

ALSO BY IRIS JOHANSEN

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Your Next Breath

Sight Unseen (with Roy Johansen)

Live to See Tomorrow

Silencing Eve

Hunting Eve

Taking Eve

Sleep No More

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Bonnie

Quinn

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The Killing Game

The Face of Deception

And Then You Die

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Midnight Warrior

The Beloved Scoundrel

The Magnificent Rogue

The Tiger Prince

Last Bridge Home

The Golden Barbarian


Reap the Wind

Storm Winds

The Wind Dancer

HIDE AWAY

IRIS JOHANSEN

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CHAPTER

1

COMMUNITY HOSPITAL OF THE MONTEREY
CARMEL, CALIFORNIA

She was alone.

She mustn't panic. After all, she was eleven years old and had been taught to take care of herself. She had always been told that someday she might have to face this.

Cara Delaney leaned back against the door after leaving Eve Duncan's hospital room and tried to smother the fear that was surging through her. Her heart was beating hard and her throat was tight. They were going to send her away. It was all very well to tell herself she had known that it might happen someday, but it still came as a shock. She wasn't ready to face it yet.

But she'd better get ready. She'd been on the run most of her life and should have been prepared for the day that there would be no one here to help her. Her sister, Jenny, had been killed; Elena, who had cared for Cara since she was born, had been killed. Now Cara was the only one left, and if Eve had decided she didn't want her, she'd have to find a way to face the loneliness and protect herself.

What was she thinking? Cara thought in sudden disgust. She had been feeling so sorry for herself that she had forgotten that it was Eve that she was supposed to be worrying about. It was Eve who had to

be taken care of as Cara had promised. Jenny had died so that Cara could live and so had Elena. Now it was Cara's turn to give back.

She drew a deep breath and opened her hands, which had been clenched into fists. She could work through this, she just couldn't give up. There had to be a way . . .

"Cara?"

Margaret Douglas was walking down the corridor toward her, a concerned look on her face. Margaret was Eve's friend, and she had taken over Cara's supervision to keep her out of the hands of Child Services. She had been kind to Cara since Eve had been in the hospital, and Cara liked her. But Cara didn't want kindness now.

She wanted to go back into that room from which Joe Quinn had sent her and start the battle to keep her place at Eve's side.

What on earth had happened to Cara, Margaret thought. Her gaze was fixed worriedly on the child's face as she came down the hall toward her. Cara's lips were tight, and there was a tension about the muscles of her shoulders. Maybe it was just the accumulated trauma of the last days that had finally hit home. What wouldn't be wrong with an eleven-year-old child who had gone through what Cara had suffered in the last few days, much less her short life, Margaret thought bitterly. She and her sister, Jenny, were the daughters of Juan Castino, the kingpin of a drug cartel in Mexico City, and they had been kidnapped as an act of vengeance by Salazar, the leader of a rival drug cartel. Jenny had been killed, and Cara had been taken on the run by her nurse, Elena, for eight long years. Just a few days ago, Elena had been murdered by a hit man, James Walsh, hired by Salazar to find them. Cara had later been cornered by Walsh, who had come close to killing her. Only Eve's intervention had prevented it, but it had landed her in this hospital with a concussion. Yes, Cara had every reason to look tense.

"Hey, what's the problem?" Margaret stopped in front of Cara and smiled gently. "Anything I can do to help?"

Cara shook her head. "I don't think so. I think it has to be me. Something has gone wrong. I could tell when Joe Quinn came into Eve's room and sent me out here. It's probably about me. He said it wasn't and that I didn't do anything wrong. But what else could it be?" Her hazel eyes were glittering with moisture. "Eve said they were going to take me home with them for a while. But Joe probably thinks that the reason Eve was hurt was because of me. He's right, you know."

Margaret reached out and gently touched the child's dark hair. "You don't know that he's upset with you, Cara. Joe is very fair. He knows that Eve does what she thinks is right, and nothing stops her. Yes, she was hurt trying to save your life. But Joe was there almost immediately afterward, and he was concerned for you as well as Eve." She cupped Cara's thin shoulders in her hands. "We were all concerned. It was a nightmare finding you and trying to keep you safe from that horrible man. There was no way Eve was going to stop."

"I know," Cara whispered. "Jenny said to trust Eve, that she would never stop until I was safe."

Margaret stiffened. "Jenny? Cara, your sister, Jenny is—" She hesitated. There was no other way to put it. "Jenny isn't with us. She died eight years ago."

Cara nodded. "I know that, but she . . . I dream about her." She looked at Margaret defiantly. "And she doesn't seem . . . Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Who, me?" She brushed the hair back from Cara's face. So much intensity in that small face, those wide-set hazel eyes that were more green than brown. The winged brows and pointed chin. In the few days since she'd come to know the child, she'd become aware of how much emotion and intensity lay behind that usually reserved expression. Intensity and strength. Strange to think of a child as being strong, but Cara's life had been different from that of other children. She'd had to be strong and enduring to bear the constant change and terror of being on the run. Even now when Walsh, the man who'd been

hunting her had been killed, she knew she wasn't safe, that there might be another killer on the horizon. That life had made Cara mature beyond her years, and Margaret was constantly finding out new and different facets to her character. "I'm the last one to think anyone is crazy because of a few dreams. A lot of people think I'm a little weird because I don't march to their drummers."

"You don't seem weird," Cara said. "You seem . . . nice."

"One doesn't exclude the other. You seem nice, too." She stepped back. "And a dream can just be a memory."

"Yeah," Cara nodded. "But it seems like more." She paused. "I think Eve dreams about Jenny, too."

"It wouldn't surprise me. Eve has a kind of sensitivity to people like us. That's why I get along so well with her." She added gently, "I know this is all strange to you, Cara. *We're* strange to you. It's only been a couple days since you met all of us. We blew into your life at a time when everything was terrible and scary. You even lost your best friend, Elena, to that monster who was hunting you. You probably don't know whom to trust or how to react to all of us. You don't know where you're going next."

"You're wrong. I know where I'm going." Cara looked over her shoulder at the door of Eve's room. "I'm going with her. I have to take care of her. She needs me."

Margaret's brows rose. "Really? Everyone needs affection. But other than that, Eve's pretty strong, Cara."

"I have to take care of her," she repeated. "I promised Jenny."

"In that dream you had?"

She didn't answer directly. "I promised her." She went on in a rush, "And, like I said, Eve was going to let me stay with her and Joe for a while. She said so." She was frowning. "But when Joe came into the room a few minutes ago, I could tell that he was upset. Maybe he changed his mind."

"I doubt it." She tilted her head curiously. "What would you do if he did?"

“I’d go with her anyway. I’d find a way.” Her gaze was still fixed on the door. “I have to take care of her.”

Determination, intensity, and total commitment. Margaret shook her head with amazement. All of them had been so focused on finding and saving Cara during these last weeks that they had been thinking of her as helpless. She might have been in danger, but there was nothing helpless about this child. “Well, soon she’ll be out of the hospital and on her way home. She won’t need taking care of.” She smiled. “Though I’m sure that she’ll still want your company, Cara. You’re jumping to conclusions. Come on, let’s go to the waiting room and I’ll buy you a soda.”

She thought Cara was going to refuse, but then the girl turned away from Eve’s door. “Okay. I can’t do anything right now anyway.”

“Very sensible,” Margaret said, as they strolled down the hall. “There’s probably not going to be anything to do anyway. Maybe it’s your imagination.”

“No,” Cara said soberly. “It’s not imagination.” She glanced back over her shoulder at Eve’s door. “Joe was . . . tense. Something is wrong . . .”

MEXICO CITY, MEXICO

Something was wrong, Alfredo Salazar thought impatiently. In his last report, Walsh had told him that he had located Castino’s kid and that bitch, Elena Pasquez, who had hidden her all these years, and that they’d be dead within days.

Why the hell hadn’t he heard from him? It was making him damn uneasy. He’d been losing faith in James Walsh lately, but there was no doubt he was an expert once he set his sights on a victim. What could have gotten in his way?

Or who?

He reached in his desk drawer and pulled out the dossiers he'd compiled from the reports Walsh had given him.

Eve Duncan. Joe Quinn. Cara Delaney.

There were other dossiers but none as important as those three.

Eve Duncan, forensic sculptor who had restored the skull of Jenny Castino after her bones had been recently unearthed. He glanced at her photo. Not to his taste. Slim, red-brown hair with hazel eyes. An attractive, interesting face, but he preferred exotic and voluptuous. Evidently she was brilliant because she was considered one of the world's most gifted forensic sculptors.

Also very determined and stubborn. He'd warned Walsh that he should get rid of her before she got in his way. But she was an artist, a sculptor, and not equipped to go up against an enforcer of Walsh's capabilities.

He glanced at the Joe Quinn dossier. Brown hair, brown eyes, strong jaw. Detective with the ATLPD, ex-FBI, ex-SEAL. He had lived with Eve Duncan for a number of years and was said to be extremely loyal to her. He was undoubtedly deadly and capable of interfering with Walsh.

He glanced at the photo of the child. Cara had only been three when Walsh had taken her from the Castino home. Her sister Jenny had been nine, but they'd had the same high cheekbones and winged brows. That damn Eve Duncan had reproduced Jenny's features almost exactly when she'd been sent that skull of the skeleton buried in northern California and found by the Sheriff's Department. Now Walsh was sure that she was trying to locate Jenny's sister, Cara.

Which could mean disaster for Salazar.

And he wasn't about to sit here and wait any longer for word from Walsh. If he hadn't completed the kill, it was time he was taken out himself.

He reached for his phone.

It rang before he could dial.

Ramon Franco.

Which did not bode well. When Salazar had begun to have his doubts about Walsh's efficiency, Franco was the young man Salazar had sent to shadow him and make certain he was performing effectively.

"Walsh is dead," Ramon Franco said harshly as soon as Salazar picked up the call. "Killed. I just found out last night, and I've been scrambling to get information. I told you that you should have sent me to take care of that kid. He bungled the kill, and now there are police all over the place. We'll be lucky if they don't trace anything back to you."

Son of a bitch!

Salazar's hand tightened on the phone as the fury tore through him. "That can't happen. I've spent eight years covering Walsh's incompetence. I won't let that bastard's death toss me into Castino's jaws for him to chew up. Who killed him?"

"Eve Duncan."

So he had been wrong. Evidently the artist had a few more lethal skills than her credentials suggested. He had warned Walsh that she was a possible problem when the woman had gone on the hunt for him after he had stolen her reconstruction of Castino's daughter's skull. Now she was no longer a problem; she was a major pain in the ass. "For God's sake, Duncan is only a forensic sculptor, and she managed to put down Walsh? How many people has Walsh killed over the years? He should have been able to squash her like a bug. How did it happen?"

"It could have been an accident. Her statement to the police claimed they were fighting on the high ledge of a cave, and he backed off and fell to his death." He added, "Or she might have outsmarted him. Castino's other daughter, Cara, was in the cave, and you told me she was the target."

"The last target," Salazar said bitterly. "And Walsh couldn't even manage to find and kill an eleven-year-old kid."

"He found her in that cave, but he couldn't finish the job. Eve

Duncan got in the way. He managed to kill her nursemaid, Elena Pasquez, but no one else. I would never have let that happen.”

“And when the police start digging into who that kid really is, they’ll toss her back to her father, Castino, and he’ll go after me. He’s just waiting for a chance to break the coalition agreement.”

“Then we have to make sure he doesn’t have a reason to do it until we’re strong enough to bury him and all the rest of the men in his damn cartel. Give me the word and I’ll erase Walsh’s death and that little girl as if they’d never existed.” His voice was suddenly impassioned. “You haven’t been fair to me. Haven’t I always been loyal to you? From the time I was twelve, I did everything you told me to do. No kill was too hard. Yet you sent me here to Carmel to watch that bumbler, Walsh, just to make sure he was going to be able to finish the kill on the Castino kid. It was a job for a beginner. I may be young, but I’m no beginner.”

“No, I know you’re not.” He tried to make his tone soothing. Franco’s tone bordered on insolence, and he was tempted to cut him down to size, but he might need him. He was the man on the spot, with all contacts in place. Better to handle Ramon Franco with kid gloves. The young recruits always lacked discipline, but they were also the ones most eager to prove themselves in blood. He was only nineteen, but his kill record with the cartel was impressive. He was quick, lethal, and totally vicious. “That’s why I trusted you to watch Walsh. I never knew when I would have to have someone good enough to take over. Walsh had the experience, but he was going downhill, and I couldn’t trust him.” He paused. “Not like you, Franco. I see myself in you.”

“You do?” Franco was silent, then said haltingly, “I’m honored, sir. It’s just that I don’t understand. You told me so little about what was going on with Walsh. I felt . . . like an errand boy.”

Which was exactly how Salazar saw him. But circumstances dictated the errand boy be promoted until Salazar could take charge himself. “I don’t want any of my other men to be jealous of you.

Particularly not now. I'd rather you concentrate on getting me out of the mess Walsh made up there in Carmel. You're going to have to dance a fine dance to save the situation. But you're a smart boy, and I know that you can do it for me."

"I'm a man, not a boy."

"Of course you are. But it's not a bad thing that others believe you to be a boy, so they won't suspect how very deadly you can be. I've seen you use that ploy before."

"Sometimes."

"Often. Do you think I haven't been watching you? Use your brains and that smile the ladies like so much."

"Then tell me what I need to know. Tell me what Walsh knew, what I should have known from the beginning."

A definite touch of arrogance, Salazar noticed. "You know the beginning. You grew up with it. The drugs, the vice, that son of a bitch, Juan Castino, constantly moving into my territory. He acted as if his cartel was the only one in Mexico, and every time anyone came close to taking him down, he managed to come out on top. I had the brains and the plans but Castino had the contacts and was always just ahead of me. If I hadn't managed to form a mutual coalition of all the cartels in Mexico, he would have eaten me alive. I can rein him in as long as he knows I have the backing of the coalition behind me."

"Until we find a way to kill him. That's the best way. Don't worry. I'll do it for you."

So simple, so incredibly naïve. "I know you will. But it has to be staged very carefully. I can't let any of the other cartels know that I'm getting ready to jump Castino." He paused. "Or that I yielded to temptation eight years ago to twist the knife and make him hurt. They might turn against me."

"Because you arranged with James Walsh to kidnap Castino's two little girls and their nanny and kill them? They all probably wish they'd had the balls to do it."

“They’d chop me up and serve me to Castino. And then move into my territory and split it up.” His voice was laden with frustration. “It was going to be so simple. Walsh would kill them, and there would be no bodies or anything to connect me to it. I’d be able to sit back and watch Castino suffer, then, when the time was right, I’d make sure he joined his little girls in the graveyard. But Walsh screwed it up. He left me hanging and vulnerable if Castino finds out I paid Walsh to kill them. We have to fix it, Franco.”

“I can do it if I work fast. I don’t think that Castino knows anything yet. The kid’s name on the police report is Cara Delaney, and Walsh is only suspected of being a serial killer. Nothing about Castino.”

Hope and relief shot through Salazar. “You’re certain?”

“I paid a good deal of your money to bribe a look at those reports. No mention of Castino . . . or you.”

“Yet.”

“As you say. But there may be a way to keep you safe if we work fast. Eve Duncan hasn’t made a statement yet. She’s in a local hospital being checked out for concussion, and her lover, Joe Quinn, isn’t letting her be interviewed.”

“Where’s the kid?”

“She’s being taken care of by a friend of Duncan’s, Margaret Douglas.”

“Not at Child Services? They’re big on Welfare shit in the U.S.”

“No, I’m sure. I knew you’d want to know where you could put your hands on her.”

“Oh, yes.” His hands around her throat to end this nightmare. “Then it appears you may have a multitude of targets in the near future. You need to find out how much Duncan knows about Cara Castino . . . and me. I have to know I’m safe from Duncan before I move forward again.”

“You’ll be safe. It’s only a question which target I hit first.” His

voice was suddenly eager. "You tell me and it will be done. Duncan? Quinn? The kid?"

"You're moving too fast. I want you to go to that hospital and report back to me. Do you understand?"

"If I took out Duncan, it would stop the—"

"Report back to me," Salazar repeated. "Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." He was silent. "I didn't mean to argue. You're the *Pez Gordo*, the big boss. I'm just concerned."

He was concerned because if Salazar and his cartel fell, he could be part of the collateral damage, Salazar thought cynically. It was obvious Franco was very ambitious. "Then it's time to use that concern in the way I told you."

"I'll leave for the hospital right away. I won't disappoint you." He hung up.

Franco was moving fast and was eager to please but Salazar still wasn't sure that he would obey instructions if an opportunity presented itself.

Oh well, Franco was a superb assassin, and Salazar was just angry enough with the way Eve Duncan had spoiled his plans that he was willing to take a chance that Franco wouldn't pay her a fatal visit in her hospital room without taking appropriate precautions. Salazar rather liked the idea of Duncan's lying helplessly in that bed in her room while Franco moved around that hospital like a lethal buzz saw.

But if Franco decided to do it, he'd damn well better do it right.

COMMUNITY HOSPITAL OF THE MONTEREY

"Cara has good instincts," Eve Duncan said as she turned back to Joe after watching the child walk out of her hospital room. "You're not easy to read, Joe. I'm glad that whatever you're upset about wasn't about her. Though I'm not sure she believed you. It would have been

difficult explaining a sudden change of heart. Do you know, I'm starting to look forward to having Cara staying with us for a while?" She shook her head. "Remember, we were talking on the day Jane left for London about how my life may be changing? Then all of this happened. Do you suppose Cara is the change?"

"Not necessarily."

Eve went still. She couldn't miss that jerky roughness in his tone. "What are you talking about? What *is* wrong?"

"Not wrong. Strange. Bizarre." He shook his head. "I don't know what else."

"Stop playing around with words. Talk to me."

"I don't know how to say it."

"Just tell me."

"The hospital has the results from all the tests they've been running on you. The doctor stopped me in the hall to go over them."

"The results? Joe, I know you've been ramrodding everything connected to my treatment since you brought me to this hospital, but that's going a little too far. Why go over them with you and not with me?" She tried to smile. "Some terrible disease popped up that he thought you should break to me?"

"God, I'm not doing this right. No terrible disease. You're very healthy and ready to go home. He just didn't want you to leave the hospital without knowing."

"Joe, what are you trying to tell me?"

"In my completely clumsy and inadequate fashion." He reached out and took her hand. "I'm trying to tell you that you're going to have a child, Eve."

"You're joking," Eve said dazedly. "It's some kind of mistake?"

"No." Joe's hand tightened around her own. "And no. To both questions. I wouldn't have dared come in here if I hadn't made sure the doctor had checked and double-checked. You're pregnant." His teeth bit his lower lip. "And that goes to show how upset I am. *We're*

pregnant. I can't quite take it in either. I went into shock when the doctor told me."

"Tell me about it," she said weakly as she sat up in the bed. "It wasn't supposed to happen. I thought it couldn't happen. It wasn't as if we weren't careful."

"I didn't think so either," Joe said. "We did everything right. Or maybe we didn't. But I don't know how we could have done anything different." He shook his head. "I'm a little confused on that point at the moment."

"Me, too." She met his gaze. "I . . . feel lost. I can't quite grasp it." She reached up and ran a hand through her hair. "How . . . long?"

"Barely. A few weeks. You must have conceived before we left the Lake Cottage to come out here to California."

"I remember when I was pregnant with Bonnie, I didn't know for months."

"Things have changed since you were sixteen. They can tell within five or six days now."

She nodded. "The whole world has changed. My whole life has changed. I'm not the same person."

"Yes, you are. You've just been tempered by experience." He lifted her palm to his lips. "And this particular experience may do some more very intricate tempering. Just don't let it throw you. We'll think about it, then make decisions."

"Decisions." No, she couldn't make decisions right now. Her head was whirling, and all she could think about was the fact that in nine months she would bear a child. It was impossible. No, it was going to happen. "How do you feel about it?"

"As dazed as you." He grinned. "Kind of . . . primitive. I've never fathered a child of my own. I suppose that's a natural reaction. I . . . like it." His smile faded. "I never suggested it to you. After all you've gone through, I thought that it had to come from you. I know what you went through when you lost your Bonnie; when she was killed. After we adopted Jane, I believed that might be the way we should go."

“So did I.” She moistened her lips. “And now I’m wondering why we never talked about having a child of our own. Did I just bury my head in the sand? My God, Joe, I must have sensed you’d feel like this. Was I so afraid that I avoided facing it?”

He didn’t answer.

Because he knew it was true, she realized. She was his center, and he wouldn’t allow her to be hurt even if it meant being cheated himself. “You should have spoken to me about it.”

He shook his head. “I have you. That’s enough, more than enough.” He leaned forward and kissed her. “Now stop fretting about me, you have thinking to do.”

“Thinking,” she repeated. “You said decision. You know I won’t have an abortion. I couldn’t do that.”

“That’s not what I meant. You told me once that you’d intended to adopt Bonnie out to a good home before she was born. Then, when you saw her, you changed your mind.”

Eve stared at him in shock. “You’d consent to me doing that?”

“I have no idea. I doubt it. Every instinct is shouting no, but I just had to bring it up because you’d once considered it. You were a teenager then, poor, virtually alone, and Bonnie was illegitimate. Now you’re older, but you have a career that obsesses you, and family would get in the way.” He met her gaze. “Whatever your decision, it has to be made with your whole heart. After that, we’ll work out what we need to do individually to meet both our own goals. We’ll find a way to blend them together.”

“Joe . . .”

“Hush.” He squeezed her hand before releasing it. “I’m going to go and see about your release papers. You rest awhile, then I’ll send Margaret in to help you dress.” He paused. “Do you want me to tell her?”

She shook her head. “It’s not real to me yet. How can I make it real to anyone else?”

“What about Cara? Do you still want to take her into our home for a while?”

“Of course I do. What are we supposed to do? Let her go back to Mexico and be torn apart in all those cartel wars? She’s just a child, and she’s already lost her sister and Elena, her best friend. You know that Salazar won’t stop hunting her because Walsh is dead. We’ve got to keep her safe until we can find a way to get rid of Salazar.”

“And Juan Castino, her loving father,” Joe said grimly. “You’re right, she’s a pawn. She wouldn’t stand a chance if immigration sends her back to Mexico.” He turned toward the door. “I just thought that you might want me to handle it myself. You may be a little busy for a while.”

“I believe the word is occupied,” Eve said dryly.

“Whatever.” He glanced back at her. “I wasn’t sure that you’d be prepared for the hassle. We’re going to have to whisk Cara away from here, keep her real identity from the authorities, and get her to Atlanta. Then I’ll get to work on bringing down Salazar’s cartel. That should keep him too busy to pay attention to Cara in the near future.”

“I agree. But most of those arrangements are in your court.”

“It will overflow.”

She nodded. “Then I’ll face it then.” She smiled. “And a challenge will be good for me. It will keep me from . . . It will distract me.”

“I doubt it.”

The next moment, he was gone.

He was probably right, she thought. Nothing was going to distract her from this news that had shaken her world. But she had always found that hard work and putting her own problems at the end of the agenda could be a salvation.

But did she need salvation? Why had the word even occurred to her?

All she needed was to adjust to a situation that happened to millions of women every year.

So adjust.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the pillow. Sort out what she really felt and examine it.

Shock.

A natural reaction.

Disbelief.

Also natural.

Fear.

A pregnancy was never easy when you were older.

Of course, there was an element of—

No, don't hide behind that easy answer. There was something else behind it.

Bonnie. Her little girl who had been her entire life during those seven short years before her death. Bonnie. The pain and agony that had almost killed Eve after she'd been taken.

The fear that agony could come back if she allowed herself to love another baby as she had Bonnie. She dearly loved her adopted daughter, Jane, but that was another relationship entirely. Jane had been ten when they'd found each other, and with a maturity that had made them more best friends than mother and daughter. So different from Bonnie. She had been responsible for her from the instant of her birth, and she had lost her. Could she bear the constant worry that another child would be taken from her?

Coward. She was a coward. Mothers faced that threat every single day.

Did you know what a coward I am, Joe? Is that why you never asked?

Well, there was no asking now. It was a fact. Stunning. Life-changing. Inevitable.

Magical.

The word had come out of nowhere.

Because that was the final emotion she had felt when Joe had told her she was going to have a child.

Magic. Joyous, rich, heady, magic.

She slowly looked down at her abdomen. Flat. No sign that someone was growing, taking on more life with every second. She reached out tentatively and touched the skin of her stomach.

What's happening? It's a crazy world out here, are you sure you want to trust me to take you through it?

Was she expecting an answer from this baby, who had just barely been conceived? Of course not, the question was really for herself. She had lost Bonnie. She would have to do better to prove herself to this child.

Her hand dropped away from her abdomen.

Later. We'll have to work on this. We're just starting out. We have a long way to go.

She sat up in bed and swung her legs to the floor. Time to start living life and not trying to avoid it. She went to the closet and started to take down her clothes.

“Hey, I’m supposed to do all that.” Margaret had come into the room. “Joe said I should give you a little while to rest, and here you are ready to jump into your clothes.”

Eve smiled affectionately at her. Margaret had been a tower of strength during the last days when they had been hunting for Cara, then Eve’s time in the hospital. But then Margaret had shown remarkable strength from the moment Eve had met her. She was young and full of life and possessed instincts and a knowledge of animals that was as unusual as her ability to deal with people.

“I want to get out of here.” Eve headed for the bathroom. “And I’ve done nothing but rest since I got here. I had a mild concussion, and Joe insisted on having those doctors run every test under the sun to make sure I was okay.”

“Typical Joe Quinn,” Margaret said. “He was a trifle . . . brief when he was talking to me. Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine.”

“Then you might tell Cara. She’s not too sure.”

Eve stopped at the bathroom door. “She thinks I’m abandoning her?”

“No, it’s not gotten that far yet. But who could blame her? She doesn’t really know any of us. She’s known since she was three years old and her sister, Jenny, was killed almost in front of her eyes, that she had to run and keep on running just to stay alive. Her nurse, Elena, taught her she mustn’t trust anyone.” She added grimly, “And with good reason. Elena died trying to protect her. Now Cara is alone, and she’s trying to come to terms with taking care of herself.” She shrugged. “Though she seems more concerned with taking care of you. Do you know she dreams about Jenny?”

“Yes.”

“And she told me she thinks you dream about her, too. Do you?”

“Not exactly.”

Margaret gazed at her, waiting. When Eve didn’t go on, she said, “Okay, you don’t want to talk about it. I understand. Well, I don’t really, but I would if you’d trust me. I thought that those reports from ‘confidential sources’ you told our Sheriff Nalchek you received were a trifle suspect when we were hunting down Walsh.” She suddenly chuckled. “Though he’d think what I’m guessing now is far more weird than suspect.” She took Eve’s suitcase out of the closet. “Go on, get dressed. Call if you need me. I’ll pack you up, and we’ll be set to go as soon as you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Margaret,” Eve said quietly. “Thanks for everything. We would never have found Cara if you hadn’t helped. You’ve been there for me since the beginning of this nightmare.”

“Not quite.” She tilted her head. “And that sounds remarkably like good-bye. Is it?”

“I prefer *au revoir*.” She hesitated. “What Joe and I are doing isn’t exactly legal in taking Cara back to Atlanta with us. It’s morally right, but you could still get in trouble. You and the Immigration Department aren’t on the best of terms.”

“We’re fine with each other as long as I’m smart enough to avoid them.”

And Eve knew Margaret had made a science of avoiding them and keeping under the radar. Eve had never been told why Margaret felt that was necessary and could only be grateful that she occasionally dropped into their lives. “And you might be caught in the cross fire if they find out that we’re keeping Cara from her legal father.”

“Who is a murderer, drug lord, and general scumbag?”

“Joe and I will be working on clearing up her situation, but it will take time. In the meantime, Salazar will be a danger.”

“Then I should be there to—”

“No, Margaret,” Eve said firmly. “You have too much to lose. I won’t have you stuck in a jail while they decide whether or not to deport you.” She made a face. “Though I don’t even know where they’d send you. You haven’t been very forthcoming on that score.”

“It’s my life, my problems.” Margaret shook her head. “I can’t convince you, can I?” She shrugged. “Then I won’t try. If you need me, get in touch.” She started packing Eve’s bag. “Do you need to know where to get phony documents for Cara? I know a few good places and some people who will—”

“No,” Eve said. “You’re out of this. Joe has managed to block any investigation on Cara’s background, but there are still problems. It will be a very tentative fix, but as long as they think Cara is an orphan after the death of her supposed Aunt Elena, we may get away with it. We’re hoping that Sheriff Nalchek will smooth things over with Child Services and persuade them to let us have temporary custody. He’s well thought of in this area.”

“He’ll do it. He’s like you. He won’t want a child in danger.”

“I believe you’re right. We’ll have to see. Everything is a little bewildering right now.”

“Eve.” Margaret was studying her face. “You’re sure everything is okay? You look a little . . . unusual.”

“Do I?” Trust Margaret to sense a truth that had only just been

revealed to Eve. Unusual? The world was shaking. Everything was changing. She didn't know how she was going to cope. But she would do it.

She had to do it.

She smiled at Margaret. "I'm sure it's *going* to be okay. But you're right, I feel a little unusual. Nothing physical. Just a new challenge on the horizon."

"Cara?"

"She's definitely a part of it." She was closing the bathroom door. "I'll be right out, Margaret."

Margaret shook her head as she gazed at the closed door. Eve was going to prove obstinate, but that's what she had expected. She had tried to push her away earlier when she had been afraid to involve her beyond what she considered safe. She would have to find a way to—

Her cell phone rang, and she glanced down at the ID. Kendra Michaels.

It wasn't the first time she had phoned in the past week. Margaret had been too busy to take her calls and had put her off. She was tempted to do that now.

No, Kendra was her friend, and she was the one who had called to ask Margaret to get in touch with Eve when she'd been unable to reach her. She deserved to know what had happened.

"Hello, Kendra. I don't have much time. I have to help get Eve sprung out of this hospital."

"Hospital? And why is Eve in a hospital? And what the hell is going on?"

"I'm going to tell you. I just have to keep it brief, okay?"

"It's not okay, but I clearly have to put up with it. Eve told me practically nothing when she came out here to California except that she needed someone who was woods savvy and wanted you. Since I'm definitely not woods savvy, I had to find you."

“You sound distinctly grumpy.”

“I couldn’t see why I couldn’t help,” she said impatiently. “I still don’t. Tell me.”

“Eve came out here because Sheriff Nalchek had discovered the grave of a nine-year-old little girl at Sonderville, California. He sent Eve the skull to reconstruct. She did a great job and FedExed the reconstruction back to him. But the FedEx truck was hijacked, the driver killed, and the reconstruction stolen. Eve’s computer and notes were also stolen that same day. Someone had no intention of letting that little girl’s identity be discovered.”

“And that pissed Eve off.”

“Big-time. She had become very involved emotionally with that little girl, who she called Jenny, while she was reconstructing her skull. She and Joe Quinn came out here to try to find a clue to who that little girl was.” She added, “And to catch her killer. That’s why she wanted me to go to that grave in the forest and see what I could find.”

“And what did you find?”

“Not as much as I would have liked, but I was helpful. Joe and Eve discovered that the name of her killer was James Walsh and started to try to track him. It became very convoluted because Walsh was on the hunt himself. He was an enforcer for a Mexican drug cartel, very nasty character, and had been hired by the head of a rival cartel to kidnap and kill Juan Castino’s two daughters. They were supposed to just disappear, but something happened. The older girl was killed, but the younger child, Cara, and Elena, the nurse who cared for the girls, escaped. Walsh searched for them for years.”

“Bastard.”

“Oh, yes. It was a very bloody hunt. But we managed to find Cara almost at the same time as Walsh.”

“Tell me he’s dead.”

“Yes, a very painful demise. Eve has only a minor concussion.”

“And the child?”

“Cara is alive, but there are still problems. Eve is sure she can work them out.”

“And are you sure?”

“Reasonably. As long as she’s willing to accept help from her friends.”

Kendra laughed. “You?”

“Well, I do like to see things through to the very end.”

“I’ve noticed. An iron will occasionally peeks out from behind all that sunny sweetness.”

“Sweetness? How cloying. I feel ill. And in dire need of an apology.”

“You’ll not get it.” She was suddenly serious. “You’re okay, Margaret?”

“Sure, I was just drifting along with the current.”

“Never.”

“Well, sometimes. Now the current is persistently reminding me I have to get Eve out of this hospital.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll talk to you later. But that explanation was very sketchy. I’ll want details.” She hung up.

And Kendra would keep at Margaret until she got all those details, Margaret thought ruefully. She was not only brilliant, she had boundless curiosity and fantastic instincts.

And she hadn’t liked being passed over for Margaret when Eve needed help. She always liked being in control.

But then, so did Margaret.

So finish packing Eve up, then try to think of a way to get Eve to let her trail along and help put a period to this nightmare that was haunting both her and Cara.