

## Chapter 1

Midafternoon traffic was creeping along. Everyone on the road was edgy, thanks to the blistering heat. As I turned up the air-conditioning, I noticed two voice messages on my cell phone. Both were from my gynecologist, recorded earlier this morning before the office opened. Dr. Fisher always went to work by sunup, but she said she would give me my test results *after* the weekend. Why call me on Friday? Why hadn't either rung through? My insides snagged. It had to be bad news. On the other hand, it was only a small lump. Probably nothing.

Too impatient to wait, I pulled to a stop on the side of the road and played the first message. No one spoke; the message stopped abruptly. How I hated spotty reception in Lake Tahoe. I selected the second message. The doctor said, "Aspen," and the call cut off again. She'd sounded out of breath. In a hurry.

I phoned her back, but after twenty rings and no answer, I ended the call. "Dang it!" I slapped the steering wheel on my Jeep and resumed driving, ticked off at my doctor, my body, and the world.

At the junction near Tahoe City, dozens of cars were parked along the side of the road. Tourists in swimsuits and sandals, plenty of them with sunburns, stood bent over the rail at Fanny Bridge, named for the road crew foreman's maiden aunt Fanny McGillicuddy Wilkerson, not for the countless people exposing their rear ends to passersby as they viewed the trout below.

As I made a right turn toward town, out of nowhere a sedan whizzed past me and then abruptly screeched to a halt. I honked the horn. The driver flipped me off and

opened the passenger door for a pedestrian, the jerk.

While I waited, I drummed the center console concerned about Dr. Fisher's call. Why had she sounded so breathy? Why had she hung up after saying my name?

*Chill, Aspen.* She could have done so because she realized she had her days wrong. She was busy. Heck, there were times I couldn't figure out what day of the week it was until I consulted a calendar.

Forcing worrisome thoughts from my mind, I drove through town and made a left on Polaris Road toward North Tahoe School.

Minutes later, I waited in the carpool lane like all the other mothers, although I wasn't a mother. A half year ago, my niece Candace moved in with me. When she first showed up, she was timid and confused and battling bulimia. Now, she was fourteen and fairly confident and could cook circles around me.

Candace loped to the curb and posed next to the passenger door, hand on one hip and fifteen-pound book bag balanced on the other. She swiped perspiration off her forehead and threw a nasty look over her shoulder.

I rolled down the window. "What's going on?"

"I'm hot and cranky. Everyone is."

"Well, lose the 'tude before you climb into the car."

"Can I drive?"

"Not a chance."

"Aw." She pouted then cracked a smile, making my breath catch in my chest. Sometimes she looked so much like me—dark hair, green eyes, the Adams's turned-up nose—even I had trouble remembering she wasn't mine. Except for a few minor details

like DNA, she could have been. That and the fact that I'd never had children. My ex-husband hadn't wanted them. My boyfriend, Nick Shaper, did, but I refused to have a child without being married, and we weren't there yet. I was thirty. Plenty of time.

"In the next couple of weeks, I'll let you behind the wheel," I promised. Occasionally on a Saturday, I took Candace to an empty parking lot and allowed her to drive. I wanted her to be ready and fearless when she got her permit. "But not today. Not with everyone behaving like a maniac."

"It's the heat. It's almost a hundred degrees." Candace slipped into the car and fastened her seat belt.

"How was your day?"

"So-so."

"Was today's final hard?"

"Not too bad." Candace was ready to be finished with homework and dive into summer. She had plenty of things planned. Waterskiing and hiking with her best friend, Waverly, and to my dismay, movies and beach trips with the new boy in her life, Rory. His name made me think of Irish brawls and free-for-alls. Danger signs flashed in my mind. I nudged them aside. Parenting was proving to be one of the greatest challenges of my life.

"Which final did you have?" I asked.

"English. I think I aced the essays."

"Great."

Since obtaining official custody of Candace, I'd moved her education to the top of my priority list. For months, I'd tutored her so she would be ready to enter high school.

When living with her mother—my sister, Rosie—she'd missed the first two months of eighth grade because she'd stayed home to take care of Rosie, who had suffered from a severe infection. Luckily, Rosie had shared her love of books with Candace, so the girl was a good reader, but her math and language skills needed help.

“What’s Monday’s test?” I asked as I made a right on North Lake Boulevard.

“Napoleon to the present.”

I moaned.

She giggled. “Luckily, I like history.”

“Glad to hear it.” History had never been my strong suit. My cell phone rang. I pressed the speaker button on the steering wheel. “Hello?”

“Aspen, it’s me.” Nick usually sounded upbeat and energetic. Not this time. He sounded tired. A detective for the Placer County Sheriff’s Office, his work ran the gamut from breaking up bar fights to high-end crime. We’d been dating ever since he—*we*—solved the murder of my friend Vikki. “I can’t make dinner.”

“Okay.” I hadn’t told him about the lump. I’d planned to tonight. The conversation would have to wait. I was okay with that because, before we spoke, I wanted to get confirmation from Dr. Fisher that cancer had not infiltrated my body. “What’s up?”

“There’s been a murder.”

“Oh, no. Who?”

“Dr. Kristin Fisher.”

“Oh, no.” A flurry of emotions stuck in my throat as the doctor’s face flashed before me. Not forty-eight hours before, I’d sat white-knuckled on her examination table as she’d explained in measured, reassuring tones that I was going to be fine. In the two years

since I'd moved to Lake Tahoe, we'd had many conversations . . . about teenagers and family skeletons and women's rights. "She was my gynecologist," I said.

"Mine, too," Candace's eyes filled with tears. I'd set up all sorts of doctor appointments for my niece after she'd moved in. Dr. Fisher had been one of them.

"You and three hundred others," Nick said. "She must have had the largest practice this side of Sacramento."

"When did she die?" I asked. "How?"

"No, Aspen. You don't need to—"

"Nick, I can handle anything since Vikki's murder." I'd been the one to discover my friend bludgeoned to death, and though I was only a process server working for my aunt's detective agency, I'd delved into Vikki's murder with a vengeance.

Nick cleared his throat. "Dr. Fisher was killed early this morning. Her office assistant found her."

"Nick, she called me this morning. Early. The first call ended abruptly."

"The first?"

"She called back. I thought she was going to give me the results of a test. I—" Guilt roiled inside me. *Had the killer attacked her as she was reaching out to me? If only I'd answered.* "Tell me what happened."

"I don't want you to investigate," Nick said. "I don't want you to relive . . . you know."

I liked that he worried about me. Other than my father, no man ever had. "I understand, but at least tell me how she died."

"Are you on speakerphone?"

“Yes.”

Nick sighed, his reluctance obvious.

I grabbed my cell phone from the cup holder and switched to telephone mode. I knew it was illegal to drive with it in my hand, but for Candace’s sake, I had to do it. “It’s just me now,” I assured him. “Go on.”

“There was quite a struggle. She was stabbed in the abdomen. It was gruesome. A scalpel was used.”

My stomach lurched. I forced the bile down.

“We found the weapon. Wiped clean. No fingerprints on it.”

“Any suspects?”

Candace cut me a sharp look.

“Her nurse is in New York on vacation. Her office assistant was having breakfast with her boyfriend.”

“Who else is on your list?”

“Besides the multitude of patients,” Nick continued, “we’ll be questioning her ex-husband. He’s a pediatric surgeon in Reno. We’ll be looking at the money angle, of course, because of the size of the practice.”

“Considering the weapon, it sounds like a crime of passion. Spur of the moment.”

“What was the weapon?” Candace asked.

I silenced her with a look. “Did you review patient files, Nick?”

“A few.”

“Mine?”

“Why? Do you have secrets? Perhaps another lover?”

I welcomed his teasing during such a grim conversation. “As if. You’re all the man I can handle.” After the debacle of my marriage, I hadn’t believed I could love anyone again. But Nick was different. Special. A man filled with integrity and courage. He had been by my side as I took on the responsibility of raising Candace. He’d helped me deal with her illness. How many men would have done that?

“Most of the files were strewn on the floor,” he said. “A real mess. Detective King is going through all of them.” Kendra King was Nick’s number two in command. “As one of the doctor’s patients,” he went on, “you’ll be contacted at some point. I’ve got to go. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news.”

“We’re going to the Tavern for dinner,” I said. “If you can swing by on your way home, please do. You’ve got to eat.”

“Man, I hate this part of my job.”

“I know.” I blew him a kiss and received one from him in return.

Candace swiveled in her seat. “Dr. Fisher was so nice. Who would kill her?”

“I don’t know.”

I rolled down my window to let the scent of pine inside, but the aroma didn’t calm me as it normally would. Sorrow gripped my heart and my mind was a jumble of thoughts. Who had killed Kristin Fisher and why?