

# Cold Conviction

## Chapter 1

I awoke with a jolt, heart pounding. A nightmare hadn't startled me. What had? I ran my fingers through my hair and peered at the bedroom window, which was open a crack. When I slept, I liked to drink in Lake Tahoe's crisp, pine-scented air. To calm myself now, I listened to the distant swish of the lake's waves lapping the shore and the breeze whistling through the pines. There was no other sound. Not even a nocturnal critter skittering on the cabin's rear patio.

The cordless telephone jangled.

My insides reeled. I struggled to a sitting position, switched on the lamp on the nightstand—the clock read two a.m.—lifted the cordless telephone's receiver, and pressed Talk.

"Aspen, I didn't do it," Rosie rasped.

My older sister, an addict who was known to ramble. Had I sensed she would call? Was that why I'd awakened?

I stifled a yawn. Yesterday had been a long, trying day. Today, Wednesday, was going to prove even longer if I didn't get more sleep. "What are you talking about, Rosie?"

"It wasn't my fault." She didn't slur her words. She sounded sober. And she was pacing. I heard her lumbering footsteps. "It wasn't my fault," she repeated, her voice barely a whisper.

I pressed the receiver tightly to my ear. "Speak up. What wasn't your fault?"

Cinder, my rescue dog, gazed at me from the foot of the bed. I signaled for him to settle down. “I don’t know who killed Mom and Dad,” Rosie said.

I winced. Rosie may have sounded clearheaded, but she had to be on something. Heroin probably, her drug of choice. “Rosie, nobody knows who did it. The case went cold. Remember?” Our parents were murdered in their home fourteen years ago. According to the Atherton

police, my father had come upon an intruder in the dining room. The robber had shot Dad first and then Mom when she’d tried to save him. The police had interrogated a ton of people—family, friends, neighbors, Rosie’s associates as well as Dad’s and Mom’s clients. All had been cleared and the weapon never found.

“Let it go,” I said softly.

“You’ve always blamed me.”

“No—”

“You did. Everyone did. But it wasn’t my fault.”

At the time of the murder, Rosie had been clean for a year. She’d recently given birth to

Candace, my niece. However, in view of her past, which had included stealing from our parents to help pay for her next fix, Rosie had been the obvious suspect. Except she’d had an alibi. A verifiable alibi. As did I. I was in my first semester of college and had been in class.

“It wasn’t Antoine, either,” she said. “Or anybody else I knew. You know addicts. They talk.” I’d once been a therapist. Yes, I knew addicts.

“No one talked.” My sister slapped something hard. “I don’t know who killed them.”

“Okay. I hear you. I believe you. Go to sleep.”

“I can’t. You’ve got to—” She hiccupped. “You’ve got to—”

“I’ve got to *what?*”

For a month, the police had interrogated Rosie. A freshman, I was barely able to keep my head

above water, let alone intercede on her behalf. When the case went unsolved, she fell into despair and returned to heroin to ease her problems. Over the ensuing years, her daughter had paid the price, struggling with her self-confidence as well as a battle with bulimia. I still couldn’t believe I’d been able to gain custody of Candace nearly two years ago. Today, she was healthy, happy,

and thriving in high school.

“You can find out who killed them,” Rosie said. “I know you can. The police were . . .

*are*

useless.”

The memory of the phone call from Detective Sergeant Evers hit me squarely between the

eyes. “*Miss Adams.*” He’d sounded official but kind. “*We’re sorry to have to tell you, but—*” “You can find out the truth,” Rosie said. “Please.”

I scrubbed my neck, itching to end the call. “It’s over, Rosie.”

“You’re a P.I. It’s your job.”

A few years ago, at the tender age of twenty-eight, after my failed marriage and the anguish of trying to save struggling teens had broken me, I’d moved to Lake Tahoe to work for my aunt, who owned a detective agency. I’d started as a gofer, serving process and such. As of six months ago, I’d become a full-fledged private investigator. At my

core, I was a problem solver; I wanted to help people find clarity.

“I need you to prove it wasn’t my fault. If I could see my way clear of guilt, maybe . . .” Rosie’s words drifted off.

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe I could get clean. Pull myself together. Stop being a loser.” My sister sucked back a sob.

So did someone else.

I whipped my focus to the right. Candace stood in the doorway, a cordless phone receiver in her hand, her eyes glistening with tears. Pajamas hanging on her lithe frame, she reminded me more of *me* at that age than her oversized mother, although she was close to her mother’s height. She’d grown another two inches in the past few months. Her auburn hair had grown, too, and was

usually silky and wavy. Right now, it was a rat’s nest. How much had she heard of my conversation with her mother? All of it, I imagined. She was a light sleeper.

“Please, Aspen,” Rosie begged. “I’m having nightmares. I see their faces.” *Please*, Candace mouthed.

“Aspen, I never told the police something,” Rosie said.

I held my breath.

“When I arrived there that day . . .”

Rosie had been living in Redwood City at the time and working as a waitress at a diner. She’d never married—she didn’t know who Candace’s father was—and had to put Candace in day care in order to hold down the job. That day, she’d gone on an interview to work as a customer service representative, a telephone-type job expressly designed for

stay-at-home parents. The interview had been in Morgan Hill, a thirty-minute drive from Atherton. After the interview, on the way to pick up Candace at day care, Rosie had decided to stop by our parents' home first and run a load of laundry. They were supposed to be out of town on a trip. She'd have the place to herself. In and out.

*Wrong.* She was the one who'd found them. She'd called 911.

"When I arrived there," she began again, "Mom was alive."

"Alive?" The word leaped out of my mouth.

"Yes, but her eyes were closed and she was bleeding out, and there was so much—"

Rosie

didn't add *blood*. "I didn't press her chest. I was too afraid I'd . . ." She cleared her throat. Afraid she'd speed up our mother's death. Got it.

"In her last breath, Mom said, 'You'll never get it.'"

"She spoke?" My heart thudded. "What did she mean? Get what?"

"I don't know. I think . . ." Rosie slurped back tears.

Candace tiptoed to my bed and scrambled under the covers with me, her ear glued to the receiver. Cinder belly-crawled to her. She rubbed his ears with her free hand.

"I thought *it* was the inheritance," Rosie said. "It had to be. She . . . and Dad . . . meant to cut me out of any inheritance."

"They cut me out, too." Almost all of our parents' wealth had been left to our heirs—Candace and whatever child I might have, should I have any.

"Right," Rosie said with an edge, "but I didn't know that at the time. I felt so rotten, knowing how much Mom hated me."

"She didn't—"

“I let her down. I broke her heart. So, I kept silent and didn’t mention what she’d said to anyone, but now, I’m wondering if I might have misunderstood her words.”

“Misunderstood how?” My voice crackled with tension.

“Remember I said her eyes were closed? Maybe she didn’t know it was me. Maybe she thought she was rebuking the robber. Whoever killed Mom and Dad stole the silver tea set and silverware, but maybe there was something else the robber was after.”

“Like what?”

My father had been a defense lawyer and, being one-quarter Washoe Indian, had handled a lot of volatile Native American–related cases. My mother had worked as an interior designer. They hadn’t been poor by any stretch of the imagination, but they hadn’t been rolling in dough. They hadn’t kept piles of cash lying around the house, and my mother hadn’t worn expensive jewelry; she’d liked arty, colorful pieces.

“You won’t get *it*,” Rosie reiterated.

“It,” I echoed. “What is *it*?”

“It’s haunted me, Aspen. All these years.”

“I understand, but—”

“There’s one other thing, an angle that came to me an hour ago. That’s why I’m calling. I

know you have their hope chest, so you probably already know this, but there’s a gun in it.” Over the years, Rosie had rummaged through everything our parents had owned. “I never touched it. I drew the line at holding it, but what if—” She sucked in air.

“What if *what*?”

“What if the killer used it on Mom and Dad?”

“You’re just now telling me this?” I barked.

Candace whimpered. The dog, too.

“I’m sorry,” Rosie wailed.

With Rosie sinking into personal despair after our parents’ deaths, I hadn’t had the composure

to handle the estate by myself, so I’d asked the estate’s attorney, the bank executor, and my mother’s best friend and business partner, Tammie, to pack up our parents’ house. I’d had the wherewithal to set aside a number of items to sell immediately, the proceeds to go into trust for Rosie’s and my heirs, and Rosie had taken a few items for her personal use, all of which were now long gone, sold off to pay for her addiction. I’d also tagged a few items that I’d known I would want after graduation—snowshoes, Native American paraphernalia, a couch, a lamp, and the hope chest that my grandmother had crafted as a wedding gift for my parents. With my blessing, Tammie had put my selections and the remainder of the household and clothing items into a storage unit that we’d booked for a pittance. I’d only visited the unit once to collect the tagged items.

I gazed at the hope chest at the foot of my bed, a feeling of dread washing over me. Before

the movers had carted it and the other items from my parents’ house to the storage unit, I’d tried to go through the contents, only to realize that I wasn’t emotionally ready. Touching the linens and childhood mementoes my mother had kept had knocked me for a loop. Since then, I’d been too afraid to open it. Was there a gun in it? And if there wasn’t a gun, what did that mean?

“Why would the killer use it and put it back?” I asked. “I. Don’t. Know.” Rosie howled.

Candace recoiled.

I said, “Okay, Sis, calm down.”

“I think it was Dad’s,” she said. “He probably bought it for protection. You know how many ticked-off clients he had.”

Our father had represented clients from a variety of tribes, ranging from wealthy casino owners to the destitute in need of a fair shake. My mother had blamed Dad’s father for his bleeding- heart attitude. Although his father, Jonathan Adams II, had continued to run the family lumber business, he had lived his life driven by social causes. He had demanded the same from his boys.

“Like I said,” Rosie continued, “around midnight I got to thinking. What if Dad didn’t have the gun for protection? What if he’d purchased it because he’d gotten involved in something illicit?”

“Dad? Not a chance. He was as honorable as the day is long.” Our father had been tough and could be distant, but he had been devoted to his clients, his causes, and our mother.

“Want me to look in the hope chest?” Candace asked.

I covered the receiver’s mouthpiece. “No!”

Defensively, she raised her hand. “Don’t wig out.”

“Please, Aspen,” Rosie went on. “Do this for me. Get the police to reopen the case or do your

own investigation. If I get clean and stay clean, maybe Candy and I could—” Rosie clicked her tongue.

She didn’t have to finish the thought. I knew where her line of thinking was headed.

Maybe she could be reunited with her daughter. Maybe they could be a family again.

I petted Candace's hair. Although I doubted her mother could go straight and I worried about the mental well-being of my sweet niece if Rosie wanted to fight me for custody, I said, "Yes. I'll do it."