

Chapter 1

A wave cracked against the shore. A seagull cawed and shrieked. I snapped my head to look. The bird circled overhead and glided to a log on the shore. I stopped running along the pavement, peered harder.

Logs don't wear shoes.

I leaped over the fence and bounded down the slope, slipping on the snow. Even through the icy powder that dusted her face, I would've recognized her.

“Vikki, are you okay?” I yelled.

She didn't answer.

I skidded to a stop and gasped.

Silver-blue crystals clung to her face. Her lips were ghostly gray, her translucent skin pasty. Her chestnut hair flared around her head like fiery rays radiating from the sun. Her burgundy sweater clung to her torso. Her chest wasn't rising and falling. Dark goo pooled beneath her neck and hair. Blood.

I checked her pulse. Nothing. I straddled her and pressed on her chest. Counted to ten. Pinched her nose. Managed three short breaths. Pressed my ear to her mouth. Still nothing.

If only I could lift her, I could carry her to the road. But I wasn't that strong. She was much taller than I was.

“Somebody, help!” My voice echoed off the icy beach.

No reply. Even the most avid skiers in Lake Tahoe weren't driving to the slopes before seven.

Frustration clamped down around my guts. Tears stung my cheeks. My breath seemed stuck in my chest. I wasn't sure I could survive if someone else I loved died.

Sweat streamed down my neck as I pressed on her chest again. "C'mon, Vikki, breathe. One, two, three. Say, 'Hello, Aspen, tricked you.' C'mon."

Only last month she and I had celebrated her twenty-eighth birthday with chocolate cake and champagne. Vikki took ten tries to blow the candles out before I admitted they were stay-lit candles. I had laughed so hard.

"Breathe." Wind sliced my face. The usually invigorating aroma of pine made me gag. I slid back on my heels and stared.

What had led her to the beach in the middle of the night? An urgent desire to gaze at the stars? A tryst with a secret lover?

I keened at the top of my lungs. I wasn't sure I could stop.

It was predawn when I'd started my run. Now the sun was creeping over Cave Rock. A thin, shimmering path of sunlight streaked across the deep azure waters, promising a glorious day. Buoys danced as waves crested and receded. The beauty was why I had moved to Lake Tahoe. To start a new life. To heal.

I felt cold nausea clawing at my throat. I was going to puke.

Don't you dare. Hold it together.

Right palm over left hand, I pressed again on Vikki's sternum.

"Hey, you, down there," a man yelled from the road beyond the fence. I couldn't make out his face. "You need help?"

"Yes." I stood, but my feet slipped on the ice. I landed on my rear by Vikki's side.

"Stop," a woman shouted. "Don't move."

A little too late for that.

With the speed of a soccer player, the woman in the blue parka and jeans dashed through the gate and sprinted across the expanse. As she drew near, relief swept over me. Karen Brandon was a seasoned detective for the Placer County Sheriff's Office. A member of my book club. A friend.

"Aspen, step back."

I scrambled to my feet and obeyed.

"How long have you been here?"

"A couple of minutes," I said, sounding unsure, brittle.

Karen crouched and grabbed Vikki's wrist, checking for a pulse like I had. She placed two fingers on my friend's neck. After a moment, she looked up at me, sadness in her dusky eyes. For over two decades, Karen had worked Vice in Sacramento. Three years ago, in her early forties, she'd transferred to Lake Tahoe to get away from the stress. I would bet she was regretting that decision now.

"You want me to call the police?" the man on the road yelled.

"No, I'm with the sheriff's department." Karen flicked snow off the top of her boots. "Stay right where you are." She rose to her full height—a good six inches taller than me—and leveled me with a searing glare. "Do you know her, Aspen?" The odor of whiskey that leached from her mouth made me recoil. "Talk."

"Yes. It's Vikki Carmichael." Dear, sweet, funny Vikki who liked wine and cheese and bawdy jokes, and who just hours ago had chided me about my current profession. *You're a garbological explorer*, she had teased. I'd countered by saying I was a process server and up-and-coming private eye who sometimes had to dive into Dumpsters.

“Have I ever met her?” Cold breath billowed from Karen’s mouth. She tucked her gold charm necklace beneath the collar of her turtleneck and zipped her parka to her neck.

“On the slopes, maybe.”

A year ago December, Vikki and I had met at Alpine Meadows, a family-friendly ski resort located a couple of miles from Tahoe City. In the winter, she was a chairlift operator known for drawing smiley faces on people’s ski tickets. In summer, she gave water-ski lessons. At the end of a bitter December day, I was standing in line when the chairlift broke down. While waiting for it to be repaired, Vikki and I chatted at length. We ended up going to dinner, where we discovered we had so much in common. Besides our love for photography, crossword puzzles, sports, and men with a good sense of humor—not necessarily in that order—we learned we both loved to bake.

“Aspen.” Karen braced my shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“No. I don’t know. I mean, it’s—” My intestines wrenched with pain. The taste of dirty pennies filled my mouth.

“She’s young,” Karen said, as perfunctory as ever. Through book club, she and I had become the kind of friends who talked about life in general, but we had never shared the outdoors or dinners or movies. Not like Vikki and I had.

I shivered. “She looks so cold.”

“Death will do that to a person. Did you move her at all?”

“No, I knew—”

“Let’s get you away from the crime scene.” She reached for my elbow.

“Crime scene?” I shoved my knuckles against my mouth and almost bit through the

skin. “You think somebody killed her?”

“I don’t see anything she might have struck her head on, do you? And there are no skid marks by her feet. Let’s go.” Karen was a bit of a control freak. I tried not to take her tone personally. “Come on, you’ve already messed up a lot of the area.”

“Ma’am, I’m cold,” the man on the road called. “I’m going to get a coat.”

“Wait, sir.” Karen clenched my arm and tugged me up the hill, taking care to follow in our previous footprints. At the top, she nudged me through the gate. “Find someplace to sit. You look—”

“Was the gate open when you ran down?” I spun around and looked back at the shore.

“Yes, why?”

“It’s supposed to be locked.”

Had the murderer had a key? Vikki had one. She’d been house sitting the A-frame house across the street. Had the murderer followed her?

Karen ran her fingers through bleached-blond hair that never looked combed and faced the man who was none other than Vikki’s food-mooching neighbor, Garrett, dressed in a pair of pajamas and boots. The sight of him made my skin crawl. More than once, he had shown up at Vikki’s with the lame excuse of needing a cup of sugar. He would stand there ogling Vikki. Granted, she had been as attractive as a runway model with a lithe figure like Karen’s, but the way he’d gaped at her had been beyond disturbing.

“Who are you?” Karen asked.

“Garrett Thompson.” He stamped his feet on the ground and blew into his hands to

keep warm.

“Stand over there. I’ve got some questions to ask you.” Karen pulled a cell phone out of her parka and punched in a number. “It’s me. We’ve got a homicide. The body is lying in the snow, near the edge of the lake. North of Tahoma. South of Tahoe City.” She shook her head. “Yeah, yeah, I’m not going anywhere. Look, anyone can see the corpse from the danged road. Call the fire department, then get the others down here.”

Garrett sidled up to me. He smelled of stale beer. “What’s going on?”

“Vikki’s been murdered,” I whispered.

The guy turned ash gray and without so much as a goodbye darted in the direction of his home.

Karen, who was engaged in a shouting match with the woman on the other end of the phone, didn’t notice his departure. “Well, wake him up if you have to. I don’t care if he barks, we’ve got a dead body.” She ended the call, shoved the phone into her pocket, blew a trail of steam from her mouth, and turned toward me. “What the blazes were you doing down there?”

“I was running. I saw her from the road and recognized her. Vikki is . . . *was* . . . my best friend. We skied together and . . .” Tears welled in my eyes. One slipped down my cheek. I batted it away. “She wanted to become a professional photographer.”

“You said your friend worked at—” Karen glanced around. “Hey, where’d that guy Thompson go?”

“Home.”

“Which one?”

“The blue one across the street. Next to the A-frame where Vikki was house sitting.”

I glanced at the house and back at Vikki, and our final conversation came to me in a rush. She'd been teasing me and I'd responded with: *I hate you*. In jest. But still . . . "I left a parka there last night."

"You were with her?"

"We ate an early dinner, then I went to serve a subpoena." My heart ached as if it had been plunged into ice water.

"Is this the first dead person you've seen?"

"No." My teeth began to chatter. "My mom and dad—"

"Of course. Sorry. That was insensitive of me." Karen withdrew a pack of cigarettes from her pocket, popped one out, and rolled it between her fingers. One night after book club, she confided that she'd quit smoking a year ago. The rolling routine had started after she had annihilated her nails with anxious chewing. "They died twelve years ago, right?"

Died. I nodded. My father caught a robber rummaging through the silver in the dining room hutch. The guy shot him in the heart. When my mother came to my father's rescue, the robber shot her in the back.

"The police never caught the creep who killed them, did they?"

"No." At the time I was a student and extremely naive. I didn't know I could have pressed the police to do more.

"Don't beat yourself up," Karen said, as if reading my mind. "Not for that. I try not to." She was referring to her inability to prevent her father's fatal heart attack a couple of months ago.

A siren blasted in the distance, growing louder until a fire truck zoomed up and

pulled to a stop near us.

“About time.” Karen shoved a piece of gum into her mouth and dashed toward the driver, my presence all but forgotten as the machinery of solving a murder groaned to life.