

Chapter 1

There were days when Molly Snow loved her sister, but this wasn't one. She had risen at dawn to be Robin's water-bearer, only to learn that Robin had changed her mind and decided to do her long run in the late afternoon, fully expecting Molly to accommodate her.

And why not? Robin was a world-class runner - a marathoner with a dozen wins under her belt, incredible stats, and a serious shot at making the Olympics. She was used to people changing their plans to suit hers. She was the star.

Resenting that for the millionth time, Molly said no to late afternoon, and though Robin followed her from bedroom to bathroom and back, she refused to give in. Robin could have easily run that morning; she just wanted to have breakfast with a friend. And wouldn't Molly love to do that herself! But she couldn't, because her day was backed up with work. She had to be at Snow Hill at seven to tend to the greenhouse before customers arrived, had to do purchasing, track inventory and sales, preorder for the holiday season; and on top of her own chores, she had to cover for her parents, who were on the road. That meant handling any issues that arose and, worse, leading a management meeting - not Molly's idea of fun.

Her mother wouldn't be pleased that she had let Robin down, but Molly was feeling too put-upon to care.

The good news was that if Robin went running late in the day, she would be out when Molly got home. So, with the sun bronzing her face through the open windows, Molly mellowed as she drove back from Snow Hill. She pulled mail from the roadside box, without asking herself why her sister never did it, and swung in to crunch down the dirt drive. The roses were a soft peach, their fragrance all the more precious for the short life they had left. Beyond were the hydrangea she had planted, turned a gorgeous blue by a touch of aluminum, a sprinkling of coffee grounds, and lots of TLC.

Pulling up under the pin oak that shaded the cottage she and Robin had rented for the last two years but were about to lose, Molly opened the back of the Jeep and began to unload. She was nearly at the house, juggling a drooping split-leaf philodendron, a basket of gourds, and a cat carrier, when her cell phone rang.

She could just hear it. *I'm sorry for yelling this morning, Molly, but where are you now? My car won't start, I'm in the middle of nowhere, and I'm beat.*

Molly was shifting bundles to free up a key when the phone rang again. A third ring came as she knelt to put her load down just inside the door. That was when guilt set in. Seconds shy of voice mail, she pulled the phone from her jeans and flipped it open.

'Where are you?' she asked, but the voice at the other end wasn't Robin's.

'Is this Molly?'

'Yes.'

'I'm a nursing supervisor at Dickenson-May Memorial. There's been an accident. Your sister is in the ER. We'd like you to come.'

'A car accident?' Molly asked in alarm.

'A running accident.'

Molly hung her head. Another one of those. *Oh, Robin*, she thought and peered into the carrier, more worried about the little amber cat huddled inside than about her sister. Robin was a chronic daredevil. She claimed the reward was worth it, but the price? A broken arm, dislocated shoulder, ankle sprains, fasciitis, neuroma - you name it, she'd had it. This small cat, on the other hand, was an innocent victim.

'What happened?' Molly asked distractedly, making little sounds to coax the cat out.

'The doctor will explain. Do you live far?'

No, not far. But experience had taught her that she would only have to wait for X-Rays, even longer for an MRI. Reaching into the carrier, she gently drew out the cat. 'I'm ten minutes away. How serious is it?'

'I can't tell you. But we do need you here.'

The cat was shaking badly. She had been found locked in a shed with ten other cats. The vet guessed she was barely two.

'My sister has her phone with her,' Molly tried, knowing that if she could talk directly with Robin, she would learn more. 'Does she have cell reception?'

'No. I'm sorry. Your parents' number is here with yours on her shoe tag. Will you call them, or should I?'

If the nurse was holding the shoe, the shoe was off Robin's foot. A ruptured Achilles tendon? That would be bad. Worried in spite of herself, Molly said, 'They're out of state.' She tried humor. 'I'm a big girl. I can take it. Give me a hint?'

But the nurse was immune to charm. 'The doctor will explain. Will you come?'

Did she have a choice?

Resigned, Molly cradled the cat and carried it to her bedroom at the back of the cottage. After nesting it in the folds of the comforter, she put litter and food nearby, and then sat on the edge of the bed. She knew it was dumb bringing an animal here when they had to move out in a week, but her mother refused to let another cat live at the nursery, and this one needed a home. The vet

had kept her for several days, but she hadn't done well with the other animals. She wasn't only malnourished. She looked like she had been at the losing end of more than one fight. Her little body was poised, as if she expected another blow.

'I won't hurt you,' Molly whispered assuredly and, giving the cat space, returned to the hall. She trickled water on the philodendron - too much too soon would only drain through - then took it to the loft and set it out of direct light. It, too, needed TLC. But later.

First, a shower. It would have to be quick one - she could only put off the hospital so long. But the greenhouse was hot in September, and after a major delivery of fall plants, she had spent much of the afternoon breaking down crates, moving pots, reorganizing displays, and sweating.

The shower cleared her mind. Back in her room to dress, though, she couldn't find the cat. Calling softly, she looked under the bed, in the open closet, behind a stack of cartons. She checked Robin's room, the small living room, even the basket of gourds - which was only one more thing to have to pack, but it filled an aesthetic need and could easily hide a small cat.

She would have looked further, if her conscience hadn't begun to nag. Robin was in good hands at the hospital, but with their parents somewhere between Atlanta and Manchester, and with her own name first on that tag, Molly had to make tracks.

Letting her long hair curl as it dried, she put on clean jeans and a tee. Then she drove off with the cell in her lap, fully expecting that Robin would call. She would be resilient and sheepish - unless it truly was an Achilles rupture, which would mean surgery and weeks of no running. They were all in trouble if that was the case. An unhappy Robin was a misery, and the timing of an accident now couldn't be worse. Today's fifteen-miler was a lead-up to the New York marathon. If she placed among the top ten American women there, she would be guaranteed a spot at the Olympic trials in the spring.

The phone didn't ring. Molly wasn't sure if that was good or bad, but she didn't see the point of leaving a message for her mother until she knew more. Kathryn and Robin were joined at the hip. If Robin had an in-grown toenail, Kathryn felt the pain.

It was lovely to be loved that way, Molly groused and, in the next breath, felt remorse. Robin had worked hard to get where she was. And hey, Molly was as proud of her as the rest on race day.

It just seemed like running monopolized all their lives.

Resentment to remorse and back was such a boringly endless cycle that Molly was glad to pull up at the hospital. Dickenson-May sat on a bluff overlooking the Connecticut River just north of town. The setting would have been charming if not for the reasons that brought people here.

Hurrying inside, Molly gave her name to the ER desk attendant and added, 'My sister is here.'

A nurse approached and gestured her to a cubicle at the end of the hall, where she fully expected to see Robin grinning at her from a gurney. What she saw, though, were doctors and machines,

and what she heard wasn't her sister's embarrassed, *Oh, Molly, I did it again*, but the murmur of somber voices and the rhythmic beep of machines. Molly saw bare feet - callused, definitely Robin's - but nothing else. For the first time, she felt a qualm.

One of the doctors came over. He was a tall man who wore large, black-framed glasses. 'Are you her sister?'

'Yes.' Through the space he had left, she caught a glimpse of Robin's head - short dark hair messed as usual, but her eyes were closed, and a tube was taped over her mouth. Alarmed, Molly whispered, 'What happened?'

'Your sister had a heart attack.'

She recoiled. 'A *what?*'

'She was found unconscious on the road by another runner. He knew enough to start CPR.'

'*Unconscious?* But she came to, didn't she?' She didn't have to be unconscious. Her eyes might be closed out of sheer exhaustion. Running fifteen miles would do that.

'No, she hasn't come to yet,' said the doctor. 'We pulled up hospital records on her, but there's no mention of a heart problem.'

'Because there isn't one,' Molly said and, slipping past him, went to the bed. 'Robin?' When her sister didn't reply, she eyed the tube. It wasn't the only worrisome thing.

'The tube connects to a ventilator,' the doctor explained. 'These wires connect to electrodes that measure her heartbeat. The cuff takes her blood pressure. The IV is for fluids and meds.'

So much, so soon? Molly gave Robin's shoulder a cautious shake. 'Robin? Can you hear me?'

Robin's eyelids remained flat. Her skin was colorless.

Molly grew more frightened. 'Maybe she was hit by a car?' she asked the doctor, because that made more sense than a heart attack at the age of thirty-two.

'There's no other injury. When we did a chest X-ray to check on the breathing tube, we could see heart damage. Right now, the beat is normal.'

'But why is she still unconscious? Is she sedated?'

'No. She hasn't regained consciousness.'

'Then you're not trying hard enough,' Molly decided and gave her sister's arm a frantic jiggle.

'Robin? Wake up!'

A long hand stilled hers. Quietly, the doctor said, 'We suspect there's brain damage. She's unresponsive. Her pupils don't react to light. She doesn't respond to voice commands. Tickle her toe, prick her leg - there's nothing.'

'She can't have brain damage,' Molly said - perhaps absurdly, but the whole scene was absurd. 'She's in *training*.' When the doctor didn't reply, she turned to her sister again. The machines were blinking and beeping with the regularity of, yes, machines, but they were unreal. 'Heart or brain - which one?'

'Both. Her heart stopped pumping. We don't know how long she was lying on the road before she was found. A healthy 30-something might have ten minutes before the lack of oxygen would cause brain damage. Do you know what time she started her run?'

'She was planning to start around five, but I don't know whether she made it.' *You should have known, Molly. You would have known if you'd driven her yourself.* 'Where was she found?'

The doctor checked his papers. 'Just past Norwich. That would put her a little more than five miles from here.'

But coming or going? It made a difference if they were trying to gauge how long she had been unconscious. The location of her car would tell, but Molly didn't know where it was. 'Who found her?'

'I can't give you his name, but he's likely the reason she's alive right now.'

Starting to panic, Molly held her forehead. 'She could wake up and be fine, right?'

The doctor hesitated seconds too long. 'She could. The next day or two are crucial. Have you called your parents?'

Her parents. Nightmare. She checked her watch. They wouldn't have landed yet. 'My mom will be devastated. Can't you do something before I call them?'

'We want her stabilized before we move her.'

'*Move her where?*' Molly asked. She had a flash shot of the morgue. Too much *CSI*.

'The ICU. She'll be watched closely there.'

Molly's imagination was stuck on the other image. 'She isn't going to *die*, is she?' If Robin died, it would be Molly's fault. If she had been there, this wouldn't have happened. If she hadn't been such a rotten sister, Robin would be back at the cottage, swigging water and recording her times.

'Let's take it step by step,' the doctor said. 'First, stabilization. Beyond that, it's really a question of waiting. There's no husband listed on her tag. Does she have kids?'

'No.'

'Well, that's something.'

'It's *not*.' Molly was desperate. 'You don't *understand*. I can't tell my mother Robin is lying here like this.' Kathryn would blame her. Instantly. Even before she knew that it truly was Molly's fault. It had always been that way. In her mother's eyes, Molly was five years younger and ten times more troublesome than Robin.

Molly had tried to change that. She had grown up helping Kathryn in the greenhouse, and taking on more responsibility as Snow Hill grew. She had worked there summers while Robin trained, and had gotten the degree in horticulture that Kathryn had sworn would stand her in good stead.

Working at Snow Hill wasn't a hardship. Molly loved plants. But she also loved pleasing her mother, which wasn't always an easy thing to do, because Molly was impulsive. She spoke without thinking, often saying things her mother didn't want to hear. And she hated pandering to Robin. That was her greatest crime of all.

Now the doctor wanted her to call Kathryn and tell her that Robin might have *brain damage* because *she*, Molly, hadn't been there for her sister?

It was too much to ask of her, Molly decided. After all, she wasn't the only one in the family.

While the doctor waited expectantly, she pulled out her phone. 'I want my brother here. He has to help.'

Chapter 2

Christopher Snow was at the kitchen table, eating the flank steak that his wife had grilled. Erin sat on his right and, on his left, in her high chair, was their daughter, Chloe.

'Is it okay?' Erin asked when he was halfway done.

'Great,' he answered easily. Erin was a good cook. He never had complaints.

Helping himself to seconds, he picked out a kernel of corn from the salad and put it on the baby's tray. 'Hey,' he said softly, 'how's my pretty girl?' When the child grinned, he melted.

'So,' Erin said, 'was your day okay?'

Nodding, he dug into his salad. The dressing was great, too. Homemade.

The baby struggled to pick up the corn. He was intrigued by her concentration. After a time, he turned up her hand and put the slick nugget in her palm.

'How was your meeting with the Samuel people?' Erin asked.

He nodded *fine*, and ate more of his salad.

'Did they agree to your terms?' she asked, sounding impatient. When he didn't reply, she said, 'Do you care?'

'Sure, I care. But they'll be a while going over the figures, so for now it's out of my hands. Why are you angry?'

'Chris, this is a major building project for Snow Hill. You spent all last night preparing your pitch. I want to know how it went.'

'It went fine.'

'That doesn't tell me much,' she remarked. 'Want to elaborate? Or maybe you just don't want me to know.'

'Erin.' He set down his fork. 'We've talked about this. I've been working all day. I want to get away from it now.'

'So do I,' his wife said, 'only my day revolves around an eight-month-old child. I need adult conversation. If you won't talk about work, what do we talk about?'

'Can't we just enjoy the silence?' Christopher asked. He loved his wife. One of the best parts of their relationship was that they didn't have to talk all the time. At least, that's what he thought.

But she didn't let it go. 'I need stimulation.'

'You don't love Chloe?'

'Of *course*, I love her. You *know* I love her. Why do you always ask me that?'

He raised his hands in bewilderment. 'You just said she wasn't enough. You were the one who wanted a baby right away, Erin. You were the one who wanted to stop working.'

'I was pregnant. I *had* to stop working.'

He didn't know what to say. They had been the town's favorite newlyweds, both blonde-haired and green-eyed (Chris would say his own eyes were hazel, but no one cared about the distinction). They had been an adorable couple.

But what was happening between them now was not so adorable. 'Go back to work, then,' he said, trying to please her.

'Do you want me to work?'

'If you want to.'

She stared at him, those green eyes vivid. 'And do what with Chloe? I don't want her in day care.'

'Okay.' He hated all arguments, but this was the worst. 'What *do* you want?'

'I want my husband to talk to me during dinner. I want him to talk to me after dinner. I want him to discuss things with me. I don't want him to come home and just stare at the Red Sox. I want him to share his day with me.'

Quietly, he said, 'I'm an accountant. I work in the family business. There is nothing exciting about what I do.'

'I'd call a new building project exciting. But if you hate it, quit.'

'I don't hate it. I love what I do. I'm just saying that it doesn't make for great conversation. And I'm really tired tonight.' He did want to watch the Red Sox. He loved the team.

'Tired of me? Tired of Chloe? Tired of *marriage*? You used to talk to me, Chris. But it's like now that we're married - now that we have a baby - you can't make the effort. We're twenty-nine years old, but we sit here like we're eighty. This is not working for me.'

Unsettled, he stood up and took his plate to the sink. *This is not working for me* sounded like she wanted out. He couldn't process that.

At a loss, he picked up the baby. When she put her head on his chest, he held it there. 'I'm trying to give you a good life, Erin. I'm working so you don't have to. If I'm tired at night, it's because my mind has been busy all day. If I'm quiet, maybe that's just who I am.'

She didn't give in. 'You weren't that person before. What changed?'

'Nothing,' he said carefully. 'But this is life. Relationships evolve.'

'This isn't just life,' she fought back. 'It's *us*. I can't *stand* what we're becoming.'

'You're upset. Please calm down.'

'Like *that'll* make things better?' she asked, seeming angrier than ever. 'I talked with my mother today. Chloe and I are going to visit her.'

The phone rang. Ignoring it, he asked, 'For how long?'

'A couple of weeks. I need to figure things out. We have a problem, Chris. You're not calm, you're *passive*.' The phone rang again. 'I ask what you think about putting Chloe in a playgroup, and you throw the question back at me. I ask if you want to invite the Bakers for dinner Saturday night, and you tell me to do it if I want. Those aren't answers,' she said as another ring came. 'They're evasions. Do you *feel* anything, Chris?'

Unable to respond, he reached for the phone. 'Yeah.'

'It's me,' his sister said in a high voice. 'We have a serious problem.'

Turning away from his wife, he ducked his head. 'Not now, Molly.'

'Robin had a heart attack.'

'Uh, can I call you back?'

'Chris, I need you here now! Mom and Dad don't know yet.'

'Don't know what?'

'That Robin had a *heart attack*,' Molly cried. 'She keeled over in the middle of a run and is still unconscious. Mom and Dad haven't landed. I can't do this alone.'

He stood straighter. 'A heart attack?'

Erin materialized beside him. 'Your dad?' she whispered, taking Chloe.

Shaking his head, he let the child go. 'Robin. Oh boy. She pushed herself too far.'

'Will you come?' Molly asked.

'Where are you?' He listened for a minute, then hung up the phone.

'A heart attack?' Erin asked. '*Robin*?'

'That's what Molly said. Maybe she's exaggerating. She gets wound up sometimes.'

'Because she shows emotion?' Erin shot back, then softened. 'Where are your parents?'

'Flying home from Atlanta. I'd better go.'

He stroked Chloe's head, and, conciliatorily, touched Erin's. She was the one on his mind as he set off. They had only been married for two years, the last third of those with a child, and he tried to understand how dramatically her life had changed. But what about him? She asked if he felt things. He felt responsibility. Right now, he felt fear. Being quiet was part of his nature. His dad was the same way, and it worked for him.

Molly, on the other hand, tended to be highly imaginative. Robin might have suffered something, but a heart attack was pushing it. He might have talked her down over the phone, if he hadn't wanted to get out of the house. Erin needed time to cool off.

Did he feel things? He sure did. He just didn't get hysterical.

Putting on his blinker, he turned in at the hospital. He had barely parked at the Emergency entrance when Molly was running toward him, her blonde hair flying and her eyes panicked.

'What's happening?' he asked, leaving the car.

'Nothing. *Nothing*. She hasn't woken up!'

He stopped walking. 'Really?'

'She had a *heart* attack, Chris. They think there's brain damage.'

She drew him inside, through the waiting room to a far cubicle - and there was Robin, inert as he had never seen her. He stood at the door for the longest time, looking from her body to the machines to the doctor by her side.

Finally, he approached. 'I'm her brother,' he said and stopped. He didn't know where to begin.

The doctor began for him, repeating some of what Molly had said and moving on. Chris listened, trying to take it in. At the doctor's urging, he talked to Robin, but she didn't respond. He followed the physician's explanation of the various machines and stood with him at the X-ray screen. Yes, he could see what the doctor was pointing out, but it was bizarre.

He must have been looking doubtful, because the doctor said, 'She's an athlete. Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy - inflammation of the heart muscle - is the leading cause of sudden death in athletes. It doesn't happen often, and the instance is even lower in women than men. But it does happen.'

'Without warning?'

'Usually. In cases where there's a known family history, a screening echocardiogram may diagnose it, but many victims are asymptomatic. Once she's in the ICU, she'll have an intensivist heading her case. He'll work with a cardiologist and a neurologist.'

Chris knew his parents would want the best, but how could he know who that was? Feeling inadequate, he looked at his watch. 'What time do they land?' he asked Molly.

'Any minute.'

'Are you going to call?'

'You are. I'm too upset.'

And Chris wasn't? Did he have to be *visibly* shaking? Facing the doctor, he said, 'Is this - what is she - comatose?'

'Yes, but there are different levels of coma.' He pushed up black glasses with the back of his hand. 'At most levels, patients make spontaneous movements. The fact that your sister hasn't suggests the highest level of coma.'

'How do you measure it?' Chris asked. He didn't know what he was looking for, only knew that Molly was standing at his elbow taking in every word, and that his parents would ask the same questions. Numbers had meaning. They were a place to start.

'A CAT scan or an MRI will show if there's tissue death, but either one will have to wait until she's more stable.'

Chris glanced at Molly. 'Try calling Mom and Dad.'

'I can't,' she whispered, looking terrified. 'I was supposed to be with her. This was my fault.'

'Like it wouldn't have happened if you'd been waiting five miles down the road? Be real, Molly. Call Mom and Dad.'

'They won't believe me. *You* didn't.'

She was right. But *he* didn't want to call. 'You're better with Mom than I am. You'll know what to say.'

'You're older, Chris. You're the *man*.'

He took the phone from his pocket. 'Men stink at things like this. It'll be enough when she sees my caller ID.' With a sharp look, he passed her the phone.

Kathryn Snow turned on her BlackBerry as soon as the plane landed. She hated being out of touch. Yes, the nursery was a family operation, but it was her baby. If there were problems, she wanted to know.

While the plane taxied through the darkness to the terminal, she downloaded new messages and scrolled through the list.

'Anything interesting?' her husband asked.

'A note from Chris - his meeting went well. A thank-you for the Collins wedding shower. And a reminder from the newspaper that the article on flowering kale is due at the end of the week.'

'It's all written, ready to go.'

Appreciative, she smiled. Charlie was her marketing chief, a behind-the-scenes guy who had a natural knack for writing ad copy, press releases, and articles. In his quiet way, he invited trust. When he suggested to TV producers that Kathryn was the one to discuss fall wreaths, they believed him. He had single-handedly won her a permanent spot on the local news and a column in a home magazine.

Speaking of which, '*Grow How* is due at the end of the week,' she mused. 'It'll be for the January edition, which is always the toughest. Molly knows the greenhouse better than me. I'll have her write it.' She returned to the BlackBerry. 'Robin didn't email. I wonder how her run went. She was worried about her knee.' Accessing voice mail next, she smiled, frowned, smiled again. She finished listening just as the plane reached the jetport. Releasing her seatbelt, she put the BlackBerry in her pocket and followed Charlie into the aisle. '*Voice* mail from Robin. She had to drive herself because Molly refused to help. What's wrong with that child?'

'Just refused? No excuse?'

'Who knows,' Kathryn murmured, but grinned. 'Good news, though. Robin got another call from the powers-that-be wanting to make sure she's set to run New York. They're counting on her for the trials next spring. The Olympics, Charlie,' she mouthed, afraid to jinx it by speaking aloud. 'Can you imagine?'

He lowered her suitcase from the overhead bin. Kathryn was lifting its handle when her BlackBerry jangled. Christopher's number was on the screen, but it was Molly's voice that came on saying, 'It's me, Mom. Where are you?'

'We just landed. Molly, why couldn't you help Robin? This was an important run. And did you lose your phone again?'

'No. I'm with Chris at Dickenson-May. Robin had an accident.'

Kathryn's smile died. 'What kind of accident?'

'Oh, you know, running. Since you weren't around they called us, but she probably wants you here. Can you come by on your way home?'

'What kind of accident?' Kathryn repeated. She heard forced nonchalance. She didn't like that, or the fact that Chris was at the hospital, too. Chris usually left crises to others.

'She fell. I can't stay on now, Mom. Come straight here. We're in the ER.'

'What did she hurt?'

'Can't talk now. See you soon.'

The line went dead. Katherine looked worriedly at Charlie. 'Robin had an accident. Molly wouldn't say what it was.' Frightened, she handed him the BlackBerry. 'You try her.'

He handed the phone back. 'You'll get more from her than I will.'

'Then call Chris,' she begged, offering the BlackBerry again.

But the line of passengers started to move, and Charlie gestured her on. She waited only until they were side-by-side in the jetport before saying, 'Why was Chris there? Robin never calls him when there's a problem. Try him, Charlie. Please?'

Charlie held up a hand, buying time until they reached the car. The BlackBerry didn't ring again, and Kathryn told herself that was a good sign, but she couldn't relax. She was uneasy through the entire drive, imagining awful things. The instant they parked at the hospital, she was out of the car. Molly was waiting just inside the ER.

'That was a cruel phone call,' Kathryn scolded. 'What happened?'

'She collapsed on the road,' Molly said, taking her hand.

'*Collapsed?* From heat? Dehydration?'

Molly didn't answer, just hurried her down the hall. Kathryn's fear grew with each step. Other runners collapsed, but not Robin. Physical stamina was in her genes.

She caught her breath at the cubicle door. Chris was there, too. But that couldn't be Robin, lying senseless and limp, hooked to machines - machines that were keeping her alive, the doctor said after explaining what had happened.

Kathryn was beside herself. The explanations made no sense. Nor did the X-rays. Her daughter's hand, which she clutched, was inert as only a sleeping person's hand would be.

But she didn't wake up when the doctor called her name or pinched her ear, and even Kathryn could see that her pupils didn't dilate in response to light. Kathryn figured the person doing the prodding wasn't doing it right, but she had no better luck when she tried it all herself - not when she pleaded with Robin to open her eyes, not when she begged her to squeeze her hand.

The doctor kept talking. Kathryn no longer took in each word, but the gist got through with devastating effect. She didn't realize she was crying until Charlie handed her a tissue.

When Robin's face blurred, she saw her own - the same dark hair, same brown eyes, same intensity. Two peas in a pod, they had neither the fair features, nor the laid-back approach to life of the others in the family.

Kathryn refocused. Charlie seemed desolate, Chris stupefied, and Molly was stuck to the wall. Silence from all three? Was that it? If no one else questioned the status quo, it was up to her - but hadn't it always been that way when it came to Robin?

Defiant, she faced the doctor. 'Brain damage isn't an option. You don't know my daughter. She's resilient. She comes back from injuries. If this is a coma, she'll wake up. She's been a fighter since birth - since *conception*.' She held Robin's hand tightly. They were in this together. 'What comes next?'

'Once she's stabilized, we move her upstairs.'

'What's her condition now? Wouldn't you call it stable?'

'I'd call it critical.'

Kathryn couldn't handle that word. 'What's in her IV?'

'Fluids, plus meds to stabilize her blood pressure and regulate the rhythm of her heart. It was erratic when she first arrived.'

'Maybe she needs a pacemaker.'

'Right now, the meds are working, and besides, she wouldn't be able to handle surgery.'

'If the choice is between surgery and death - '

'It isn't. No one's letting her die, Mrs. Snow. We can keep her going.'

'But why do you say her brain is damaged?' Kathryn challenged. 'Only because she doesn't respond? If she's been traumatized by a heart attack, wouldn't that explain the lack of response? How do you test for brain damage?'

'We'll do an MRI in the morning. Right now, we don't want to move her.'

'If there's damage, can it be repaired?'

'No. We can only prevent further loss.'

Feeling thwarted, Kathryn turned on her husband. 'Is this all they can do? We can live with a heart condition, but not brain damage. I want a second opinion. And where are the specialists? This is only the *ER*, for God's sake. These doctors may be trained to handle trauma, but if Robin has been here for three hours and hasn't been seen by a cardiologist, we need to have her moved.'

She saw Molly shoot a troubled look at Charlie, but Charlie didn't say anything, and Lord knew Chris wouldn't. Frightened and alone, Kathryn turned back to the doctor. 'I can't sit and wait. I want to be proactive.'

'Sometimes that isn't possible,' he replied. 'What's crucial right now is getting her up to the ICU. The doctor there will call in specialists. This is all standard protocol.'

'Standard protocol isn't *good* enough,' Kathryn insisted, desperate that he understand. 'There is nothing standard about Robin. Do you *know* what she does with her life?'

The eyes behind the glasses didn't blink. 'It's hard not to, if you live around here. Her name is in the local papers so often.'

'Not only the *local* papers. That's why she has to recover from this. She works all over the country with budding track stars. We're talking teenage girls. They can't see *this*. They can't *begin* to think that the reward for training hard and aiming high is ... is *this*. Okay, you may not have had a case like this before, but if that's so, just say it and we'll have her transferred.'

She searched family faces for agreement, but Charlie seemed stricken, Chris was frozen, and Molly simply looked pleadingly from her father to her brother and back.

Useless. All three.

So Kathryn told the doctor, 'This isn't a personal indictment. I'm just wondering whether doctors in Boston or New York would have more experience with injuries like these.'

Molly touched her elbow then. Kathryn looked at her youngest in time to hear her murmur, 'She needs to be in intensive care.'

'Correct. I just don't know where.'

'Here. Let her stay here. She's alive, Mom. They got her heart going, and it's still beating. They're doing all they can.'

Kathryn arched a brow. 'Do you know that for fact? Where *were* you, Molly? If you'd been with her, this wouldn't have happened.'

Molly paled, but she didn't retreat. 'I couldn't have prevented a heart attack.'

'You could have gotten her help sooner. You have issues, Molly. You've always had issues with Robin.'

'But *look*,' the girl urged, glancing at the medical personnel hovering at the door. 'They're waiting to take her upstairs, and we're slowing them down. Once she's there, we can talk about specialists, even about moving her, but right now, shouldn't we be giving her every possible chance?'

Molly followed the others to the ICU and watched the team get Robin settled. At one point she counted five doctors and three nurses in the room, as frightening as it was reassuring. Monitors were adjusted and vital signs checked, while the respirator breathed in and out. Every minute or two someone spoke loudly to Robin, but she didn't respond.

Kathryn left the bedside only when a doctor or nurse needed access. The rest of the time, she held Robin's hand, stroked her face, urged her to blink or moan.

As Molly watched from the wall, she was haunted by the knowledge that her mother was right. If Robin had started breathing sooner, there would be no brain damage. If Molly had been with her, Robin would have started breathing sooner.

But she wasn't the only one who had let Robin down. She couldn't blame her mother for being frantic back in the ER, but where was her father? He was supposed to be the calm one. What had he been *thinking* letting Kathryn go on like that? Even Chris could have spoken up.

They didn't have the guts, Molly decided, and then modified the thought. They *knew* better.

You have issues. You've always had issues with Robin. She knew her mother was upset, but Molly was feeling guilty enough to be flayed by the words. As the minutes passed and the machines beeped, she remembered occasionally deleting a phone message, buying the wrong energy bar, misplacing a favorite running hat. Each offense could be balanced with something good Molly had done, but the latter were lost in the guilt.

Chris left at midnight, her father at one. Charlie had tried to get Kathryn to leave with him, to no avail. Molly suspected that her mother feared something awful would happen if she wasn't there to stand guard. Kathryn had always been protective of Robin.

Hoping her own presence might go a little way toward making up to Kathryn for what she had not done earlier that day, Molly stayed longer. By two, though, she was falling asleep in her chair. 'Are you sure I can't drive you home?' she asked her mother.

Kathryn barely looked up. 'I can't leave,' she said and added, 'Why weren't you with her, Molly?' with a speed suggesting she was brooding about just that.

'I was at Snow Hill,' Molly tried to explain. 'The management meeting, remember? I didn't know how long it would run. How could I commit to Robin?' There was also the issue of the cat. But putting a cat before her sister was pathetic.

Kathryn didn't ask how long the meeting had run. She didn't even ask how it had gone. If she was brooding, it was about Molly's negligence toward Robin, not about Snow Hill.

And Molly was guilty. That thought beat her down, before she finally broke the silence by asking, 'Can I get you something, Mom? Coffee, maybe?'

'No. But you can cover for me at work.'

Startled, Molly blew out a little breath. 'I can't go to work with Robin like this.'

'You have to. I need you there.'

'Can't I do something here?'

'There's nothing to do here. There's plenty to do at Snow Hill.'

'What about Dad? Or Chris?'

'No. You.'

She doesn't want me around, Molly realized, her feeling of devastation growing. But she was too tired to beg for mercy, too wiped out even for tears. Asking Kathryn to call her if there was any change, she slipped out the door.