

The book cover features a woman with long brown hair and blue eyes on the left, and a man with a beard and green eyes on the right. They are set against a background of a sunset over a body of water. In the foreground, there are rocky, snow-covered mountains with some orange and red patches. The text is overlaid on the image.

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AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

CALLAGHAN'S
CONUNDRUM

COLORADO SKIES SERIES

Callaghan's Conundrum

by

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For Josh & Chris

CHAPTER ONE

Sam smiled as he pulled his Jeep Cherokee into the mall parking garage. Not that he wanted to be at the mall. Besides the fact that he hated shopping, he hated the mall's owner even more. He smiled because the sun was low on the mountains and he had made it through a day at the station without having to call home and say he would be late. He was looking forward to a night off with his son, a bowl of popcorn, and whatever movie Robbie had picked. If Sam's mother hadn't asked him to pick something up at a store out here, the day would have been perfect, he thought as he maneuvered into a parking spot.

As he stepped onto the pavement, his phone went off. He assumed it was his mother calling with another request. Running an errand for her now and then didn't bother him because she was so helpful with his son. His positive attitude took a decided downturn when he glanced at the readout. His partner, not his mother.

"What's up, Art?"

"You said you were going to the mall right?"

The serious tone of Art's voice had Sam's trouble radar spiking. Rubbing his other hand under his chin, he stopped at the back of his vehicle rather than continue inside. There would be no sense walking in if he wouldn't be here long enough to go in the store.

"Yeah, I'm just getting ready to go inside. Why?"

"The station just received an anonymous tip. Supposedly, there's a sniper there. I told the captain you were on your way already and he wanted me to call and have you keep your eyes open."

"Why isn't the place being evacuated? That's a serious threat with the Memorial Weekend crowd here," Sam said, glancing around the nearly full parking lot. "Wait, don't tell me. Stokes doesn't want to take the chance of losing sales."

"Got it in one, partner. We called and told him, but he refuses to shut the place down. He said something about bored kids and paranoid cops, yada yada. You know him."

"Unfortunately," Sam hissed. "All right, I'll keep my eyes open. I take it you're on your way as well as other back-up?"

"I'm about a minute out. What's your plan?"

Sam grinned at the question. His partner knew him well. The moment Art mentioned a sniper Sam's mind started running through scenarios.

"I'm at the eastern entrance where it's pretty open and most of the

businesses are restaurants or fast food. If I were a sniper, I would set up at the western end at this time of day so the sun would be behind me. I'll start here and check out the second level as I walk down the main thoroughfare. If you could get on the roof of the Italian restaurant down here with your scope and let me know if you see anything that would be a big help. I'm walking inside now."

There weren't any real doors to this mall. You entered by walking down one of several old downtown alleys. Mall was really a misnomer for the place. The entire area took up approximately four city blocks. The older buildings on both sides had been renovated and all opened onto the center. The road between them now resembled a long courtyard. New buildings built at either end closed off the street making a neat quadrangle. Sam entered the food court area.

The place was packed. It seemed like everyone and their cousin was at the mall to pick up something for the long Memorial weekend. Of course, a sniper would pick tonight.

Sam nodded and waved to people he recognized as he made his way around a grouping of tables. He kept walking while his eyes continued scanning back and forth, up and down looking for a threat. So far, he didn't see anything out of place. No odd flashes from sun glinting off a rifle barrel, or anything like that. Teenagers hanging out around the taco place, some held skateboards, several had piercings he didn't even pretend to understand, but none of them was causing any trouble. As long as they didn't break the law, Sam didn't care how they looked. Besides, in his experience some of the worst offenders were the best dressed and most politically correct people you knew. He'd stopped judging books by their covers a long time ago.

He had just reached the end of the food court area when a telltale itch started at the back of his neck. Stretching it one way and then the other, he waited for it to pop and release the tension. It didn't. That was not a good sign. His other senses went on high alert.

Sam had the feeling this was not some bored teenager playing a prank. Someone was out there waiting and watching. But for what or who, he wondered. He glanced at his watch; five minutes had passed since he had talked to Art. Reaching in his coat pocket, he pulled out the Bluetooth headset he hated and put it in his ear before calling his partner.

"You in place?"

"Yep. I found you a minute ago. Now I'm checking out the far end, but haven't seen anything yet. You?"

"No, but I've got a bad feeling this isn't a prank."

"Yeah, I know it's not unheard of nowadays, but I doubt most kids think calling in a sniper attack is funny. Especially when they're so close to getting out of school for the year."

"Keep your eyes peeled. I'm keeping the line open so talk to me."

"You got it."

Adjusting his shoulder holster under his sport coat, Sam continued his own surveillance. He was almost at the halfway point when he saw something odd.

#

Rina made her way toward the food court in the unfamiliar mall. If she had known the layout of the place, she would have parked at the other end so she didn't have to be out in the open so much. Once she was inside and realized her mistake, it was too late to bother moving her car. As she walked, she kept telling herself being in a crowd made her invisible. That's why her mother had suggested this weekend and such a busy place. She knew Rina would be uncomfortable back in town. Still, unease rode heavy on Rina's shoulders. She tried to convince herself everything would be fine, no one would recognize her after almost nine years. In an effort to ensure it she had dressed with extreme care this morning. She had even worn one of her boss's baseball caps. No one would ever expect Katrina Stokes to wear a baseball cap.

Of course she wasn't Katrina Stokes anymore and hadn't been for many years. Now she was just plain Rina.

A grin tugged at one corner of her mouth with the thought. Only one person had ever called her Rina when she used to live here. Everyone else had called her Kat or Katrina. Only Sam had ever called her Rina.

She stopped suddenly. At almost the same moment she thought his name, she saw him. He was walking toward her. Well, not her directly, he seemed to be scanning the crowd. While his gaze searched the opposite side of the area, she took a quick inventory.

He was taller and heavier than he had been eight years ago. His shoulders broader, as was his chest, and she could tell his legs were well muscled by his determined solid stride. She had never seen any man walk with the same self-assured aura. As her gaze returned to his head, she realized he was looking at her. Rina's breath caught in her throat.

She released it all at once when his head continued to pivot.

Then it snapped back. His gaze pinned her to the spot as a nearby flag snapped sounding like a gunshot. She hadn't realized the wind had picked up

that much. Then she heard Sam's voice.

“Police, everyone down!”

Rina dropped to a crouch at the order. It was gunfire, not a flag?

She covered her head with her arms a second before the sound of another bullet rent the air and bit into the planter she knelt beside. She quickly scooted around the corner. As she did she heard the gleeful laughter of a child.

Turning, she saw a toddler running and laughing amongst all the cowering adults. A second later she heard a mother's ear piercing wail. Knowing she would want someone to do the same for her, Rina sprung from her crouched position and dove for the child. She heard the gun's report an instant before pain burned in her right shoulder. The realization she had been shot hit her as she caught the child around the waist and fell to the ground.

Rina peeked beneath the brim of her cap while murmuring quiet words to the child she kept pinned beneath her. What she saw stole her ability to think or speak. Sam was stepping away from where he'd taken cover. She knew he was trying to draw the shooter's attention away from her and the child. Damn him. She hadn't left all those years before so he could get himself shot protecting her now.

She knew the moment he'd had enough. The very air around him came alive with the electricity of the man. Rina's heart rate sped up.

“Police, put your weapon down!”

Instead, the shooter peppered two more shots right beside Rina. Chips of cobblestone bit into her cheek. Closing her eyes, she hugged the child tight hoping her body would protect him. She heard another gunshot, much closer. She dared to peek out again. Sam knelt on one knee with his arms extended. An uncomfortable silence fell like a blanket over the area.

“He's down,” someone yelled.

Seeing Sam drop his arm and release a breath, Rina hugged the child close in relief a second before the scene exploded with people rushing to her. Someone started to lift her arm and she screamed as pain shot through her again. The pain wasn't enough to dull the knowledge that she had to get away before Sam made his way through the crowd. His life depended on her not being recognized.

Fear fueled her with enough adrenaline to roll over and hand the little boy to his tearful mother. A man helped her stand. He was saying something about paramedics and the police. Rina only half listened. She looked up to a second level balcony, the area where the shots had come from. What she saw stole her breath.

She pushed frantically out of the man's hold and through the crowd of people. She had to get out of the mall before anyone recognized her. Her feet were clumsy and her head was spinning from adrenaline or hitting it on the floor, she didn't know. With so many people crowded around, she never fell. Colliding with one person after another, she made her way to an exit.

The crisp fresh night air that met her had the effect of a slap in the face, but it cleared her head. She made her way around the wall by the main mall exit. Swallowed up by tall bushes and shadows she leaned against the cool concrete and took a few minutes to catch her breath. If she could make it to the parking garage, she could get to her car and disappear before anyone knew she was here. She would have to walk to the other end, but in the shadows of the dark garage she believed she could make it unobserved.

Her heartbeat was returning to normal and the adrenaline rush had just started to dissipate when she heard boot heels hitting the sidewalk near her hiding place. Hearing a frustration tinged *damn* she knew who owned the boots.

#

Sam was furious. He had pushed his way through the crowd of confused and scared shoppers only to find the woman who rescued the child gone. Disappeared. That would be fitting if it actually was the person he thought it might be. No, it couldn't be her. She'd left Pinecrest eight years ago and never looked back. No, it couldn't be Rina, but whoever it was had been shot. He needed to find her and get her medical attention.

When he questioned the people in the area, a man told him the woman had looked at a second floor balcony and gone deathly white. Sam had looked up and met the gaze of the mall's owner, Raymond Stokes. That explained why she ran. Stokes would scare the devil himself with that icy glare. You didn't have to know about his total lack of compassion, you could feel it. The man personified evil and took pride in the fact. It also meant the woman wasn't Katrina Stokes; there was no reason for her to run from her father. At least that was one positive for the evening he thought releasing a breath.