

Morris bypassed the elevator and took the stairs to the third floor. The sleek hospital buildings had surprised him. Given the name—Whispering Pines—he'd half expected a *Gone With The Wind* pseudo-mansion. His quick Internet search on the private hospital had disclosed a split personality for the place: half day spa/cosmetic surgery recovery center, half nursing home.

Dorothy Wainwright's driver's license said she was a fifty-three-year-old brunette. The photo in Caroline's living room said her mother was gorgeous. Betting on the cosmetic-surgery side of Whispering Pines' business, he wondered what could've gone so badly wrong that the woman was still a patient at the facility.

He paused outside Room 309. An alto voice rose and fell in a gentle pattern. He touched the wooden panel, silently widening the opening. Caroline sat beside her mother's bed, reading aloud. He caught an occasional word, a phrase, but mostly he listened to the rhythm of her words. Her voice soothed; the cadence captured him.

With a mental shake, he withdrew from the spell. How long had he been standing there listening?

He watched her, trying to maintain a professional distance. In the property manager's office, after a rough night and a tougher morning, he'd thought she was pretty—better looking in person than in her pictures. Today...wow. Dark hair cascaded around her face. He could see its lustrous texture from the hallway. Unconsciously rubbing his fingers, he imagined it slipping through them.

She wore jeans, a dark shirt, and sneakers. Girl shoes, not tennis or running shoes. A lightweight jacket hung on the back of her chair. Simple clothes, not intended to draw attention, but he noticed the figure beneath them anyway. All the right curves, in all the right places.

He studied her features. On the surface, she looked a lot like Natalie, but he only had to *look* at her to see they were nothing alike. Natalie was a party girl, through and through. Caroline—

He jerked his thoughts away from that slippery path. Caroline was off-limits, a potential victim, a potential witness, and—his lips twitched—according to Pennell, a potential murderer.

Feeling like a voyeur, he tried to see her as a suspect. He drew in a breath, gathering impressions. She appeared completely under control. Competent. Used to handling emergencies with her mother and at work. A far cry from the confused woman the officer on the scene had described, the woman who'd nearly fainted over crime scene photos.

Could she have arranged the murders?

He had to ask the question.

He still didn't know the answer.

Maybe he could interview the mother later. She might know if something was going wrong in her daughter's life—and be willing to tell him about it.

He shifted, uncomfortable with his next thoughts. Why had Caroline agreed to this meeting? What did she hope to accomplish?

What did he?

Caroline must have heard him move or felt the change in the airflow through the open

door, because her head suddenly turned, angled in his direction. Her finger rose to her lips in a silencing command. His mouth struggled with a smile at her audacity. When was the last time a civilian told him to do something? And when had he paid the slightest attention?

Caroline rose and bent over the prone figure, murmuring words too soft for him to hear.

As he entered the room, she straightened and smoothed the blanket. His gaze followed her fingers. They slid across her mother's shoulder and eased down her arm. When was the last time a woman touched him with that gentle a caress?

Focus, he chided. Wrong time. Wrong place. Wrong woman.

He passed the bathroom and stopped short when the sleeping woman fully registered. The woman in the bed looked eighty-three instead of fifty-three. He took in the wasted limbs and sparse hair, wondering if he'd stumbled into the wrong room.

He flicked a glance at Caroline. Right room, right mother, wrong assumptions.

A flicker of anger bloomed. The mother was closer to death than life. No wonder Caroline spent so much time here. What was Mr. Wainwright thinking, running around the country with his wife in this condition?

"Detective."

He turned back to Caroline. At her gesture, he stepped into the hall. She closed the door behind them. Her brief smile never reached her eyes.

"I want to do whatever I can to help," she said.

Her voice resonated in the hollow of his chest. Ignoring the reaction, he said, "Good. Is there a cafeteria here? Some place we can sit?"

Her blue eyes focused on him. They studied him, as if he were a puzzle she couldn't figure out. "I arranged to use the conference room on this floor."

He studied her with equal frankness. Beyond the physical attraction, he noticed the intelligence and awareness in her posture. Was Pennell right? Was she capable of murder?

His hand swung open. "Lead on."

They passed the nurses' station and turned into a side corridor.

"Do you have any idea who did it?" she asked.

She had a nice walk, confident, like she knew where she was going and what she was doing. "We're investigating several possibilities." It was a rote answer, the one he always gave.

She stopped. Her head tilted and her forehead puckered in a searching expression. "Let me see if I have this straight. I'm supposed to tell you everything I know or suspect about my friends, but you aren't going to tell me anything."

He couldn't treat her any differently than he would another witness. "Well, basically, that's the way it works. We have to play it close to the chest. We can't risk leaking information."

She propped a hand on her hip. "Oh, you mean like you did yesterday, practically calling a press conference to announce I was your main suspect?" Color rose in her cheeks, and she bit the corner of her lip.

*Damn. Don't bail on me now.* He softened his expression. "We really don't know much right now, but it does look like drugs might have played a part."

“I saw that speculation in the papers too. Really playing those cards close. You know”—she pivoted, turning back toward the main hallway—“maybe this isn’t a great idea after all.”

“Ms. Wainwright. Caroline. I need what you can tell me. It might not be drug related, but how am I going to figure that out if you won’t talk to me?”

She stopped, her hands fisted at her sides.

He watched the rigid line of her back, practically hearing the mental debate, hoping her internal battle would lead her in the right direction. The confident façade was a front, he realized, only partially masking how much the past few days had taken from her.

Her shoulders sagged under the load she carried. “Sorry. I’m a little overwhelmed.”

She turned around.

“I’d be surprised if you weren’t. Is this the conference room?” He gestured at the only open door on the corridor.

Moments later, he faced her across a small round table. He wanted to ask about her mother but wasn’t sure he had the right, especially given their fragile truce.

She picked up on it. Or else she was so used to the question, she answered it automatically. “Cancer.”

Like that said it all. And given the way Mrs. Wainwright looked, the big “C” pretty much covered it. “I understand you spend a lot of time here.”

She gave him an odd look. “You understand?”

What *had* he meant by that? He’d thought it was a way to get her talking about Saturday night at the hospital. From there he could ease her into Sunday morning and the murders. But from her expression, she was asking if he understood *why* she spent the time. Which was a question he wanted to discuss over a quiet drink, not in the context of a murder investigation.

He gave a silent sigh. Whatever he said next would probably ruin any chance of that drink ever happening. “If my mother was that sick, I’d want the chance to say good-bye. To know I’d done all I could.”

Damn, what was wrong with him? That wasn’t what he meant to say. Her friends had just died, and here he was reminding her about her mother’s impending death.

He forced his hands to remain flat on the table rather than scrub them over his face. He wasn’t above using anything to coax a suspect or witness to talk, so why did he feel like such a jerk?

He wasn’t manipulating her. He’d told her the truth. Doing so had offered her far too personal an insight. Clearly, he was the one who needed the distance, not Caroline.

The next second, he realized something had shifted in the room, as if a physical barrier had lowered. The tension had lessened. Another emotion—Sympathy? Understanding?—replaced Caroline’s distant expression. With his simple observation—he loved his mother—Caroline had moved from flat-out suspicious of him to a tentative trust.

And for some equally ridiculous reason, he trusted her. Pennell was going to kill him. His sergeant would bite his head off. But he believed her. There was no way this woman had arranged a murder for hire.

Stalling, giving both of them time to adjust, he removed a notebook and a recorder from his briefcase. “Why don’t you start at the beginning and tell me what happened?”

“There’s not much to tell.” Caroline frowned and twisted a lock of hair. She ran through the events leading up to Sunday morning.

“Tell me about your friend. What’s her full name?”

“Natalie Anne Jennings. She lives in Atlanta, but her parents are in Macon.”

Present tense, he noticed as she gave him the address. It still wasn’t real.

“I called them.” She stopped, her composure cracking. Her lips thinned and her throat worked as she fought tears.

He waited a moment, remembering the call from the Macon PD he hadn’t returned. “You called her parents?”

She nodded. A muscle in her cheek twitched as she struggled for control.

Notification calls sucked. Obviously, the conversation had been difficult for her. Her hands clenched her upper arms; her fingers were white. If she didn’t ease the pressure, she was going to leave bruises.

“Reese’s parents already knew.”

“You called them too?” Calling the deceased’s family was one of the worst parts of law enforcement. Bethea’s parents had taken the news hard, and he could imagine how they reacted when Caroline called them. His respect for her rose another notch.

“I had to.”

Most people wouldn’t. He moved things around on the table for a minute, giving her time to recover.

He led her through the ordeal, in detail this time, from Natalie’s arrival on Friday to this meeting. After probing for details about the various relationships, he took her through the weekend several more times, looking for holes, but her story matched the evidence he’d found. He made notes as she talked, listening for the little signs that indicated she might be lying. All he heard was her bewilderment and determination to find the murderer.

“I still can’t believe they’re dead.” She traced a circle on the table with her finger.

“Ms. Wainwright, there’s one area we haven’t discussed.” He waited until he’d recaptured her attention. “This took place in your home. Is someone trying to hurt you?”

She met his eyes. “I don’t know.”

He waited for more.

Her hands rose and fell in a frustrated gesture. “Don’t you think I’ve asked myself that a thousand times? Ever since it happened, I’ve asked *why*? Was it random? Were they after me? One of them?” A flush climbed her cheeks, but her eyes didn’t waver. “Natalie looks a lot like me. She was in my bed.”

She stopped, her lips pressed tightly together. He was intently aware of her—how she held her head, her hands. The way she stood and sat. He didn’t want to be aware of her on that level, knew it couldn’t go anywhere. He also recognized the sensation wasn’t going to go away.

“Nothing makes sense.” Her fingers clenched the edge of the table. Her expression said

she was remembering more than she was saying. She was finally feeling the events. Until now, her emotions would've been too numb. Her friends had died, violently. Nothing he said could touch that pain.

Biting her lip, she again blinked back tears.

Morris stalled, reading through his notes. He sometimes felt awkward when a victim or witness cried, but Caroline's struggle to control her emotions punched through his professional skin. He wanted to take her into his arms and let her sob, but he couldn't. Instead, he had to be heartless. "Caroline, I know this is hard, but I'm not the enemy. I need your help to find whoever killed your friends."

Swallowing hard, she whispered, "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry for your losses. All of them," he said—and meant it.

She took a deep breath, visibly setting her grief aside.

He waited a beat, but she didn't speak. "Can you think of any reason someone would want to hurt your friends?"

"No." She looked up. Her eyes were red-rimmed but focused. "I've tried to think through the possibilities." Her forefinger flicked out. "One, Natalie got mixed up in something in Atlanta. Trouble followed her up the road."

"That's possible," he said. They hadn't really considered that angle. He needed to call the Georgia officers.

Caroline shook her head. "She never mentioned any problems. And believe me, Natalie can't keep a secret. If something were wrong, she'd have told me."

Another finger came out. "I'm sure you've heard the stories—Reese and his women. That was before Natalie, but even if he made a massive error in judgment about some woman's mental state, I can't believe she'd break into my condo. Or if he slipped up and got involved with a married woman, her husband would have the same problem. How would he know where to go, that Reese would be at my place?"

Before Morris could ask her to explain the "error in judgment" or prod her about Reese's drugs, she said, "There may be another possibility."

"Oh?" His attention immediately sharpened. They'd already covered his primary motives.

Her fingers drummed the table. "As far as I know, no one hates me. My family has money, but most of it's tied up in Cypher. The company's never been an active target before."

Before? "Is something different this time? Have there been threats?"

"I'm not aware of any."

She was hedging. "Anything from a disgruntled employee?"

"It's just a feeling. That something's going on. With the company."

He found himself in the uncomfortable position of pulling a Pennell. He couldn't take her instincts to court. He needed something solid. "You aren't involved in the company?"

Caroline shook her head. He tried to focus on the subtext of her words rather than her perfume and the way her chest rose and fell sharply when she tried not to cry.

"It was a mutual decision. I enjoy my work with Robeshaw Advertising. I called Crystal

earlier today. She said the police were there. Was that you?"

He wasn't going to let her off that easily. "I could talk to your father about threats to the company."

Her body language said, *Good luck with that one.*

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Already tried that, huh?"

"He's big on Need to Know."

"What about you?" He tried to say it neutrally. He didn't want to be attracted to her, but he wasn't looking forward to hearing about her love life either.

"Me? I've already told you, nobody's threatened me."

"This could be directed at you personally rather than your family. Maybe an old boyfriend?"

She recoiled as if he'd slapped her. "Bill would never—"

"If it is directed at you," he interrupted, "the guy could try again. We need to consider the possibility."

For a long moment, she stared at him. Then she released a slow breath and relaxed her shoulders. "You can take my old boyfriends off your suspect list." A wry expression twitched her mouth. "I can think of one guy who broke my heart back in college, but I didn't exactly leave a trail of crushed men in my wake."

*Don't sell yourself short.* "Anything recent?"

She tensed, then gave a small shrug. "Bill Walker and I dated for a few years. The others were short-term. You know, go out a couple of times. Things don't click and you move on."

He jotted down the names she provided, wondered about the ex, and then tapped the list with his pen. "Actually these may be the ones we're interested in."

"Why?"

"Maybe you weren't attracted, but the guy was. He's been nursing those feelings, brooding, until something happened to set him off. If he saw Natalie and thought it was you..." His words maintained a delicate balance between guilt, pressure, and trust.

She stared at the tabletop, lost in thought.

He watched a small frown crease her forehead. The light reflected off her dark, glossy hair and created shadows below her eyes and cheekbones. She had beautiful skin. Warm-toned, glowing, supple. He'd love to touch it. His eyes tracked down her cheek to her mouth. The lower lip was fuller than the top one. She'd pulled in the corner and was slowly chewing it as she concentrated. He gave his imagination more rein and thought about those lips on his, on his body. Desire slid hot and impatient through him. *Whoa. Don't go there.*

He closed his eyes, fighting the sensation. *Think about something else. The case. The murderer.*

He opened his eyes. She was watching him, concern tightening her features. "Are you okay?"

*No.* Spots of warmth bloomed on his cheeks. "Yeah, just tired. Sorry."

"We can finish this later."

“No,” he interrupted. “Did you remember someone?”

She looked at him again, and he wondered how much she’d read in his earlier expression. Her gaze slid away. “There’s one guy. Steve Lyles. He’s a talented artist, but he’s one of those guys that... It’s not so much that he’s a nerd, although that’s part of it. Mostly, he’s shy.”

The name rang a bell. Her coworkers had mentioned this guy. “And?”

She absently twisted her ring. The deep green stone emphasized the warm tone of her skin. “Steve loves to fly. He has an instrument rating, not just VFR.”

“What’s that?”

“Visual Flying Rules. Most pilots fly with a basic license, using visual landmarks, instead of relying on cockpit instrumentation. Anyway, Steve said he was required to do touch-and-goes to maintain the instrument rating.”

“Touch-and-goes?”

“Landings and immediate takeoffs. One Saturday, Steve asked if I wanted to go with him. Dad used to take us flying when we were little—before he started Cypher. I always loved it. I didn’t realize how much I’d missed it until Steve invited me.”

She shifted in her chair. “It was a gorgeous day. Steve did his practice session, then we flew over the lake, up into the foothills. The nice thing about small planes is they don’t go so high. You can see everything.”

He smiled in what he hoped was an encouraging way. When he flew, he preferred a wide-body jet, preferably one with multiple engines.

“I guess we were up about an hour. Steve landed. And that was it. At least, I thought that was it.”

“What happened?”

She straightened the ring and directed her attention at the door. “He started mooning around me at the office, staring and stuff. The guys noticed. Some of them teased me. Others started the ‘Why don’t you go out with him’ routine. It was embarrassing. I mean, I was just being nice. It never occurred to me he would read more into it.”

Morris flashed on Jennifer’s comment that Steve’s actions were blown out of proportion. So far, Caroline hadn’t mentioned anything particularly troubling.

Caroline lowered her gaze. “I didn’t handle it very well. I talked more about the guy I was dating. Kinda ignored the puppy dog expressions.”

She added softly, “I didn’t mean to hurt his feelings.”

There was nothing he could say that was appropriate to the circumstances. “It probably isn’t him, but we should check him out. Does he still work with you?”

She shook her head. “It got so bad, my boss told Steve to knock it off or find another job.”

Morris forced his body to stay relaxed, but his internal radar pinged. “Did he?”

“Find another job? I think so.”

“Have you heard anything more from him?”

She sighed and retraced the whirl of wood in the tabletop. “Yes and no.”

“And that means?”

“He got my cell phone number. I ended up having to change it. And Mr. Robeshaw told him if he kept hanging around the building and following me to meetings, he’d have him arrested.”

“Caroline, they make things called restraining orders for people like that.”

A blush stained her cheeks. “Mr. Robeshaw made me get one. I felt bad about it. Steve would never hurt me.”

Morris kept his comments to himself. She’d just described the classic stalker. He put another star beside the guy’s name. “Anything else?”

She shook her head.

Her hair slid across her shoulders in a dark wave that he fought to ignore. “I think that’s it for now.”

“For now?” The slightest smile creased her lips. “You mean we might get the joy of doing this again?”

“Probably. I’m sure I’ll have more questions.” He’d invent them for a chance to see her again. “I’ll need you to sign a formal statement.”

Her eyebrows twitched. “Great.”

He could’ve sworn she was rolling her eyes under the downcast lids. He tried to decide if it was him or the questions she didn’t want to face again. He glanced at his watch. “Do you have time to run by your condo? There’s still a possibility this was a robbery that went bad. The usual targets—electronics and cash—weren’t touched. You can tell me if anything else is missing.” *Something you might know about that would attract an assassin. Something we overlooked. Something that could break this case wide open.*

She was already shaking her head. “I’m not going back to that condo.”

“It’s not easy. I understand. But—”

“Ever.”

The finality of her statement made him drop the subject. He couldn’t force her to go. He’d talk her into it later, though. “Where will you stay? In case I need to get in touch with you.”

She hesitated, then said, “I checked into the Claymont.”

“Not with your parents?” Surely her father had security arrangements. And she wouldn’t be alone.

“No.”

He tried to decipher her expression. Her features tightened when he mentioned staying at her parents’ house. Tension at home? Or was it simply wanting to escape the questions and the memories?

Her face grew haggard, fatigue overtaking her awareness.

She’d shut down. He wouldn’t get anything else today.

He rose. “Thanks for talking with me. I realize how difficult this is.”

He waited while she checked on her mother—asleep—and then walked her to her car. “Will you be okay? I can request protection for the short-term.”

“Just find whoever did this.” Her eyes bore into his with sudden intensity. “They can’t get away with it.”

“We’ll do our best.”

Another strange expression crossed her face. For a second, he wondered if she’d ask if their best was good enough.

He asked himself the question as he watched her drive away.