated. A soft snapping sound outside the car made her jerk her head toward the open window, and she forced her eyelids open, blinking hard to clear her blurry vision. Through a film of white-hot pain, she saw her assailant's right hand sliding something black and metallic from a side holster.

Gun.

It snagged coming out of the holster, giving her the distraction she needed. Spotting his left hand resting on the car-door frame for balance, she rammed her elbow on to the back of his hand, crushing his fingers against the door. Something hard and metallic cracked against her elbow bone—a ring? It sent pain jarring up her arm, but she ignored it as he spat out a loud curse and pulled his hand free, just as she'd hoped.

She turned the key in the ignition. The rented Pontiac G6 roared to life and she jerked it into Drive, ramming the accelerator pedal to the floor.

The Pontiac shimmied across the sandy ground, the right back wheel teetering precariously along the edge of the dipping shoulder, but she muscled it back on to the highway and pointed its nose toward the long stretch of road ahead.

She groped on the seat next to her for the bottle of water she'd picked up from a vending machine at a gas station a few miles back. Grappling with the cap, she opened the bottle and splashed

water in her eyes, trying to wash out enough of the burning spray to help her see as she drove. It helped the stinging pain in her eyes but did nothing to stop the burning on her skin and in her nose and throat.

Think, Hannah. Think.

She felt for her purse, which held her cell phone, but it must have fallen to the floorboard. She couldn't risk trying to find it. Though she could barely see, barely breathe, she didn't dare slow down, taking the curves at scary speeds. There had to be civilization somewhere ahead, she promised herself, shivering with shock and pain. Just another mile or so....

She peered blindly at the rearview mirror, trying to see if the car with the blue light was following. She'd rounded a curve that put a hilly stand of pines between her car and the waning daylight backlighting the Wyoming Rockies. Behind her, night had already begun to fall in murky purple shadows, hiding any sign of her assailant from view. Maybe she'd bought herself enough time.

She just had to keep going. Surely somewhere ahead she'd run into people who could help her.

She wiped her watering eyes, trying to see through the gloom. More than once over the next endless, excruciating mile, she nearly drove off the road, but soon the highway curved again, and the mountains came back into view, rising with violent beauty into the copper-penny sky. And just a mile or so ahead, gleaming like a beacon to her burning eyes, a truck stop sprawled along the side of the highway.

She headed her car toward the lighted sign, daring only a quick glance in her rearview mirror. She spotted a car behind her, a black dot in the lowering darkness. It seemed to be coming fast, growing larger and more threatening as the distance between her and the truck stop diminished.

Heart pounding, Hannah rammed the accelerator to the floor again, pushing the Pontiac to its limits. It shuddered beneath her, the engine whining, but the distance to the truck stop was yards now, close enough that she could make out men milling in the parking lot.

Behind her, the pursuing car fell back, as if he realized the foolishness of trying to overtake her so close to a truck stop full of witnesses. Shaking with relief, she aimed her car at the blurry span of the truck-stop driveway.

The sun dipped behind the mountains just as she made the turn, casting a sudden shadow across the entrance. The unexpected gloom, combined with her blurred vision, hid a dangerous obstacle until it was too late. Her right front wheel hit the rocky outcropping that edged the driveway and sent the car lurching out of control.

Fighting the wheel, she managed to avoid a large gas-tanker truck parked at the far edge of the truck-stop parking lot, but a scrubby pine loomed out of the darkness right in her path. She slammed on her brakes, but it was too late.

She hit the tree head on, and the world went black.

IN CANYON CREEK, WYOMING, night had long since fallen in cool, blue shadows tinted faint purple by the last whisper of sunset rimming the ridges to the west. With sunset had come the glow of streetlamps lining Main Street, painting the sidewalks below with circles of gold.

From his office window on the second floor of the Canyon Creek Police Department, Deputy Chief Riley Patterson had a bird's-eye view of the town he protected, though few people remained in town at this time of night. Most of the stores had shut down a couple of hours earlier, though a light still glowed in the hardware store across the street. After a moment, even that light extinguished, and Riley spotted storekeeper Dave Logan locking the store's front door, his dog Rufus waiting patiently by his side.

Riley turned from the window and sank into his desk chair, his gaze lifting to the large, round clock on the wall. At seven-forty on a Tuesday evening, Riley was one of four people left in the building, but up here on the second floor, he might as well be the only person. The quiet was like a living thing this time of night, unbroken for the most part, though a few minutes earlier he'd heard the fax go off in the chief's office. He'd check it before he left for home.

He worked late most evenings, in part because he liked the quiet time to catch up on the paperwork that took up most of his time these days, but mostly because the alternative was going home to his empty house.

He worked his way through a handful of reports the day-shift officers had left on his desk, making notes on interviews that needed follow-ups and putting them in the outbox for his secretary to file in the morning. Then he leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, willing himself to grab his jacket and keys and head home before he started worrying himself the way he knew he'd begun to worry his friends and colleagues.

His desk phone rang before he could move, shattering the quiet. He dropped his feet to the floor and checked the number on the caller ID display. It was Joe Garrison, his boss and lifelong friend. Riley grabbed the receiver. "I'm about to head home, I swear—"

"Just got a call from the Teton County Sheriff," Joe interrupted briskly. "Attempted abduction on Highway 287 late this afternoon. Female victim, mid-twenties."

Riley felt a twinge of unease. "Deceased?"

"No, but I don't know any more details yet. It's Teton County's jurisdiction, but the sheriff gave me a courtesy call. His department should be faxing the details over any minute."

"The fax rang a minute ago. I'll check." Riley put Joe on hold and walked into the chief's office. He grabbed the handful of sheets from the fax tray and scanned them on the way back to his office. Standard BOLO—Be On Lookout—notice, short on details. The victim apparently hadn't gotten a good look at her attacker.

Riley reached his desk and picked up the phone. "Still there?"

"For the moment, although Jane's giving me come-hither looks that are getting a little hard to resist," Joe answered, laughter tinting his voice. "Anything on the BOLO we need to worry about?"

"According to the victim, the assailant was driving a police car, although she doesn't seem sure whether it was a marked car or not. The guy had a blue light on the roof, but it might have been a detachable one." Riley scanned further. "Not much in the way of a description, either, beyond what he was wearing."

"Odd," Joe said.

The next words Riley read made his blood go cold. A faint buzzing noise filled his ears as he read the information again.

"Riley?" Joe prodded on the other end of the line.

Riley cleared his throat, but when he spoke, his voice still came out raspy and tight. "She was pepper-sprayed. In the face."

There was a brief silence on the other end of the line while the implications sank in for Joe. A second later, he said, "I'll be there in ten minutes." He hung up without saying goodbye.

Riley put down the phone and stared at the BOLO, rereading the passage one more time to make sure he hadn't misread. But the words remained unchanged—oleoresin capsicum found on the victim's face, clothing and in her mucus and saliva.

He sank heavily into his desk chair, his hand automatically reaching for the bottom drawer to his right. He pulled it open and took out a dog-eared manila folder, the only thing that occupied the drawer. He thumbed through the familiar pages inside the file folder, searching for the three-year-old Natrona County coroner's report. His breath caught when he read the decedent's name—Patterson, Emily D.—but he dragged his gaze away from the name to the toxicology report on the pages stapled behind the death certificate.

Oleoresin capsicum. It had been found in her eyes, nose, throat and lungs, preserved, ironically, by the plastic sheeting her killer had wrapped her in before sinking her body in a lake off Highway 20.

He heard footsteps pounding up the stairs outside his office. Joe burst through the doorway, his wife, Jane, right behind him. Joe grabbed the fax pages from Riley's desk while Jane crossed to put her hand on Riley's shoulder, her green eyes warm with compassion. "You okay?" she asked.

He nodded, putting the coroner's report back into the file folder and sliding it into the open drawer.

"This is six," Joe said, settling on to the edge of Riley's desk with the fax pages in his hands.

"Six that we know of," Riley added grimly. "And we're not sure about a couple of them." The plastic sheet wrapped around the bodies of two of the victims hadn't protected them from the water where their bodies had been dumped.

"The plastic sheeting was enough of an MO for me," Joe said firmly. "If this one hadn't gotten away, she'd have shown up in a lake or river somewhere around here, wrapped in plastic, too. Maybe this time, the FBI will finally see the pattern."

The FBI didn't want to see the pattern, Riley knew. He'd tried to get the feds involved the minute he'd started piecing together the murders three years ago, when Emily had become one of the killer's victims. They hadn't been interested. "The connection was too nebulous" or some such B.S.

"I'll give Jim Tanner a call in the morning," Joe said, referring to the Teton County Sheriff. "He owes me a favor."

Jane put her hand on Riley's shoulder again. "Come home with us for dinner," she said. "It's nothing much—just some leftover barbecue, but we have plenty of it."

"Even with her eating for three," Joe added with a smile.

"Two," Jane corrected with a roll of her green eyes, "although one of us is half cowboy, so you may have a point."

Riley tried to smile at the banter, but it stung a little, even though he was happy as hell that his old friend had finally found a little happiness in his roller-coaster of a life. Seeing Joe and Jane so clearly happy, so clearly in love, was a reminder of all he'd lost three years ago when Emily had died.

"Actually, I think I'm just going to head home and try to get some sleep so I'll be fresh in the morning," he lied, even as a plan began to form in his restless mind. He gave Jane a quick kiss on the cheek and nodded toward the door. "Let's get out of here and I'll talk to you both tomorrow."

He could see a hint of suspicion in Joe's expression as the three of them walked out to the parking lot, where Joe's dark-blue Silverado was parked next to Riley's silver one. But his friend just gave a wave goodbye as Riley slid behind the truck's wheel and backed out of the parking lot.

He drove west, toward the small farmhouse located on the last parcel of what used to be his family's cattle ranch a couple of miles outside the Canyon Creek town limits. But he passed the house and kept driving west.

HANNAH WOKE TO SILENCE, her heart pounding. She lay in an unfamiliar bed, the unmistakable smell of antiseptic surrounding her. Her eyelids felt heavy and swollen, but she forced them open.

The room around her was mostly dark, only a faint sliver of light peeking under the door. A darkened television sat on a wall mount in one corner of the room. Curtained windows lined the wall beside her bed.

She was in the hospital, she remembered. She'd been attacked on the roadside and crashed while escaping. The memories returned in bright, painful fragments.

She lifted her hand to her face. The touch of her fingers to her raw skin hurt a little, though not as much as the dull ache settling in the center of her forehead. She touched the left side of her head and found a bandage there. From the wreck or from the man's attempt to slam her head into the steering wheel? Pressing lightly, she felt a sharp sting.

And how had she gotten away? She couldn't remember—

The door to the room opened, admitting a shaft of light from the hallway and the compact frame of a woman in blue scrubs. The woman crossed to her bed and pushed a button on the wall. The room filled with gentle golden light, giving Hannah a better look at her visitor.

She looked to be in her late forties, short and muscular, with sandy-brown hair and large blue eyes. A badge clipped to her belt read Lisa Raines, LPN. She smiled at Hannah as she reached for her wrist to check her pulse. “How’re you feeling, Hannah?”

“Head hurts,” Hannah croaked, her throat feeling raw.

“You took a bit of a bump. You have a concussion.” She said it with a slight chuckle.

“You’ve told me that before, huh?” Hannah shifted into a sitting position, groaning a little as the room spun around her.

“Yeah, you had a little short-term memory loss when you first got here, so you kept asking the same questions every few minutes.” Lisa slipped a blood-pressure cuff over Hannah’s arm. “You’re going to be fine, though. We didn’t find anything seriously wrong. We’re just going to keep you overnight for observation.” Lisa checked her blood pressure and took her temperature, jotting notes on her chart. “Everything’s looking normal. You must have a hard head.”

“Has anyone called my family?”

“You didn’t have any emergency contact information in your belongings. I can make a call for you if you like.”

Hannah started to shake her head no but thought better of it. She’d told her mother she’d call once she reached Jackson Hole, just to check in. If her mother didn’t hear from her soon, she might send half of her brothers north to Wyoming to find her. “Could I make the call myself?”

“Sure.” Lisa smiled and waved her hand toward the phone by the bedside. “I’ll be back in an hour to check on you again, but if you need me before then, just push the call button.”

Hannah waited for Lisa to leave before she picked up the phone and dialed her parents’ number. Her father picked up after a couple of rings.

“Hi, Dad, it’s me. I’m in Jackson.” Her voice came out much hoarser than she had intended.

“Hannah?” Her father sounded instantly suspicious. “What’s wrong with your voice?”

She couldn’t lie, now that he’d asked a direct question. “I had an accident.”

“Are you okay? Where are you calling from?”

“The hospital, but I’m okay. I promise. Nothing broken. Just a concussion, but the nurse just told me I’m doing great and I’ll be getting out of here in the morning. Can I speak to Mom a moment?”

A moment later, Beth Cooper took the phone. “Tell me everything that happened.”

Settling back against the bed pillows, Hannah told her mother about the attack and her escape, trying not to make it sound too alarming. But by the time she was finished, her mother was making plans to fly to Wyoming immediately.

Tears stinging her eyes, Hannah fought the unexpected urge to agree. “Mom, there’s no need to come up here. I’m okay, I promise. No real harm done, except to my rental car, and that’s insured. I’m going to finish out my vacation just like I planned and I’ll be home by Sunday evening.”

“That’s crazy. You get on a plane tomorrow and come home.”

The temptation to do what her mother asked alarmed Hannah. The youngest of seven, and the only girl, she’d fought hard to assert herself, to prove she could take care of herself. The last thing she needed to do now was slink home to hide beneath her family’s wings. She’d done enough of that over the past four years.

“No, I’m staying here, Mom. I need to do it.”

Her mother was silent for a moment before she answered. “Okay. You’re right. But you’ll call me every night. Fair enough?”

Hannah smiled. “Fair enough.”

“You’re a brave woman,” her mother said, her voice tinted with admiration.

“I had a good role model.” Hannah blinked back hot tears. She heard the door handle to her hospital room rattle. The door started to open. “Looks like the nurse is back, so I need to go.” She rang off and hung up the phone, turning back to face the nurse, ready to make a joke about how hard it was to get any sleep in a hospital.

But she stopped short as her visitor entered the soft cocoon of light surrounding her bed, revealing a pair of long, jean-clad legs and a shiny silver belt buckle.

Her heart rate doubling in the span of a second, she opened her mouth and screamed.

## Chapter Two

At the sound of Hannah Cooper's scream, Riley whipped around to look behind him, half-certain he'd see a crazed maniac with a gun. But all he saw was a nurse run into the room, alarm in her eyes. She pushed past Riley to her patient's side.

"Who is he?" Hannah asked the nurse, gazing at Riley with wide, frightened eyes.

The nurse looked at him over her shoulder, her expression wary. "What are you doing here? Visiting hours are over."

"I'm sorry. I should have announced myself at the nurses' station." He hadn't done so, of course, because he didn't want anyone to tell him he couldn't see Hannah Cooper. "I'm Riley Patterson with the Canyon Creek Police Department. I wanted to talk to Ms. Cooper about what happened to her this afternoon."

"The police have already spoken to her." The nurse lifted her chin, looking like a she-wolf guarding her young.

"That was the Teton County Sheriff's Department," Riley said, not ready to give up until he'd talked to the victim alone. "I want to talk to her about a similar case in my jurisdiction." That was stretching the truth a bit; none of the murders he'd been looking into over the past three years had actually happened in the Canyon Creek jurisdiction. But if nobody else in Wyoming gave a damn about connecting the dots, he was happy to make it a Canyon Creek priority.

"What do you want to know?" Hannah Cooper spoke in a raspy drawl, her voice a combination of honey and steel. Her green eyes remained wide and wary, and she hunkered deeper into the pillow behind her as he approached, but her jaw squared and she didn't turn away when he reached her bedside.

"I'm going to reach into my pocket and show you my badge first." He kept his voice low and calm. "So you'll know I am who I say I am."

She remained wary as he showed her his credentials. "The guy who attacked me was driving a cop car." Her gaze lifted defiantly to his. "You'll forgive me if I'm not particularly impressed by your badge."

Of course. He should have considered that possibility. Sliding the badge into the back pocket of his jeans, he did his best to soften his expression. "I'm sorry. I know you've been through a terrible ordeal. If you want to call the Canyon Creek Police Department, they can verify my credentials—"

"That's not necessary." Anger flashed in her eyes, although he got the feeling she was angrier at herself than at him. She pushed her hair away from her face, taking a deep breath. When she spoke again, she was calmer. "It's okay, I don't mind talking to him for a minute," she told the nurse.

The nurse slanted a look at Riley, as if she wanted to argue, but after a short nod, she left them alone.

"I apologize for barging in without any warning." Riley pulled a chair next to her bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been kicked in the head and dipped in acid."

"Pepper spray's nasty." He'd been exposed a few times, mostly in his police training. "And so's a concussion. I took a hit my senior year playing football. Kept asking the trainer what had happened every other minute for a solid half hour."

His confession elicited a tiny smile from her, the effect dazzling. Bandages, blotchy skin and red-rimmed eyes disappeared, revealing how pretty she was beneath her injuries. Her eyes were a mossy-green, her pupils rimmed by a shock of amber—cat's eyes, bright and a little mysterious. Her small, straight nose and wide, full lips might have been dainty if not for her square, pugnacious jaw. She was a scrapper. He'd known a few scrappers in his life.

Her smile faded, and he felt a surprising twinge of disappointment. Her chin dipped when she spoke. “You said there was a similar case in your jurisdiction?”

He cleared his throat. “Actually, there are a handful of cases I’ve been looking at over the past three years. Similar MO’s—women driving alone on the highway, incapacitated by pepper spray.” He didn’t add that they usually ended up dead, wrapped in plastic sheeting in some river or lake not far from the highway where they disappeared.

Her expression darkened. “How many got away like I did?”

He licked his lips and didn’t answer.

She nodded slowly. “I’m lucky, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, you are.”

She took a deep breath, coughing a little from the aftereffects of the pepper-spray attack. Her lower lip trembled a moment, but she regained control, her gaze lifting to meet his. “He tried to pull me out of the car, but I kept hearing my brother’s voice in my head. ‘Don’t let him get you out of the car.’ So I smashed my elbow against his hand where it was sitting on the window frame and I drove off as fast as I could.”

“That was smart and brave.”

“I don’t know about that,” she said faintly. “I just didn’t want to die today.”

The simple emotion in her voice tugged at his gut. Had Emily felt that way, trapped by a monster on the highway out of Casper? He knew from the autopsy that she’d fought him—her fingernails had been ripped in places, and there was some pre-mortem bruising from the struggle. Had the pepper spray incapacitated her more than it had Hannah Cooper? Had she lacked the opening that Hannah had to fight back and get away?

He rubbed his forehead, struggling against the paralyzing images his questions evoked. “I saw your statement to the Sheriff’s Department. You didn’t see your assailant’s face?”

“No. I barely saw his midsection through the window before he hit me with the pepper spray. I didn’t see much of anything after that. Just blurry images.”

“You mentioned a silver belt buckle. Can you remember what was on it?”

Her brow furrowed with tiny lines of concentration. “I just know it was silver and there was a pattern to it, but I can’t remember what it was. Maybe I didn’t get a good look.”

Though his instinct was to push her to remember more, he held his tongue. As frustrating as it was not to have all the answers right now, he reminded himself how lucky he was to have a living, breathing witness to the killer’s MO. Maybe she’d remember more as the effects of the trauma wore off.

“You look tired,” he said.

“Gee, thanks,” she muttered, and he smiled.

Behind them came a knock, then the door opened just enough for the light from the corridor to silhouette the shape of a man. The hair on the back of Riley’s neck rose. On instinct, he moved to put himself between Hannah and the visitor.

“Sorry to interrupt. I’m with hospital security. The nurse thought I should check and see if everything’s okay here.” The security guard remained in the doorway, his shoulders squared and his hands at his side, close to the unmistakable outline of his weapon holster.

“Everything’s fine,” Hannah said firmly. “Thank you.”

With a nod, the security guard closed the door behind him.

“Did the Teton County Sheriff’s Department offer to post a guard outside your door?” Riley asked.

“Why? The guy who attacked me didn’t know me. I was—what do y’all call it? A target of opportunity?”

She was right, but leaving her alone here in the hospital didn’t sit well with him. The staff had shown they had her best interests at heart, but he couldn’t shake the idea that the wily killer he’d

been looking for over the past three years wouldn't be happy leaving behind a live victim. The more time Hannah had to remember details from the attack, the more valuable she was to the police—and dangerous to the killer.

He pushed to his feet, sensing she was running out of energy. She needed her rest, and they could pick up this conversation in the morning. "I'm heading out now. You get some sleep and don't worry about any of this, okay?"

She nodded, her eyelids already starting to droop.

He slipped out of the room and headed down the hallway toward the nurses' station, where the nurse he'd met previously was making notes in a chart behind the desk. She looked up, her expression turning stern. "You didn't stress her out, did you?"

"Is there a waiting area on this floor?" he asked.

The nurse pointed out a door a few feet down the corridor.

Riley entered the room, which was mostly empty, save for a weary-looking woman stretched out across an uncomfortable-looking bench in the corner. Riley grabbed a seat near the entrance, where he could keep an eye on the door.

He hadn't wanted to worry Hannah Cooper, but it had occurred to him that, target of opportunity or not, she'd seen the killer and lived to tell.

The son of a bitch wouldn't like that one bit.

ONE OF THE DIRTY LITTLE secrets of hospitals was how shoddy hospital security was, especially in a place like Jackson, Wyoming. Jackson Memorial Hospital had a single security camera trained on the main entrance and a few guards scattered throughout the hospital in case trouble arose. If you looked like you belonged and knew where you were going, nobody gave you a second look.

That's how it worked in institutions of all sorts.

He wasn't on duty that evening, but it was a piece of cake to enter right through the front door, wearing his work garb, without anyone lifting an eyebrow. Now, he had just one more job to do to cover his tracks, and then he'd finish what he'd come here to do.

He slipped inside the empty security office and closed the door behind him.

SHE DREAMED OF HOME, with its glorious vista of blue water, green mountains and cloud-strewn skies. The lake house where she'd spent her first eighteen years of life had been built by her father's hands, with lumber and stone from right there in Gossamer Ridge, Alabama. Though she'd lived on her own for almost eight years, the lake house remained home to her, a place of refuge and a source of strength.

She didn't feel as if she was dreaming at first, the setting and companions as familiar and ordinary as the sound of her own voice. Out on the water, her brother Jake was taking a fisherman on a guided tour of the lake's best bass spots. Nearby, her brother J.D. worked on the engine of a boat moored in one of the marina berths, while his eleven-year-old son, Mike, shot a basketball through the rusty old hoop mounted on the weathered siding of the boathouse.

She basked in the sun on her skin and breathed in the earthy wildness of the woods and the water from her perch on the end of the weathered wooden pier. Her bare toes played in the warm water, drawing curious bluegills close to the surface before they darted back down to safety near the lake bottom.

Suddenly, the pier shook and creaked beneath her as footsteps approached from behind. She turned to look up at the visitor and met a pair of brilliant blue eyes gazing out from the chiseled-stone features of Riley Patterson.

"Wake up," he said. "You're in danger."

The dream images shattered, like a reflection in a pool displaced by a falling stone. She woke to the murky darkness of a hospital room filled with alien smells and furtive movements. A shadow shifted beside her in the gloom, and she heard the faint sound of breathing by her bed.

She froze, swallowing the moan of fear rising in her throat. It's a nurse, she told herself. Only a nurse. In a minute, she'll turn on the light and check my pulse.

But why hadn't the nurse left the door to the hallway open?

She felt the slightest tug on the IV needle in the back of her hand. Peering into the darkness, she caught the faint glint of the IV bag as it moved.

The intruder was putting something into her IV line.

Panic hammering the back of her throat, she swallowed hard and tried to keep her breathing steady, even though her lungs felt ready to explode. Slowly, quietly, she tugged the tube from the cannula in her right hand until she felt the cool drip of liquid spreading across the bed sheet under her arm. She had no idea where the nurse call button was, but it didn't matter anyway. She was too terrified to move again. The last thing she wanted to do was let the intruder know she was awake.

Instead, she focused on her breathing, keeping it slow and steady. In and out. Her heart was racing, her head was aching, but she kept breathing until she felt the intruder move away from her bedside. A moment later, the door to her room opened and the silhouette of a man briefly filled the shaft of light pouring inside. But he was gone before she got more than a quick impression of a solid, masculine build.

The door clicked closed and she jerked herself to a sitting position, groping for the nurse call button that hung by a cord from the side of her bed. She flicked the switch that turned on the bedside light and frantically pressed the call button.

A few seconds later, a woman's tinny voice came through the call-button speaker. "Yes?"

"Someone just came into my room and tried to put something in my IV line," she said, her voice shaking.

After a brief pause, the nurse's voice came through the speaker again. "I'll be right there."

A few seconds later, the door opened and a nurse hurried inside. She hit the switch by the door, flooding the room with light. Her brow furrowing, she looked at the tube Hannah had extracted from the cannula. "Are you sure someone was in here?" she asked, checking the IV bag.

"He was standing right there. He put something in that port thing." Hannah pointed toward the bright orange injection port positioned a few inches below the IV bag.

The nurse's frown deepened.

The door to the room whipped open and Riley Patterson entered, his tense blue eyes meeting Hannah's. "What's going on? I saw the nurse run in here—"

Hannah watched him close the distance between them, unsettled by how glad she was to see the Wyoming lawman again. The memory of her dream, of his quiet warning, flashed through her mind, and she felt the sudden, ridiculous urge to fling herself in his arms and thank him for saving her life.

Instead, she murmured, "I thought you went home."

"You thought wrong," he said drily. "What happened?"

She told him what she'd just experienced, watching with alarm as his expression darkened. "I wasn't imagining it," she said defensively.

He looked at her. "I didn't say you were."

"I'll call security," the nurse said, heading for the door.

"I think we should call the Teton County Sheriff's Department, too." Riley reached for the phone.

"So you believe me?" Hannah pressed.

"Any reason I shouldn't?" He started dialing a number.

Hannah sank back against her pillows, reaction beginning to set in. She tried to hold back the shivers, but it was like fighting an avalanche. By the time Riley hung up the phone and turned around, her teeth were chattering wildly.

He sat beside her on the bed and took her hands in his. “It’s okay. You’re going to be okay.”

His eyes were the color of the midday sky, clear and brilliant blue. They were a startling spot of color in his lean, sun-bronzed face. He seemed hewn of stone, his short-cropped hair the rusty color of iron ore, his shoulders as broad and solid as a block of granite. His lean body could have been chiseled from the rocky outcroppings of the Wyoming mountains. He had cowboy written all over him.

Aware she was staring, she looked down at his hands enveloping hers. They were large, strong and work-roughened. A slim gold band encircled his left ring finger.

She tugged her hands away, acutely aware of her own bare ring finger. “I should have screamed. I let him get away.”

“There are probably security cameras around. He took a big risk coming after you here.”

“He was so calm.” She gripped the bed sheets to keep her traitorous fingers from reaching for his hands again, though she felt absurdly adrift without his reassuring touch. “His actions were furtive, but he didn’t seem nervous.”

“Did you see anything about him?”

“It was too dark. I saw his outline when he slipped out the door—definitely male.”

“My size?”

She let her gaze move a little too slowly over his hard, lean frame. Chiding herself mentally, she shook her head. “Heavier. More muscle-bound or something. Probably your height, maybe an inch or two taller.” She pressed her lips together to stop her chattering teeth. “I should have made noise, gotten the nurses in here—”

“If you’re right about what you saw, the man came here to kill you. Making a noise only would have made it happen faster.” He briefly touched her hand where the cannula remained, unattached to the IV tube. “You got that tube out. You saved yourself, and nobody could expect anything more.”

He was saying all the right things, but she heard disappointment in his voice. Clearly, finding the man who’d attacked her was more than just another case to him.

She’d always been insanely curious—nosy, her brothers preferred to call it—but something kept her from asking any more questions of Riley Patterson. She sensed that pushing him for more information would make him back off. She couldn’t afford for him to back off.

A man had tried to kill her twice in one day, and she had a feeling Riley Patterson might be the only person who could stop him if he tried it a third time.

JOE GARRISON ARRIVED not long after the Teton County Sheriff’s Department detectives. Riley caught his boss’s eye as he entered Hannah Cooper’s room, motioning him over with a twitch of his head. Joe met him in the corner, his gaze wandering across the small room to where Hannah Cooper sat in a chair by her empty bed, her green-eyed gaze following the activity of the evidence techs who were processing the scene.

“The Teton County Sheriff’s Department wants her in protective custody, but she’s refusing,” Riley said. “She said she’d rather go home early tomorrow and forget all about this.”

“You don’t want her to leave.”

Riley met his friend’s understanding gaze. “She saw the guy. Maybe she didn’t see his face, but she’s the only living witness, and she’s about to fly back home to Alabama.”

“You can’t keep her here against her will.”

Riley pressed his hands against his gritty eyes. “I can’t let her leave.”

Joe’s answer was dry as a desert. “So kidnap her and hold her hostage.”

Riley slanted a look at his boss. “Did you drive all the way here to give me a hard time or are you going to help me figure out how to keep her in Wyoming?”

“Do you want me to arrest her or something?”

“Could we?” Riley glanced at Hannah, only half-joking. She looked calm now, more curious than worried, her slim fingers playing absently with the hem of her hospital gown, tugging it down over her knees.

“Maybe you should tell her why you’re so desperate to solve this case.”

Riley looked back at Joe. “Tell her about Emily?”

Joe nodded.

Riley looked at Hannah again and found her returning his gaze. After a couple of seconds, she looked away.

“Maybe if she knew how many victims we could be talking about, and the way they were killed...” Riley said softly.

“You want to scare her into staying?”

“Maybe she’ll want to help.”

Joe arched one eyebrow. “At the risk of her own life?”

Riley sighed. “You’re just a wellspring of optimism.”

“You want a yes man, you called the wrong guy.” Joe thumped Riley on the arm. “But maybe you’re right. The Teton County Sheriff’s Department doesn’t know what we know about these murders. They’re not giving her the whole picture. I guess you could lay the truth on her and let her make an informed choice.” Joe’s gaze shifted as the hospital-room door opened and a tall, rangy lawman entered. “There’s Jim Tanner.”

As Joe left Riley to greet the Teton County Sheriff, Riley crossed to the chair where Hannah sat. She looked up at him, a dozen questions swirling behind her eyes. He smiled slightly and crouched beside her. “Three-ring circus.”

“I’ll be glad to be out of it,” she admitted. “I get the feeling the police aren’t taking me very seriously. I think they think I’m just paranoid.”

“It shouldn’t take that long to find out what the guy put in your IV tube. I heard them say the lab is working on it right now.”

“They just want to prove it was nothing so they can pat me on the head and tell me it was just a dream.”

Riley had a feeling she was right. “I don’t think it was just a dream.”

She shot him a look of pure gratitude. “I wasn’t asleep. I know what I saw. And all that’s supposed to be in that IV is saline, so there’s no reason for anyone to put anything else into it.”

“You don’t have to convince me.”

She lowered her voice, eyeing the technician standing nearby. “Nobody in the Teton County Sheriff’s Department said anything about multiple murders.”

He couldn’t hold back a little smile. “Yeah, I know.”

“But you disagree?”

He lowered his voice, too. “I’ve been tracking a series of murders, one or two a year, for the last three years. All across Wyoming, east to west, north to south. Women driving alone, disappearing en route from one place to another. Their bodies are later found wrapped in plastic, dumped in a lake, river or other body of water. Three of the six showed traces of pepper spray around the mouth, nose and eyes. The other bodies had too much weather exposure to take a sample.”

Hannah’s face went pale, but she didn’t look away. “If I hadn’t gotten away—”

He didn’t finish the thought for her. He didn’t need to.

The door to the room opened, and a woman in a white coat entered, carrying a file folder. She crossed to speak to Jim Tanner, whose brow furrowed deeply the longer she spoke. Joe looked across the room at Riley, his expression grim. Riley’s stomach twisted into a knot.

Joe and Sheriff Tanner crossed to Hannah’s side. Riley stood to face them.

“The lab report on the IV tube is back,” Tanner said.

“And?” Hannah asked.

His expression grew hard. “There was enough digoxin in that tube to kill you in a matter of minutes.”

## Chapter Three

The buzz of urgent conversation surrounding her seemed to fade around Hannah as she took in Sheriff Tanner's quiet announcement.

Her attacker had tried to kill her. Again.

It had to be the same guy, right? It wasn't likely two different people would go after a nobody tourist like her. But why? She hadn't even seen him, really. She could remember almost nothing about him. Why did he consider her a threat?

She looked around for Riley Patterson, the closest thing to a familiar face in the room. His ice-blue eyes met hers, his expression grim but somehow comforting. He crouched beside her again, one hand resting on her forearm. "You okay?"

She nodded quickly, forcing her chin up. "I just want to know how he could get to me so easily."

"So do we," Sheriff Tanner assured her. "I've sent a man to check with hospital security. But I don't have much hope. This is a small hospital, and Jackson Hole's a pretty laid-back place. There's not much security in place here."

"He thinks he's invincible," Riley said softly. "He's gotten away with everything so far."

"Joe tells me you two think this attack is connected to other murders in the state," Sheriff Tanner said.

Riley glanced at Hannah. She could tell he didn't want to talk about this in front of her. He hadn't given her many details about the other cases he'd been investigating, though what he'd told her had been horrifying enough.

"I've made file folders full of notes," he told Sheriff Tanner. "I don't mind sharing. The more people looking for this guy, the better."

The Teton County sheriff studied Riley, his eyes narrowed, then turned his gaze to the lanky, dark-haired man Riley had introduced as his boss, Joe Garrison. "You vouch for this, Garrison?"

Joe nodded. "Riley's right. This guy has struck before, and he'll do it again if we don't stop him."

Sheriff Tanner didn't look happy to hear Joe's affirmation. "Okay, send me copies of your notes, and I'll put a detective on it. See if we can't tie it to any open cases we're working on."

"Cold cases, too. I've only been keeping notes since three years ago, but I think it could go back further," Riley said.

"Why three years ago?" Hannah asked.

Joe and Sheriff Tanner both turned to look at Riley, but Riley kept his eyes on Hannah, his expression mask-like.

When he didn't answer, she rephrased the question. "You said you've been keeping notes for only three years. What happened to make you start?"

Riley held her gaze a long moment, then looked down at his hands. He flexed his left hand, the ring on the third finger glinting as it caught the light. He spoke in a soft, raspy voice. "Three years ago, the son of a bitch murdered my wife."

Riley's words felt like a punch to Hannah's gut. No wonder he seemed personally involved in this case. "I'm sorry."

He acknowledged her condolences with a short nod, his mouth tightening. "I want this guy caught even more than you do," he added softly, as if the words were meant for her ears alone.

She swallowed hard, remembering how just a little while ago, she wanted nothing more than to catch the next plane home to Alabama. A part of her still did.

She'd done a lot of running home over the last four years.

But knowing what she now knew, could she really run away? She was possibly the only living witness who could identify a cold-blooded murderer.

A murderer who'd killed Riley Patterson's wife.

“Excuse me?”

Hannah turned at the sound of a new voice. The doctor who’d treated her in the Emergency Room when she arrived at the hospital stood nearby, his expression concerned.

“I’d like to check on my patient,” he said firmly.

Riley stepped between the doctor and Hannah. “Mind if I see your ID?”

The look on the doctor’s face almost made Hannah laugh. “Mind if I see yours?”

Riley had his badge out before the request was finished. The doctor’s mouth quirked. Once he’d studied Riley’s credentials, he held out his name tag for Riley’s inspection. “James Andretti,” he said aloud. “I’ve been working here for ten years. Ask anyone.”

“He treated me in the E.R.” Hannah touched Riley’s arm. He retreated, though he didn’t look happy about it.

“I’d like to check on my patient,” Dr. Andretti repeated, giving Riley a pointed look. “Can you clear the room?”

“It’s a crime scene,” Riley said.

“It’s also a hospital room.”

Sheriff Tanner stepped in. “The techs have processed the areas around the bed. We’ll step out a few minutes and let the doctor do his business. When he’s done, I’ll be back in to talk to you, Ms. Cooper.”

Hannah gave a nod, darting a look at Riley. She found his gaze on her, his expression impossible to read. But when the other police personnel left her room, he followed, leaving her alone with the doctor.

Dr. Andretti pulled out his stethoscope and bent to listen to Hannah’s heart through her hospital gown. “Heart rate’s a little elevated, but I guess that’s to be expected. How’s your head feeling?”

“Better, actually,” Hannah admitted. The headache that had plagued her earlier in the evening had faded to nothing.

He had her follow his fingers as he moved them in front of her face. “No double vision, no more memory lapses?”

“Nope.”

“Good. Looks like we’ll spring you in the morning. But I think we should move you to another room so you can get some rest.”

“Do I really need to be here at all?” she asked.

“That’s how we usually handle a concussion.”

“But I’m not symptomatic anymore, right? You only kept me for observation and you just said I’m doing fine.”

The doctor shot her a questioning look.

“Somebody’s already gotten to me here tonight. I’m not that comfortable hanging around to let them have another shot.”

“I can have a security guard posted at your door.”

“You don’t know one of your guards isn’t behind this. Or even another doctor or nurse,” she pointed out.

Dr. Andretti bristled visibly. “That’s not likely.”

Hannah sighed. “Maybe not. I just want to get out of here. I don’t have to have your permission to check out, do I?”

“No—”

“Then arrange it. Please.”

“What are you going to do when you leave? It’s four in the morning. No motels worth staying in are going to let you check in at this hour. Assuming you can even find a room available.”

“I just want out of here.” A tingle of panic was beginning to build in the center of her chest. The thought of staying in this room until the next day was unbearable.

“Why don’t I go get the nice police officers to tell you why leaving right now would be a very big mistake?” Dr. Andretti suggested, making a final note in her chart and tucking it under his arm. “You stay put.”

He left her alone in the hospital room, which now looked like a war zone, thanks to the handiwork of the evidence technicians. She tucked her knees up to her chin and closed her eyes, feeling as tired as she could ever remember. But she couldn’t afford to fall asleep.

Not in this place, surrounded by people she didn’t know and couldn’t trust.

“SIX MURDERS DON’T SEEM like much over three years,” Jim Tanner said, passing Riley a cup of lukewarm coffee from the half-empty carafe on the break-room hotplate. “I thought serial murderers tend to escalate, but this guy’s pretty steady at two a year.”

“Well, Hannah would have been three this year.” Riley grimaced at the taste of the stale coffee.

“So he’s escalating...slowly?” Tanner looked skeptical.

“There may be others. These are the ones I’ve been able to glean from relatively public sources.”

“You’d think the feds would be all over this.”

“Some of the links are nebulous,” Joe said, refusing Tanner’s offer of coffee. “We’ve only linked three of the murders to pepper-spray attacks. Two years ago there were two instances, and one last year. And what happened to Hannah.”

“All six of the murder victims were wrapped in plastic sheeting and dumped in bodies of water,” Riley pointed out. “All six were killed by ligature strangulation.”

“That’s not an unusual mode of murder. Same ligature used each time?”

“No,” Riley admitted. “I think he uses weapons of opportunity.”

“Victims of opportunity, weapons of opportunity—” Tanner shook his head. “Yeah, I could see the FBI needing more.”

Riley glanced at Joe. Did his old friend secretly agree with Jim Tanner and the FBI about the scarcity of connections between the cases? Was he simply humoring Riley out of loyalty?

Tanner put his cup down on the Formica counter. “You know what? You clearly believe the cases are linked, and I’m not one to blow off a fellow cop who’s having a hunch. I’ll put one of my guys on the cold cases in our jurisdiction, see if any of them match any of your criteria. Maybe it’ll help flesh out the body of evidence. You never know.”

Riley gave the Teton County chief a grateful half smile. “I appreciate it.”

“Sheriff Tanner?”

Riley turned and saw Hannah’s doctor approaching, a frown creasing his forehead.

“Can I help you?” Tanner asked.

“Ms. Cooper is asking to leave the hospital early. Now, in fact. She feels uncomfortable remaining here.”

Riley’s stomach tightened. “Did you leave her alone?”

“I posted a guard outside, but—”

Riley didn’t wait for the rest of his sentence, pushing past Joe and heading back to Hannah’s room. He didn’t see a guard outside her door, or any other door lining the corridor.

His heart rate climbing, Riley pushed open the door to Hannah’s room and almost bumped into the guard standing just inside. He was a slim man in his early twenties, with crow-black hair and sun-bronzed skin. He was laughing as he turned to look at Riley.

Riley pushed past him, putting himself firmly between the guard and Hannah. “Are you okay?” he asked her, keeping his eyes on the guard, whose brow furrowed at Riley’s question.

“I’m fine. Charlie was just introducing himself, since he was going to be my babysitter.” Humor and annoyance tinted Hannah’s whiskey drawl. “I was just telling him I’m thinking of digging a tunnel out.”

Riley arched an eyebrow at the guard. “Shouldn’t you be frisking me or something? Checking my ID?”

Charlie looked suitably crestfallen.

“He’s messing with you,” Hannah said. “Riley, leave him alone.”

“Go stand guard outside and don’t let anyone in without checking ID,” Riley told the younger man, his tone firm. Charlie quickly obeyed.

Riley turned to look at Hannah, who still sat in the chair by the window. Her knees were tucked up against her chest, her chin resting atop them as she gazed at him with sleepy green eyes. He felt a funny twisting sensation in his gut. “You look wiped out.”

“Always with the compliments,” she said around a yawn.

“Your doctor says you want out of here.”

“Ya think?”

He managed a smile at the crack. “There won’t be any flights out before 8:00 a.m. What do you plan to do, camp out in the airport where you don’t know a soul?”

“I’m camped out in a hospital where I don’t know a soul. At least at the airport I wouldn’t be wearing a cotton smock with an open back.”

There was a quiet knock on the hospital-room door, and a moment later, Joe Garrison and Jim Tanner entered, followed by one of the Teton County evidence technicians holding a notebook computer.

“Trammell here has a copy of the only security-camera footage available,” Tanner said, motioning for Trammell to set up the notebook computer on the over-bed table at the foot of the hospital bed. “I want you to watch and see if anyone looks familiar.”

“I didn’t get a good look at him either time.”

“You can at least eliminate people by body type. It can’t hurt.”

Riley and Joe gathered around the computer as Trammell hit play. Riley felt a prickle of warmth down the left side of his body and turned to find Hannah sitting closer to him, like a kitten curling up next to a heat source. The mental image amused him.

He reached behind her to grab the blanket wadded near the foot of the bed and caught a glimpse of golden skin peeking out the back of her hospital gown.

She smiled her appreciation when he tucked the blanket around her, then turned back to the computer. “What are we looking at?” she asked Trammell.

“This is the front entrance,” Trammell pointed to a pair of glass doors center frame. “We asked for everything from about an hour before you arrived to the time you called the nurse’s station around 1:00 a.m.” He pointed to another button. “Click that button and it’ll fast-forward the images. Click that one and it’ll pause the image.”

It was easy to fast-forward the video; about half the visitors could be eliminated by their sex, others by age or build. Hannah stopped the video three times, but each time she shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

Riley frowned, something on the video catching his eye. “The hell?” He reached across and hit the pause button, then touched another to reverse the video.

“What is it?” Hannah asked.

“I’m not sure—” He saw the flicker again and hit pause.

“Oh,” Hannah said, her voice tinted with surprise.

On the screen, the tip of one dark boot was visible just past the edge of the mottled carpet in front of the lobby door.

“Well, hell.” Tanner grimaced at the screen.

“Someone tampered with the recording.” Riley looked at Joe, whose blue eyes had darkened.

“Son of a bitch,” Jim Tanner growled.

“How did he manage that?” Hannah asked.

Riley laid his hand on her shoulder. She gave a little trembling jerk, turning her head to look up at him. He gave her shoulder a squeeze and felt her relax under his touch.

Tanner released a deep sigh and turned to look at them. “Inside job?”

Joe nodded. “Probably. It’s where I’d start looking for sure.”

“But why would someone who worked here want to hide his image? It’s not like it would raise an alarm,” Hannah said.

“Unless they tampered with the image to throw us off,” Riley countered. As convoluted as that possibility sounded, he wouldn’t put it past their target to be just that devious.

“I’ll get a list of all the personnel, then. Security, medical staff, sanitation, the whole lot.” Tanner clapped his technician on the shoulder. “Trammel, I want the original footage sent to the crime lab in Cheyenne. See if those fellows can get anything out of it.”

Trammell nodded, grabbed his computer and left.

Tanner looked at Hannah. “I think you’re right, Ms. Cooper. It’s not a good idea for you to stay here tonight. I can set you up in protective custody here in Jackson—”

Hannah turned and looked at Riley. “You said I’m the only one who ever got away.”

“That we know of,” Riley agreed.

“I’m the only one who’s seen him.” Her voice softened even more. She moved away from them, toward the window, her arms wrapped around her as if she felt a sudden chill. The movement spread the back of her hospital gown even wider, baring more of the golden skin on her back and the sweet curve of her bottom beneath the cotton of her pale-blue panties.

Riley felt a flutter low in his belly and clamped his teeth together, surprised by his body’s traitorous response. He cleared his throat and glanced at Joe and Jim Tanner. Both men were looking at him rather than Hannah’s pretty backside, which made him feel like even more of a slug.

“Have you talked to her doctor?” Joe asked Tanner in a faint murmur. “What are the chances of her getting back more memories of the attack?”

“Nobody knows,” Tanner admitted. “Head injuries are unpredictable. She might never remember anything more than she’s told us.”

“There might not be anything more to remember,” Joe said grimly. “I hoped when we learned there was a living witness—”

“We know a lot more than we did,” Riley pointed out, glancing at Hannah again. She’d turned and was watching them whisper among themselves, her eyes slightly narrowed.

“I’m still here in the room,” she said aloud, making the other men look at her as well. “Since I’m pretty sure you’re talking about me, why don’t y’all tell me what’s on your minds?”

Riley walked toward her slowly. “We were discussing what you do and don’t remember about the attack.”

“Not much,” she admitted, her voice apologetic. “I’d hoped that I’d remember more once the symptoms of the concussion passed, but I come back to the same thing. I didn’t get a good look at him when he pulled me over. I remember jeans and a silver belt buckle. He seemed fit—muscular, or at least that’s the impression I got before he sprayed me in the face with pepper spray. It happened so fast.”

Riley touched her shoulder again. “You told us he posed as a cop. That’s something we didn’t know before, and I think it could be important.” If nothing else, it suggested the man might have some law-enforcement experience, or at least more understanding of police work than the average citizen.

“What if it’s not enough?” Hannah asked. “What if I fly out of here tomorrow and nothing changes? What if he goes on killing people?”

Riley frowned, not following. “We keep looking for him anyway.”

She looked up at him suddenly, her green eyes bright with an emotion he couldn’t identify. “I’m the only living witness. If I leave—”

She didn't finish the sentence, but Riley finally understood what she was getting at. "If you leave, it could hamper the investigation," he admitted aloud.

Her head lowered, her back slumping as if it suddenly bore a terrible weight. Riley felt a rush of pity for her, for he had some idea of what she was feeling. It was a horrible thing, carrying the burden of six unsolved murders, knowing that it fell on you to bring them justice and closure.

"I can't leave Wyoming, can I?" she asked softly.

He didn't answer, knowing it was a question she had to answer herself.

Her tongue ran lightly over her lips and he saw her throat bob as she swallowed. When she looked up at him again, her gaze was solemn but direct. "I have five more days left of my vacation. I can't stay forever, but I can give you those five days. Maybe it'll be enough."

"We can put you in protective custody," Jim Tanner offered.

"She needs to go somewhere the killer doesn't expect her to be." Riley glanced at Joe.

"Somewhere small and off the beaten path?" Joe asked, his voice faintly dry.

Riley shrugged and turned back to Hannah. "Canyon Creek is about an hour and a half from here, in ranching country. I have a place there. Plenty of room. Great view."

Hannah's brow creased. "You want me to stay alone with you? I don't even know you."

"You don't have to know me. You just have to trust me."

The room fell silent as Hannah considered his words. The walls seemed to close in around them, every molecule, every atom focused on her words.

He wasn't sure what he wanted her answer to be, now that he'd made the offer. He'd lived alone for three years, his home both a refuge and a prison since Emily's death. He'd found a certain familiar comfort in his loneliness, Emily's absence so powerful it became a tangible thing he could hold on to when the nights were dark and long. He hadn't let anyone intrude on his solitude in a long time.

Hannah would change that. How could she not?

Hannah released a long, deep breath and looked up at them. "Okay."

Riley felt as if the ground was crumbling beneath his feet.

"Let's do it," she said, her chin high. "Let's go to Canyon Creek."

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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