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IRIS

JOHANSEN

SILENCING

EVE

AN EVE DUNCAN
NOVEL



SILENCING EVE

IRIS JOHANSEN

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SILENCING EVE

CHAPTER

1

Atlanta Airport

DEAD.

Eve was dead.

The words kept drumming in Catherine Ling's mind as she walked up the gateway to the terminal. No matter how many times she told herself it was true, she still couldn't believe it. Not Eve Duncan. Not her friend, the woman who had helped to save her son.

"Agent Ling?" A sandy-haired young man was running after Catherine as she headed for baggage. "I'm Brad Linden." He showed her his CIA credentials. "Agent Venable sent me to pick you up and take you to the memorial service."

"Then go get your car while I pick up my bag." Catherine Ling didn't stop as she strode ahead of him. "And why the hell didn't Venable come and get me himself? I need to have a few choice words with him."

"He's at the service. It's going on right now. He didn't want to show disrespect. I'm afraid you're a little late."

"Because no one told me that Eve—" She broke off. He was gazing at her warily, and she knew she must be radiating all the

ferocity and sadness she was feeling. There was no use ripping at Venable's errand boy because Venable had left her in ignorance of Eve's death or the search when she was kidnapped several days ago. He would only try to make excuses for the inexcusable. Yes, she had been undercover in the jungles of Colombia, but that didn't mean that she wouldn't have somehow extricated herself and come home to help find Eve. Venable should have gotten word to her. No, she'd had to find out in Miami when she'd retrieved her own computer and been hit in the gut with the news story in *USA Today*. "Just have that car out front and get me to that memorial service ASAP, Linden."

While she was waiting for her bag, she scanned the story in *USA Today* again. What did she expect to find? She had practically memorized the damn story on the flight from Miami. She supposed that she was trying to find an answer when there was no answer. The actual story of Eve's kidnapping and murder was fairly cut-and-dried. The murderer had obviously been unbalanced and ignited explosives at a ghost town in Colorado, where he had been holding Eve captive. Since the details were sparse, they had concentrated on Eve Duncan herself. Her background, her accomplishments, quotes from famous law-enforcement officials who had used her services. All were very worth reading, Catherine thought bitterly. It wasn't often that the media got a chance to spotlight a genuinely good person. Eve had been an illegitimate child born in the slums who had given birth herself at sixteen to a little girl, Bonnie. The child had changed her life. Eve had finished her education and straightened out her mother, who was on drugs. Then the world had come crashing down when her Bonnie, seven years old, had been kidnapped and killed. Yet Eve hadn't let it destroy her. She had gone back to school and studied forensic sculpting. Since then,

she had become perhaps the most skilled forensic sculptor in the world. She had brought closure to thousands of families whose children would never have been identified without her help.

Never let a good deed go unpunished, Catherine thought. That old adage was too true in Eve's case.

And, dammit, she was misting up again. She closed her computer and jammed it in her carry-on bag. She grabbed her phone and tried Joe Quinn again. Voice mail. She'd called him from the Miami Airport as soon as she'd read the story about Eve's memorial service being held today. It had gone to voice mail then, too. She'd left a message, but he hadn't called back. Maybe he didn't want to talk to her, she thought. Why should he? He had loved Eve with every ounce of his being, and he thought Catherine hadn't even cared enough to try to find her when that monster, Doane, had kidnapped her.

I cared, Joe. God, how I care. I would have come.

She wanted to kill Venable.

She might do it if he didn't have an explanation that she could tolerate.

And she wanted to release the tears that she had been forcing back since she'd read that damn news story. Her friend was dead, and, somehow, she felt as if it was her fault, that if she'd known, she might have been able to stop it. Lord, her eyes were stinging.

Not here. Not now.

When she was alone with her thoughts and memories of Eve and had gotten through this memorial service.

Not even a funeral because that crazy bastard had blown them both to bits.

She wished with all her heart that Doane was still alive and here, so that she could personally send him straight to hell.

But Venable had cheated her out of that pleasure, too, by not bringing her into the picture when Eve needed her most.

Damn him.

She grabbed her bag as it went around the carousel and headed for the door.

GOD. LING WAS GORGEOUS. Bradford thought as he pulled his car close to the curb where Catherine Ling was waiting impatiently. She was sleek and sexy, with shoulder-length dark hair and eyes tilted slightly, increasing the exotic magnetism she radiated. He knew she was the illegitimate daughter of an American soldier and a Korean whore who was half-Russian. She'd been born in Saigon but had grown up on the streets of Hong Kong. He'd heard stories about her from other agents, but he'd never met her. The stories had been interesting but very, very lethal. She was sharp and independent and likely to run her own show when she was on a mission. Something Venable definitely didn't like but evidently tolerated because she got the job done. She'd been CIA since Venable had picked her up in Hong Kong when she was only fourteen. What was she now? Late twenties?

"Got everything?" He leaned over and opened the passenger door for her. "I'll have you at Quinn's lake cottage in thirty minutes. I just called Venable, and he said the service had just ended."

"Dammit, I missed it? I'm surprised you got through to him," she said sarcastically. "How nice. He's not been answering my calls."

Oops. "I'm sure that's just a technical error. He was very concerned about you." He hurriedly handed her his computer.

"I've pulled up the files on Doane and the catastrophe at the ghost town. Venable was sure you'd want to look them over."

"I would have liked to look them over before the son of a bitch blew her up." She gazed blindly down at the computer. "You've read it. Fill me in."

"Eve Duncan was kidnapped from her lake cottage home in north Atlanta several days ago. Because she's one of the foremost forensic sculptors in the world, it was assumed at the time that the kidnapper might be one of the nuts or serial killers she'd targeted by her work."

"But if Venable is involved, then that's not why she was killed," Catherine said grimly. "I'm surprised Eve let him pull her into a CIA mission."

"She didn't. James Doane had been in a safe house in Gold-fork, Colorado, and slipped away from the agent guarding him. When Venable realized he was gone, he thought there might be a possibility of his heading toward Eve Duncan, but he couldn't be sure that—"

"Why? Why would he go after Eve?"

"That's not in the report. You'll have to ask Venable."

"You can bet I will. Venable fouled up and didn't protect Eve. Is that the truth?"

"I'm sure there is an explanation. As I said, he wasn't sure Eve Duncan would be a target."

She drew a deep breath. "Let's go down another path. Why was Jim Doane in that safe house? Was he a foreign agent? A witness?"

He shook his head. "He was the father of Kevin Relling, who was assassinated five years ago. His son was in Special Forces in the Army and turned very dirty. He was working with al-Qaeda in Pakistan and blocking the hunt for Bin Laden. He also

indulged his penchant for raping and killing little girls in whatever city he found himself. He killed the five-year-old daughter of General Tarter in Marseilles because the general was trying to zero in on the al-Qaeda group.”

“Very dirty. Scum.”

“The general went crazy and eventually hired a hit man, Lee Zander, to find and go after Doane’s son. Zander killed him and hired a funeral director to cremate the remains. Doane arrived too late to grab anything but his son’s skull from the furnace.”

“Okay, then that would be a reason for his kidnapping Eve. Doane wanted Eve to do a reconstruction on the son’s skull. Right?”

“I understand that she was doing just that while she was his captive.”

“Then why would the crazy bastard kill her? She was smart. If that job was the ransom he wanted, she wouldn’t risk her life by refusing to do a reconstruction.”

“You’ll have to ask Venable,” he said again. “All I know is that Doane took her to a ghost town in the Rio Grande Forest in Colorado. We traced him to an abandoned saloon there. When our units, Quinn, and Jane MacGuire were closing in on him, he set off a charge that blew up the saloon and half the town.” He glanced at her. “You look— Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay. It shouldn’t have happened. Someone should have stopped it. Venable should have stopped it.” Her voice fell to a whisper. “*I* should have stopped it.”

“Venable said that you were on a very important mission and that you—”

“Screw Venable.” Her gaze shifted to the passing scene out the window. “Anything else? Are they sure she was in that damn saloon?”

“Yes. Everyone saw Doane take her into the place, and, a few minutes later, our infrared scopes confirmed two people inside. They were still on the scopes when the place blew.”

“DNA?”

“We’re working on it, but it may take a long while. There wasn’t much left. As I said, the blast practically leveled the town. She was in—”

“I don’t want the details. Not now.”

It appeared that Ling was not as tough as he had heard, Bradford thought. Or maybe she’s just human, like the rest of us. “I hear Eve Duncan was quite a woman. It’s a great loss. Everyone from senators to a dozen police chiefs are at that memorial service.”

“They don’t know how great a loss,” Catherine said. “They know the work, not the woman, not the friend.” She was silent for a while, forcing herself to read the file. Then she looked up, and asked, “How close are we?”

“Five minutes. The service was held outside by the lake at the cottage where she lived with Joe Quinn. He thought she’d like it to be at her home. Pretty place.”

She didn’t speak for a moment. “I know. That’s where I first met Eve. I stayed with her while she worked on a computer age progression on photos of my son.”

That was one of the stories about Ling, too. Her son had been held prisoner by a Russian criminal for nine years, and she had never ceased trying to find him. It was only after Eve Duncan had helped her that she had been able to locate him. “I’m sure you were very grateful.”

“Are you?” She looked at him. “You have no idea.”

He pulled his gaze away with some difficulty. Catherine Ling might be as lethal as a striking panther, but he was suddenly finding himself having visions of ladies in distress and

knights in shining armor and himself somewhere in the mix. Crazy. It just went to show how right the stories were about the fascination she effortlessly exerted. “I know you’re upset. If I can help, just call me.” He almost bit his tongue. Venable would not like the idea of his moving into Ling’s camp when she was definitely at odds with him. “Though I’m sure Venable will straighten everything out.”

He swung into the grove that Quinn had designated as a parking area. “Here we are. I’d drive you closer, but there are people milling all over the place.” He quickly got out, ran around, and opened the door for her. “Everyone is around the cottage down toward the lake. Would you like me to go with you?”

“No.” She strode toward the cottage. “I’d advise you to stay clear. You wouldn’t like dodging the flak.”

He watched her disappear from view, then reluctantly turned away. Catherine Ling might be wrong. He found himself experiencing a strange blankness as if he’d been witnessing a fireworks display, and now there was only dark sky.

It might be worth dodging a little flak to see her in action.

CATHERINE SPOTTED VENABLE in the crowd two minutes after she turned the corner of the cottage.

He was wearing a dark suit and looked surprisingly formal. He was talking to a man in an NYPD uniform. Then he lifted his gaze and saw her at the edge of the crowd.

Wariness.

Then he lifted the wineglass in his hand and nodded.

Catherine drew a deep breath and tried to smother the anger. If she confronted Venable now, she would make a scene, and that was the last thing she wanted to do at this service honoring Eve.

She'd deal with him later. She nodded curtly and turned to look for Joe Quinn.

He was standing talking to a tall, white-haired man she vaguely recognized as a congressman. Joe looked pale and unsmiling, but he could obviously still function. She started to make her way toward him.

He looked up and saw her. Then, with a word to the congressman, he left him and was walking quickly toward her. "Catherine."

"Joe, I tried to call you." She took a step closer. "I didn't know. Believe me, I didn't know anything, or I would have come to—"

"I saw that you'd called, but I couldn't talk." He took her elbow and was propelling her toward the corner of the house. "I've been surrounded all day." He stopped as he reached an unoccupied stretch of lawn on the side of the cottage. He took a minute to look around and make sure there was no one near. "I can't really talk now either, but you have to know, dammit."

"What are you talking about? I do know. I just found out today in Miami. I can't tell you how—"

"Listen." His hands grasped her shoulders. "It's not what you think." His voice lowered. "Go into the cottage and talk to Kendra Michaels. I told her earlier that you were coming. I knew I couldn't get away from this hullabaloo."

"Joe, what the hell are you saying?"

"I'm saying that though you look terrific in black, you shouldn't go into mourning." He turned away. "I'll see you later. Go talk to Kendra."

She stared in shock as he walked away. For a moment, she couldn't get her breath. He couldn't mean what she thought he meant.

She closed her eyes. Oh, God. Let it be true. Let it all be a nightmarish mistake.

Let Eve still be alive.

CATHERINE ENTERED THE cottage and slammed the door behind her. “Kendra Michaels?”

“Yes.” Kendra was standing at the window, staring down at the mourners moving from group to group on the lawn bordering the lake. “That’s me. And you are?”

“Catherine Ling.” She crossed the room and showed her ID. “Joe told me to come to see you. Apparently it’s your job to tell me what the hell is going on here.”

Kendra nodded. “Joe called me and told me you were coming up to ask questions. I just had to verify your ID. There are too many reporters drifting around here at the memorial service. Eve was very well-known.” She smiled faintly. “Very private, but everyone knew she was phenomenal.”

“You’re damn right she was.” Her lips tightened. “We’re both talking past tense. Yet from what Joe said, I’m guessing she’s probably very much alive.” Her voice was uneven. “Don’t tell me that he’s wrong. I won’t have it.”

“Sorry. Joe didn’t steer you wrong. I’ve just gotten used to playing the sorrowful, regretful friend in the last week,” Kendra said. “I believe the chances are excellent that Eve is alive.”

Catherine felt a wave of relief surge through her. “Thank God.”

“I can’t be absolutely sure, but I’d bet every particle of my experience and judgment that she lived through the explosion at that ghost town in Colorado.”

“And why should I trust your judgment?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t.” Kendra tilted her head. “I don’t believe you have much to do with trust.”

Catherine’s eyes narrowed on her face. “Why? Did Eve or Joe tell you about me?”

“No. Just an observation. Did Eve mention me?”

“Yes, Eve told me about you a few months ago. You were born blind, but a surgical procedure gave you your sight just a few years ago, is that right?”

Kendra nodded.

“But while you were blind, you developed your other senses to such a degree that you’ve become quite the detective.”

Kendra shrugged. “Make that a reluctant detective. My profession is music therapy. I’ve helped out on a few cases.”

“You weren’t reluctant as far as Eve was concerned.”

“No, we became friends. You help your friends. Then, when I heard she was abducted, I dropped everything and came right down.” Kendra studied her. “Joe said you were close to Eve, but she never mentioned you to me.”

“Why should she? Our relationship was . . . confidential.”

“Confidential? That’s an interesting designation for a close—” Kendra stopped. “Oh, you’re CIA, aren’t you?”

Catherine’s eyes widened. “Where did that come from?”

“I don’t expect you to confirm it. I was watching out the window, and I saw you and that CIA guy, Venable, exchange a look when you arrived. He was tense, you were angry. Oh, yes, you know each other. Do you work for him?”

Catherine looked away.

“I don’t expect you to answer that either.” She smiled faintly. “Oh, and you quite often wear a shoulder holster under that black jacket, but not today.”

Catherine nodded. "Out of respect." She looked under her left arm. "It's that obvious?"

"It's a little baggy there. Nothing anyone would notice."

"Except you?"

"Except me."

"Or maybe a North Korean assassin. It might be time to invest in a more discreet shoulder holster."

"I'm sure you're equipped with other weapons." Kendra tilted her head. "I'm good with dialects, but I'm having a tough time with yours. You're clipping your consonants and slightly flattening your vowel sounds. Did the linguistic people at Langley teach you to do that?"

"They may have."

"It's very effective. I have no idea where you're from."

"Good. I've made a few enemies over the years, and the last thing I want is for them to be able to find out anything about me."

"Then you've done a good job."

Catherine gave her a cool glance. "You're doing quite an efficient job yourself. You're laying out your credentials on display to show me just how good that judgment I challenged is."

Kendra smiled. "I thought it would save time in the long run. I don't need your trust, but I need an open mind."

Catherine took a step closer. "So are you going to tell me what happened in Colorado?"

"How much do you know already?"

"Just what I read in the newspaper and the CIA records. Plus Joe's rather cryptic reassurance that Eve is probably still alive, which makes this entire day rather surreal."

"That it is."

"Then talk to me," Catherine said fiercely. "I don't have many friends, and I don't like the idea of losing one. I don't like it so

much that I'm on the edge of violence. I've got to know something."

"I'll tell you everything I know. When the saloon exploded in that ghost town, the infrared scanners showed two people inside."

"Those recordings are always very accurate. The explosion was so powerful, it rocked the whole town. There's no way anyone could have survived that."

"They didn't. And we found the skeletal fragments and burned flesh."

"Am I missing something?"

"Those two people were possibly dead already. But they weren't Eve and Doane."

Catherine was silent. Let it be true, she prayed. "Are you sure?"

"We're still waiting on DNA, but I'm sure. I think each of those bodies was wrapped in thermal-reflective sleeping-bag liners to hold their body heat for the infrared scopes. I went down with the forensic team after they extinguished the fire and found traces of the reflective material at the site."

"But there were a dozen witnesses who saw Eve and Doane go into that saloon just a few minutes before that blast. How could they have gotten away without someone's seeing them?"

"Doane obviously knew the area very well. They were in a ghost town in the bottom of a small, bowl-shaped valley. Locals call it the punch bowl. It had been raining heavily, and the street was muddy. The strange thing was that it wasn't flooded."

"Why was that strange?"

"With water coming down from every side of the valley, it had no place to go. It should have flooded, unless . . . it was draining to someplace."

Catherine thought about it. "Like a cavern?"

“Very good. There were fissures that ran behind the buildings. Water drained through them to a stream in an underground cavern. It feeds an even larger stream that runs down the mountain. We didn’t know about the cavern and the underground stream, but we used the water from that bigger stream to help put out the fire.”

Catherine could feel the excitement surging within her. “You think Doane took Eve out the back and down into this cavern?”

“It’s a twenty-foot drop, but the water is deep enough that it wouldn’t have been a problem. The fissure was so narrow that when Doane first got to the ghost town, it was easy for him to cover it with brush to hide the cavern. And the explosion completely covered up the fissures with debris, so we didn’t even know they were there until I looked for them later. Doane did a good job of covering his tracks.”

“Do we know whose bodies were in there?”

“Not yet. There wasn’t much left of them. We were lucky they weren’t vaporized. But the fact that it was so muddy gave me some interesting tracks outside in front of the saloon. An off-road vehicle arrived, and Terence Blick, a partner of Doane’s, stepped out of it. Then Blick walked around to the back, unloaded something heavy, and walked into the saloon with it.”

“You got all that from footprints?”

“I had a run-in with Blick a couple days before. I stopped to see if I could help a policeman he’d shot down, and I saw Blick’s footprints then. He was wearing different boots, but the stride was unmistakable. He swung his legs in such a way that the right and left prints were directly in front of each other, almost single file. Fairly unique. And the footsteps sunk about three inches deeper after he walked around to the back of the truck.”

“You think he took a body into that saloon. But there were two bodies in there.”

“I believe the second corpse could be Blick himself.”

Catherine slowly nodded. “Doane killed his own partner?”

“Blick’s footprints went in, but never came out. But the off-road vehicle was driven out of the town. I’d bet Doane charged Blick with securing a woman’s corpse, but he needed a second one, a male. So he killed him. He went outside in the street with Eve and showed us all that she was there, then went back inside. He slipped out the back and jumped, either dragging or carrying Eve with him, into the cavern before Venable’s team arrived with their infrared gear. He had a raft down there and rode the stream about three miles away, where he had Blick’s vehicle parked. I saw the prints on the bank. The tire tread belonged to a set of Super Swamper TSL. That meant it was almost certainly the same 4×4 off-road vehicle that Blick drove into the ghost town. Doane took Eve away while the town was still burning.” She smiled bitterly. “Quite a distraction.”

“How long did it take you to piece this together?”

“Too long. Hours. Doane could have taken Eve anywhere by the time we figured out that they were still alive. It might have taken me even longer if Margaret hadn’t—” She broke off and leaned back against Eve’s workbench. “I should have seen it all sooner. But I couldn’t see anything clearly that night. All I could think about was that moment when the saloon blew only minutes after I’d seen Eve dragged through that door. We were all in shock.”

“I can understand that.”

“Well, I don’t understand. I should have been thinking, acting, not feeling.”

“It’s amazing that you figured it out at all. Eve was right to be so impressed with you.”

“Fat lot of good it’s done. She’s still out there . . . with him.”

Catherine glanced at the funeral guests outside. “Why this charade? Why not let on that you know they’re still alive?”

“Venable supposedly has an army of agents searching for Doane and Eve as we speak. We thought we might have better luck if Doane didn’t know we were still looking for him. He was evidently counting on the fact that DNA on those skeletal fragments could take weeks to come back and allow him to proceed with his plans.” Her lips twisted. “According to Venable, Doane is very proud of his ability to concoct his nasty little plans. This particular plan was very intricate, and he clearly wanted us to think they were both dead, so that he’d be free to go forward.”

“And do what?”

“He has a target. Lee Zander, the man who killed his dirt-bag of a son, Kevin. Not an easy target. Zander is probably one of the foremost assassins in the world.”

“And what does Eve have to do with his damn target? I thought that she’d been taken to do a reconstruction on the son.”

“That’s what we all thought. But it appears that wasn’t Doane’s primary motive. Doane thinks Zander is Eve’s father. Since Zander killed his son, he wants to see him bleed as he kills his daughter in front of him.”

Catherine went still. “Father? And is he?”

“I don’t know. Venable seems to think that he is.” She shook her head. “But what does matter is that Doane thinks it’s true.”

Frustrated, Catherine said, “There are too many unknowns. What the hell is happening here?”

“I don’t know. Ask Venable. Though I’m not sure he’ll tell you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t like the way he was trying to run the show at the ghost town.” She paused. “I thought he was being stupid by bringing in an attack team to go after Doane in that saloon. But now I’m not sure if he was stupid or a little too smart.”

“What are you saying? You think Venable’s crooked?”

“I think he has an agenda, and Eve’s not at the top of it.” She met Catherine’s eyes. “And why didn’t he let you know about what was happening to Eve? You’re her friend, and I’d judge you’re fairly lethal. Why not bring you into this chaos of a situation?”

“That’s what I asked him.”

“Were you satisfied with the answer?”

“No. He’s been dodging it.”

“Good. Then you’ll not trust him any more than you do me.”

She smiled faintly. “But I believe I’m beginning to trust you, Kendra.” Her smile faded. “I’ve got to get this clear in my mind, but I don’t want to blow your little scenario. Who knows that Eve is alive?”

“Joe, Zander, Jane MacGuire, Margaret Douglas, and the people who have been concerned with the hunt for Eve from the beginning.”

“Not Eve’s mother, Sandra?”

“No, it was Joe Quinn’s call. He decided that she was too erratic to trust with that information.” She made a face. “Actually, Joe was being diplomatic. Replace erratic with selfish. You’ll notice she didn’t come today—too devastated. But not too devastated to give one TV and three print interviews this morning.” She shrugged. “I don’t know what their relationship was, but it was definitely complex.”

Catherine was mentally going over the other names Kendra had given her. “Margaret Douglas . . .” she repeated. “You

broke off in the middle of telling me something about a Margaret. Why?"

"Margaret is . . . difficult."

"You don't want to talk about her." Catherine's eyes narrowed on her face as she tried to remember the exact words Kendra had spoken. She had been so upset and intent on digging for the truth that she had dismissed it at the time. "You said something about your not being able to put the entire scenario together sooner except for her."

"No, just not as soon." She turned back to the window. "Look, I'm not going to try to explain Margaret to you. She has to be experienced. All I'm telling you is that she's a good kid and no phony. I'd trust her in the trenches."

"But I'm not you. I'll make up my own mind," Catherine said. Her gaze followed Kendra's to the crowd below. "Which one is Margaret?"

"The girl standing next to Jane MacGuire. She tends to stay close to her when she can. She's a bit protective."

"Of Jane MacGuire?" She had met Jane, and no one appeared to be less in need of protection. Strong. Very strong. And Kendra had been referring to Margaret as a girl, even a kid. She gazed curiously at Jane and Margaret standing beside her.

Golden. Margaret seemed bathed in sunlight, tanned, sun-streaked hair, slim in her simple black dress. She did look young, nineteen or twenty at the oldest. She was appropriately solemn for the occasion but there was an aura of vitality, a barely restrained exuberance, held in check. "Why protective?"

"Jane saved her life. She took a bullet for her from Doane's cohort, Blick, when all of this madness first started. Margaret believes in payback."

"Interesting. I believe I have to talk to this Margaret Doug-

las.” She turned toward the door. “Would you like to come along and introduce me?”

“No, I have some thinking to do. You’re on your own.”

“Thinking?”

“Things are changing,” Kendra said soberly. “I have some decisions to make.”

“Don’t we all,” Catherine said. She opened the door. “Thank you, Kendra. And thank God you found out that we might still have a chance of freeing her.”

“I should have found out sooner. It’s to do all over again.”

“Maybe not. It appears a trap is in the offing.”

“He’s managed to sidestep traps so far.” She paused. “Good luck, Catherine.”

The words sounded curiously final, Catherine thought, as she left the house and ran down the porch steps. Imagination? Maybe. Everything was looking dark to her right now.

Dismiss it.

She had to probe, to find which way to go. She had not been pleased that Kendra Michaels had been suspicious about Venable’s motives and response to that disaster in the ghost town. Kendra had impressed her as being very sharp. Catherine had worked with Venable since she was a girl of fourteen and knew him as well as anyone. He was always an enigma, but he was a professional. Yet his priorities were always to the job, and she could see that if he had been torn, Eve might have been downgraded in importance.

So walk carefully and discreetly around Venable.

And don’t trust him any more than she could throw him.

She started to make her way through the crowd toward Jane and Margaret.

But she’d only gone a few steps when Margaret Douglas said something to Jane and was walking briskly toward Catherine.

Catherine stopped and watched her move. Margaret was worth watching—confidence, grace, vitality. Smiling at the people in the crowd as she brushed by them. She couldn't decide whether Margaret was beautiful or just attractive because that inner glow was so strong it dominated everything about her.

"You're Catherine Ling," she said as she reached her. She reached out to shake her hand. "I'm Margaret. You'll want to talk to me."

"I will? How do you know?"

"I saw you going up to the cottage to talk to Kendra, and I asked Jane who you were." A smile lit her face. "I'm glad you came, Catherine. Jane said you're very tough, very clever, and that you owe Eve a debt for helping to save your son. A debt like that is great motivation." She looked around her. "Want to go for a walk with me in the woods? There are too many people around."

Catherine fell into step with her. "How did you know that I'd come looking for you after I talked to Kendra?" she asked again. "What do you know that she doesn't?"

"Nothing. But she doesn't like to talk about me." She chuckled. "It's part loyalty because she likes me. And it's part discomfort because I'm kinda hard to explain."

"That's what she told me." They were deep in the woods now, and Catherine stopped and turned to face her. "I don't give a damn about discomfort, but I don't like lies. She said something about your not being a phony. What was that supposed to mean?"

"Did she say that? That was nice. It's particularly hard for her to defend me when I offend her sense of logic. That's a primary sin for Kendra." She reached down and took off one of her high heels. "I have to get these off for a minute. I'm not used to anything but my flip-flops or tennis shoes." She flexed her bare

feet. "That's better. I knew I had to look somber and dressed up, but I can't stand these heels. I bought them at Payless at the mall, but they don't—" She broke off. "You're looking impatient. Sorry. You're worried about Eve like the rest of us, and you're in the dark. How can I help?"

"By shining some light," she said curtly. "You're right, I'm worried about Eve, and I'm not going to let that bastard kill her if there's a chance of saving her. I have to know everything, dammit. Kendra said that you were the trigger that made her realize that perhaps Eve hadn't been killed. How did you know that was possible?"

"Oh, it was more than possible," Margaret said. "It was fact. I told Jane and Kendra that the night of the explosion, but they're both cautious. They wanted to believe me, but they couldn't bring themselves to raise their hopes until they had proof." She beamed. "So I sent Kendra to use all that logic and deductive reasoning that she does so well to gather their proof. Didn't she do a fine job?"

"Excellent. Now tell me how you knew that Eve's being alive was a fact."

She sighed. "Okay, here it comes." She made a face. "There's a wolf pack in those mountains, and wolves are usually easy for me to deal with. Not like a dog, but close enough."

"What?"

"The pack is always on the hunt for food. Naturally, since they're in the wild, they would have to be. When the wolves noticed Doane and Eve in the mountains, they were considering them for their next meal."

"Where is this going?" Catherine was frowning. "I don't want a nature lesson, Margaret."

"But you want an answer from me. That's what I'm giving you. For some reason, the wolves became intrigued by Doane."

Margaret tilted her head. "Peculiar. But you can never tell what a wolf will do. Anyway, they started tracking, shadowing him . . . and Eve. I asked if it was because of the food factor. But that wasn't the reason, it was something else. Doane had to go away. It was important for him to go away."

"Go away?"

"Die. Doane had to die. It was important to the wolves that he die."

Catherine couldn't take any more of this. "Stop spinning fairy tales. I want answers, Margaret."

"You're getting them." She added simply, "The wolves didn't like Doane, but there was something else. They felt he had to die. It was something to do with the natural order. I couldn't get it clear. It had some connection with death and silence and a little red-haired kid."

"Margaret."

"You want to know how I know."

"I want to know why you're bullshitting me."

"I know because the night of the fire, I tracked down one of the males who was staking out the ghost town. I heard him howling, and I thought maybe . . ." She smiled. "And I struck it rich, like they say in the gold towns. Pure gold, Catherine. Karak was pure gold."

"Karak?"

"The wolf. That's the closest I can translate his name."

"Wolves have names?"

"Yes, not all animals identify themselves in that way even mentally, of course. But wolves are on a higher plane." She drew a deep breath. "I'd better get this over with quickly. You're getting impatient and angry and ready to call the local booby hatch. Look, I have a certain ability to communicate with animals. I've had it since I was a kid. No, I'm not some kind of Dr.

Doolittle. I just get impressions and can sometimes tap into memories. It can help on occasion. I was working as a tech at a canine experimental facility down in the Caribbean on Summer Island when I was drawn into all this. They thought I was damn valuable." She grimaced. "Weird, but valuable. And they eventually got used to me. Does it make you feel better to know that those vets actually believed in me?"

"No, I make my own opinions."

"Then make it now."

Catherine looked her directly in the eye. Margaret never flinched but held her gaze with boldness and shining clarity.

Truth. Catherine couldn't know whatever else comprised the person who was Margaret Douglas, but she recognized honesty.

Catherine shrugged. "Kendra says you're not a phony. That's all that's really important. As for the rest, I've run into stranger things. Voodoo, snake charmers . . . ghosts. I grew up on the streets of Hong Kong, and I've traveled all over the world. It's hard to cling strictly to reality when you've gone face-to-face with some of the things I have." She added, "So bring on your wolf if he can help me find out anything about Eve."

"I didn't expect that." Margaret's face glowed with delight. "It's not often I run into someone who is easy. Joe was a little skeptical, but he gave me a chance. Kendra was very difficult. It's hard for her to accept anything that's not black-and-white, and I'm definitely on the gray side."

"So are wolves. Can we get back to your story now?"

"Oh, yes. Karak. After I tracked him down, it took hours before I was able to find out anything other than that it was necessary that Doane die or go away as he termed it. But when he began to trust me, he let me see more." She paused. "It was the stream. He saw Doane and Eve go down the stream in a raft

and go ashore miles away from the town. Eve didn't move, probably unconscious. Doane deflated the raft and tossed it in a vehicle and took off."

"Where?"

"Out of the forest, headed south. They lost his scent after that and came back to the mountains."

"Damn."

Margaret chuckled. "You can't expect anything more. They did the best they could. Anyway, Kendra believed me when I showed her where the vehicle had been parked, and she found the tire prints. After that, she started investigating on her own. She didn't tell anyone what she was doing until she'd gathered all the information, then she went to Joe and Jane to decide what to do."

"And they decided on this charade."

"Yes, a chance to take Doane off guard." Margaret nodded. "It might or might not work, but if he doesn't expect anyone to know he's alive, it gives us a little edge. At this point, we'll take any advantage we can get." She added soberly, "We have to find her, Catherine. In those hours after we thought she was dead, it almost broke Jane . . . and Joe. Eve is too important to too many people to let her go. All of those people who came to this memorial service . . . The stories I've heard today. Every life is important, but Eve is special."

"Yes, she is," Catherine said. For an instant, memories flooded back to her of moments in her own life when Eve had stepped in and given her time and risked her life to help bring her boy home to her. She cleared her throat. "Of course we'll get her back. Do you know anything else that could help me?"

Margaret shook her head. "Nothing but that those wolves really wanted to bring down Doane for some reason."

“That’s interesting but not pertinent.” She smiled. “Now I suggest that you put on your shoes, and we go back to that crowd. I want to talk to Joe again if I can get him away from all those mourners who have him cornered.”

“He’s hating it. He’s particularly angry about all those reporters and media people he had to let come to make sure Doane would know about Eve’s service. He said Eve would hate this kind of show if she were really dead.”

“If she were really dead, she wouldn’t care either way.”

Margaret gestured. “You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do. She’d just want to fade away and live on as a memory. That’s what I’d want, too.” They had reached the edge of the trees, and she saw that Joe was still surrounded. She’d have to wait until he was free, she realized impatiently.

She had a sudden thought. “Zander. Is Lee Zander here? I need to talk to him. He seems to be the center of this equation.”

“Zander didn’t come. He disappeared shortly after the fire was put out.” Margaret shook her head. “Don’t count on talking to him. I’m not even sure he cares whether Eve is alive or not. Though the idea that Doane is still a threat to him might spur him.”

“To hell with what he cares about. I’m going to talk to him.”

“Whatever.” Margaret was strolling toward Jane. “I warned you. Everyone has to march to their own drummer.”

Catherine stayed where she was at the edge of the crowd, waiting for Joe.

She could see why Joe was on edge about the media. A TV cameraman was drifting around setting up shots of different dignitaries. There was no bank of microphones, but there were two reporters who had hand mikes.

She instinctively tried to fade back into the shadows. Was it worth it? All this media attention that Joe Quinn hated so much and was enduring on the chance that it might help Eve in some way.

Are you out there watching, Doane?