



Acts of Malice

Perri O'Shaughnessy

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O'SHAUGHNESSY



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PRAISE FOR PERRI O'SHAUGHNESSY'S BESTSELLING NINA REILLY NOVELS

BREACH OF PROMISE

“A LEGAL MYSTERY FOR THOUGHTFUL
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AND SMART AND THE SURPRISE TWISTS
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—*San Francisco Chronicle Book Review*

“FASCINATING . . . COMPELLING.”

—*The Hartford Courant*

ALSO BY PERRI O'SHAUGHNESSY

Motion to Suppress
Invasion of Privacy
Obstruction of Justice
Breach of Promise
Move to Strike
Writ of Execution
Unfit to Practice
Presumption of Death

Dedicated to the memory of Kathleen Miller O'Shaughnessy
and to the Miller family

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Finally, we thank the many readers who have sent e-mails to us, expressing enjoyment from reading our books. We feel very lucky to have their support and good wishes.

(*Excerpts from* THE STATE BAR OF CALIFORNIA
STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROFESSIONAL
RESPONSIBILITY AND CONDUCT FORMAL
OPINION NO. 1996-146)

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It is the duty of an attorney:

(e) To maintain inviolate the confidence, and at every peril to himself or herself to preserve the secrets, of his or her client.

PROLOGUE

PRETENDING HE WAS still asleep, he felt his wife crawl out of bed.

Outside, he could hear birds. That meant last night's snowfall had stopped. He wondered if the sun had finally blasted through the layer of clouds that had cursed the sky the past several days.

Jim Strong didn't move, didn't even open his eyes. He followed the sounds as Heidi got ready in the bathroom, the ritual of every morning: splash water on her face, brush her teeth, search her face in the mirror until it was all back in place, her past, her present, her secrets.

She sprayed her hair and ran her fingers through it over and over. She squeezed sun block onto her hands and rubbed it on her pale skin. Every sound, so placid, so falsely suggestive of domestic peace, aroused a fresh wave of anger in him. She had no right to be so sure of anything. Not after what she had done.

He controlled his breathing as she came softly into the dim bedroom and paused at the foot of the bed. He felt her eyes landing on him, and stopping to prowl over his face. Then she turned away. He watched through slitted eyes as she slipped the long T-shirt off over her head, her long white back with the bumpy spine, the tight calves, and delicate feet that she was inserting quietly and carefully into her tights.

She was so very beautiful. After three years, he loved her more than ever. She had seemed so blunt, so honest, like he was, forceful, an athlete with her own code of honor.

He had always thought, if she ever cheats on me I'll —but now that she had, he didn't want to hurt her. He just wanted her to turn back toward him, where she belonged.

The ski bibs slid like satin over her body. Balancing on one leg, she pulled on her raglan socks, then tiptoed out of the room, carrying her boots and parka.

He opened his eyes. He could hear better with his eyes open. Now she drank a glass of milk greedily, down to the last drop. Now she stuffed her keys into her fanny pack, and shut it with a zip. Now she bumped into the fish tank, and now . . .

She was leaving.

Out on the street, she scraped snow off the windshield. Then the cold motor turned and started up. She didn't wait as long as usual for it to warm up. Forcing it into action, she took off.

He threw off the covers and jumped out of bed. Pulling up the shade, he saw what the new storm had brought: sunshine in a searing white blaze, and at least two feet of new snow, feathery and dry.

Was she going to meet her lover? He studied the heavily burdened trees, aware that for once in his life he didn't know what to do.

No matter. It would come to him.

At Paradise, both quad lifts were operating and the hill was jammed with skiers. Carrying his Rossignols over his shoulder, Jim walked along the wall of the lodge and examined the rows of skis.

No sign of Heidi's K2s. He would know, since he'd watched her a hundred nights waxing them and fiddling with the bindings, getting them perfect. He went into the lodge restaurant.

“Seen Heidi?” he said to the day hostess, who looked like Heidi, but was chunky and plainer. Gina something, her name was. He had let her know when she was hired that part of the job was to help him keep tabs on the rest of the family.

“No, sir.” That was good. He liked respect. He was the boss. “I think she was in about half an hour ago. She couldn’t wait to get out on the powder.”

“Who was she with?”

“Um, nobody. Your father’s already in the back office, Mr. Strong.”

“Okay.” He didn’t want to see his father right now. “My brother show up?”

“Alex and Marianne just left,” the girl went on. “They were arguing. I think they separated.”

“The gang’s all here,” Jim said. He chucked her under the chin. He knew she didn’t like that, which made him enjoy the gesture even more. He was angry at her for looking like Heidi.

“Gangbuster day,” she said with a bright phony smile, and went back to work.

Pulling on his goggles to cut the glare, Jim trudged outside. He wondered where Heidi might be skiing. Off-trail somewhere, probably. Maybe somewhere with Marianne. She was probably filling Heidi’s head with ideas about leaving him.

On the other hand, it was Marianne who had warned him to watch Heidi in the first place, good advice, as it turned out. He had watched and watched until Heidi screamed at him to stop spying. Then he had told her he knew.

With that half-defiant, half-scared look he was beginning to know so well, she had admitted it. She had said she was thinking of leaving him. She had told him who it was, cutting him off at the knees.

The sun burned into his face. He leaned against the outer wall of the lodge and slathered on sunscreen.

He could just ski, forget about her, and get in a few runs. From the top he could see most of the trails, though if she was off-trail in the trees he would never find her.

He decided to cruise down some of the black-diamond runs. Give her time to meet her lover, if she had the nerve. He would catch up to her sooner or later, and then . . . something would happen.

He skied all morning on the expert runs. The powder was so sensational he even forgot her now and then, although the anger in him still burned like hot lead in his stomach.

He had never been in such virgin powder. Once he came across Marianne snowboarding along the Ogre Trail, her black hair flying over red bibs. He flew by her, lifting one pole in a salute, but he doubted Marianne had even seen him.

He saw no sign of Heidi. He missed her, wanted her by his side.

Later, at the lodge, he ate lunch. As he spooned thin vegetable soup into his mouth, the hostess told him she thought his father had gone for the day. She reported no sightings of Alex or Heidi.

After eating, he went out again. He was hunting. The day had deepened into a mellow afternoon, still crystal clear on the slopes, warmer.

He fell through light and shadow on white crystals, weightless, swerving and turning and falling endlessly, then riding back up to do it all over again.

No sign of her. He had a brainstorm. Maybe she was skiing the Cliff. She had talked about it often, but he thought she had never followed through. Today, with the snow so

tempting, the conditions so perfect . . . maybe.

He took the Bald Eagle run halfway to an opening in the forest and dodged into it, pushing up his goggles as he ducked in because of the dark that closed around him. The faint downhill trail they usually followed was buried under the snow, and he had to look sharp to avoid trees and gullies.

In a clearing on the side of the mountain, steep and wooded, expert territory, the trail opened up.

Heidi wasn't there, but Alex was sitting in the snow, fixing one of his bindings.

Jim skied straight across to him.

"What are you doing here?" Alex asked sourly.

"What's the matter? Did you break it?"

"I don't like the fit on one of them. I spent an hour working on this fucking binding this morning and it still doesn't fit. I mean, I can ski, but I really hoped for what I paid I could get it so tight my foot would be screaming."

"Sit there." Jim planted his poles and herringboned over to Alex.

"Watch yourself. It's a long slide and the Cliff is dead ahead," Alex said. He stretched his leg out so Jim could have a look. The ski stuck straight up into the air.

"I remember." Jim took Alex's boot. "I can't fix it with you sitting there. Get your lazy ass up and stand on it. What did you do to your eye?" He helped Alex up and gave him time to kick out a level platform and stand on the ski.

"Gene Malavoy came up to me in the parking lot last night and laid into me. I don't even know what it was about. I fought him off and he ran. Know anything about it?"

"I fired him yesterday. Can't imagine why he'd go after you, though."

"Fired him? What did you do that for?"

"Let's talk about it later. Step out of the binding now. Seen Heidi?" Jim pulled a glove off with his teeth and got to work on the ice-encrusted binding.

"She's off duty today, isn't she?"

"Yeah. She's up here somewhere."

"Maybe she's with Marianne."

"I saw Marianne. On the Ogre. Alone."

"Marianne likes that trail."

"You doing the Cliff?" Jim said.

"I'm doing the side of the Cliff," Alex said.

"Pretty extreme run."

Alex looked at him sideways, on the alert for a challenge. He was three years younger. He had never been able to keep up with Jim. "It's only for people with a death wish," he said. "We did it. Remember? I was, what? Thirteen? And you were sixteen."

"Yeah, but we were crazy then. I still don't know how you made it. Only thirteen years old. Jesus, Alex. You skied like a sonofabitch back then." He slapped an open buckle shut on Alex's boot, and noted a slight wince as the boot tightened over his ankle.

"You don't think I can still do it?" Alex asked.

"I never said that," said Jim, getting up, watching it so he didn't start to slide. "Do it if you want. I don't give a shit."

"We could both go," Alex said, bending down to adjust his bib over his boot.

“Straight down, then that last-minute turn before complete destruction. Remember?”

“Hotdogger’s dream,” Jim agreed.

“It feels a lot tighter. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“You haven’t run down here since?”

“Not me,” Jim said. “Thought about it a few times.” He hadn’t really, not after Alex had left and moved to Colorado with their mother and Kelly. “The snow’s right. Deep powder, slows you down.”

Alex kicked at the snow, testing the bindings. “So?”

“Why not? I feel stupid enough to do it.”

“Let’s do it.”

He watched Alex methodically check his binding and boot buckles, watched him pull his long hair out of his eyes and look toward the edge, face eager and eyes on fire. He remembered the first time they had barreled toward the Cliff, making the turn just in time, going a thousand miles an hour, miraculously avoiding the trees. He remembered the look of fear on Alex’s face, his own abject terror.

He also remembered his father’s rage when Alex bragged about it later. “You are the older one, Jim. I hold you responsible . . .”

“So are we doin’ it or not?” Alex was already dusting off the poles, going into his stance.

“Yeah,” Jim said. Lining up next to his younger brother, he adjusted his goggles and looked up at the sky. Perfect conditions.

“Last one down is a rotten egg,” Alex said, same as he had said the first time.

Down they plunged, playing to the fringes, moving on the edge of out of control instantly. The powder was so light it barely slowed them down. Knee-deep in it, they slid down the mountain. Jim fought to stay upright and avoid the trees. Alex, up ahead, laughed insanely.

Just that millisecond of watching Alex, and he almost went down! Jim flew on, gesturing like a madman, feeling like a madman, shrieking with laughter in the still air, hearing Alex’s answering shriek down below, knowing it was coming up, the last moment, the moment of the turn, and he couldn’t remember and he didn’t care, was it go left or go right, left or right, right or left—

Alex turned left, so he went right—

Alex went left, but then he went into a skid so fast he blurred. He was skidding sideways straight down, fast, faster, straight toward the Cliff. Jim, bearing hard right, saw the whole thing, Alex getting the skis under him too late, going into a tuck, going for it—

Over. Alex went over the Cliff. No sound.

Jim thought he heard a bad noise below. Then he skied over a fallen limb and caught it on the edge.

He saw the tree. He crashed—

1

THROUGH HER OFFICE door, Nina Reilly heard the gentle guitar and coaxing voice of Carlos Botelho, singing that love is a paradox that disappears the moment you find it. Sandy Whitefeather, her secretary, had developed a fixation on this particular recording and had been playing it over and over for two weeks. In the outer office, Sandy hummed along with the tune, if that rasping monotone could be called a hum.

After a long morning in court, Nina had just had lunch, a spicy quesadilla from Margarita's Mexican Restaurant across Lake Tahoe Boulevard from the office. Her yellow silk blouse now sported a salsa stain on the front, right where it stuck out the most. Men didn't have this structural difficulty. Also, sometimes they had the advantage of those patterned ties, so useful for catching drips.

Naturally, the prospective client who had come to consult her was an attractive male, tieless but stainless, who had immediately noticed the blouse. He had noticed all of her very thoroughly before he sat down, and now he was looking around the office, getting his bearings.

A, amor . . .

Love takes its rhythm from the sea

Seeking and leaving eternally

Outside her window a light, dry snow fell, shot through with sunlight as the squall moved on across the Sierra into the high desert of the Carson Valley. It was only the beginning of November, and snow already capped the giant peaks that surrounded South Lake Tahoe. At over six thousand feet, Tahoe caught the cold currents of winter long before the valleys of the San Joaquin and the Pacific Coast.

Stretching out her legs under the desk to relieve the pressure on her stomach, she gazed past him toward that calming fall of snow, thinking, here it comes again, the change of weather, the new case, the trouble that falls endlessly through the door.

"You're gonna love this one," Sandy had told her the day before, handing her the phone message slip. This could mean anything: that Sandy approved of the client's political beliefs, family ties, or bank account.

Nina had written his name and address and phone number at the top of her legal pad: James Strong, Paradise Lodge Manager, care of Paradise Ski Resort, Stateline, Nevada. "Call me Jim," he had said as he looked her over, holding out a hand. He had taken off his red, white, and black Tommy Hilfiger parka and seated himself in one of the client chairs, but he didn't seem ready to talk yet.

She watched him check out the office with its fiddle-leaf fig in the sunny corner, the picture on her desk of Bob, looking not-too-thrilled at being caught on film by the school photographer, and the framed certificates on the walls. Nina Reilly, attorney-at-large. Graduate, Monterey College of Law. Admitted to practice before the Supreme Court of the State of California.

Hard-earned certificates. So hard earned, it had taken five years to pay off the student loans.

The low-key surroundings seemed to reassure him. Some prospective clients preferred ostentation. They went elsewhere. The Law Offices of Nina Reilly consisted of the front office where Sandy reigned and clients waited, the library and conference

room next door where coffee was made and depositions were held, and Nina's small office in back, just big enough for the oversized desk and a couple of orange chairs given to her by her sister-in-law.

While Jim Strong looked around, she formed her own impression of him: blue eyes burning out of his face; brown hair, cropped close; powerful neck, finely honed features; a jock with brains. Skiing as a lifestyle had tanned his skin, beefed up his shoulders, and narrowed the rest of his profile. He was younger than Nina by a few years, in his late twenties. He wore a red sweater and jeans.

His physical presence was blinding. The ski bunnies must love him.

But it was his expression that her eyes lingered upon, the compressed lips that held things in, the furrow of skin between the thick brown eyebrows, the jaw that clenched and unclenched, working the muscles of his cheeks.

A man in the worst trouble of his life, she diagnosed, getting up to close the door that Sandy had left cracked open.

*Slowly my love changes and becomes beautiful
Sending out sparks, and I catch fire—*

She knew the Strong name from constant references in the *Tahoe Mirror*. Straddling Nevada and California, with runs in each state, Paradise was one of the oldest local businesses, a major employer at Tahoe, and one of the few ski resorts that was still run by a family and not a distant corporate conglomerate. Philip Strong, father and owner, also sat on the City Council, got loads of kudos for his philanthropy, and his fair share of respectful reverence for being among the area's founding fathers.

Also favoring the steady stream of publicity was the family's extraordinary athletic skill. Various members competed in world-class ski and snowboarding events that led to awards and exciting close races. It didn't hurt either that their physical good looks cried out for a Sunday photo spread. Nina suspected that they encouraged the coverage, which could only be good for a small resort struggling to wrestle patrons from the behemoths of Squaw and Heavenly.

But the most recent coverage, she remembered now, had been because of a tragedy.

She sat back down and swung her chair around to face him better. He focused on her face and she smiled.

"Any time," she said. "When you're ready."

"It's not easy, coming here." His voice was deeper and older than she had expected.

"I sure do agree with that. I have to come here every day."

A final hesitation, and then he came out with it.

"I think I'm going to be arrested."

She could smell his suntan lotion. Running a lodge at a ski resort, he must need to use a lot of it. His wide hands were like mallets, so hard used they were cracked and earth colored. He obviously spent more time outdoors than in the lodge. He pushed himself back in his chair, compacting himself, as if trying to contain his energy.

"They're saying I killed my own brother." Opening his mouth, he held it that way for an instant, then snapped it shut, then began grinning in embarrassment and shaking his head. "Sorry. It sounds like such a bad joke. Kill my brother? Can you believe it?"

"Alex Strong was your brother? I read about his death in the paper. I'm very sorry." The front page of the *Mirror* had headlined, "Championship Skier Dies in Accident." She hadn't had time to read the rest, but there had been a large photograph . . . the face

had looked like Jim's, the hair lighter and longer, the face younger but no less intense.

"Yes. Alex. First he dies on me, then all this. It's the worst week in my whole life. I'm licked. I can't handle it. I need help. I'm not too stupid to figure that out."

She allowed herself to feel a slight sympathy. He had lost his brother. She, too, had a brother. She had experienced grief, also, that lightless sea that rolls in, drowning everything.

But the truth was, almost every person who walked through the door and into her office had experienced misfortune. It was a given. Over the years she had had to become less sensitive to other people's pain and more attuned to her practical role in alleviating it.

"I want to hire you. How much do you need for a retainer?"

"We'll get to that. Tell me about your brother. What happened to him?"

"It was a ski accident last Sunday. Eight days ago. I've barely slept since then. I still can hardly believe he's gone." He swallowed.

"How did it happen?"

"I was with him. We were off-trail on the California side, hotdogging down a thirty-degree slope. The terrain was extreme, but if anybody could ski it, Alex could. We'd both been down that hill under worse conditions. It's a place that we called the Cliff. You head like a bat out of hell straight down, then you have to make a fast turn to avoid the drop-off. Alex was in front. I saw the Cliff coming up, dead ahead. I took a sharp turn to the right and Alex went left."

Nina nodded.

"We were laughing. I thought it was a riot."

Nina scratched a note on her pad and waited.

"Alex missed the turn. That's all. He couldn't get his skis around it. I don't know what happened—an ice patch, maybe. I looked back and saw it happening, how he kept trying to turn, getting closer and closer to the edge. I stopped paying attention to my own skiing and saw at the last second that I was heading flat out for a tree. I veered too sharply and crashed. Not a bad fall, but my left ski released. I wiped the snow off my goggles. I was about fifty feet away from the drop-off, not far at all. But I couldn't do anything to save him. I saw him go over." He paused, breathed deeply, and continued. "He did everything right, went into a tuck, pulled up the poles, went for it. I think he was yelling something, but I don't know what. I couldn't see his face, just the helmet.

"I lost sight of him."

He stopped. His hand went up to touch his forehead.

"What happened then?" Nina asked.

"I heard a sickening thud and I think I heard something, not a cry, more like a grunt, like he got the bejesus knocked out of him. I got my ski back on as fast as I could and rammed down through the trees along the side of the Cliff to him. I was yelling but I couldn't hear an answer.

"He was only out of my sight about ten minutes. Didn't take me long to find him. If it wasn't for the rocks, he would have been all right. He was a great skier. He could handle almost anything. He almost missed them. It was just damn bad luck."

Strong went on. "He'd landed on some granite jutting up through the snow." He stopped, cleared his throat. "Do you have any water?"

“Of course.” Nina buzzed. Sandy opened the door and drifted in on a wave of samba music.

*I leave at dawn and walk around the city
A spell like the mist still on me
Like rain on me, and I am helpless*

Until that moment, Nina had heard only the cheerful, relaxing side of the song, but the story Strong was telling colored the words in a way she had never noticed before. Now, embedded in the tender voice and those guitar chords that never quite resolved into majors or minors, she heard something new.

Sadness. And behind the sway of the rhythm, an evasiveness, a mystery.

Like the mystery behind the words of the skier in front of her.

“Water, please,” she said, and Sandy disappeared without a word. Strong waited until the Dixie cup was placed in front of him, took a sip, and raised weary eyes.

“They think I killed him,” he said again.

“Who thinks that?”

“Two detectives from the South Lake Tahoe Police Department came out to Paradise to talk to me yesterday. They said they were filling in some blanks for their report. I don’t think they believed me. Something’s going on.”

“Why wouldn’t they believe you?” The door was ajar again; Sandy was listening. Oh, well. Sometimes she offered up an astute comment or two after a client left.

“I don’t know! I can’t imagine why. It was an accident. He skied off a cliff, damn it!”

“You answered their questions?”

He nodded. “I told them everything I could think of. Alex was cremated. We just had the funeral three days ago. They don’t give a shit that I’ve lost my brother. They asked me the same things over and over— how long was it before I got down to the rocks, what kind of shape was Alex in, what did I do to help him. Why didn’t I save him. Christ.”

They looked at each other. His eyes were dark pools, sunken into his head. His mouth twisted. Fear made people look that way. And just now, she was beginning to understand the fear better.

He was afraid for himself.

“All those questions. I told them everything. How we were yelling, screwing around. I was trying out a brand-new pair of Rossignols—”

“Were you racing?”

“They wanted me to say we were but we weren’t. We were just trying to find the powder and have a good time.”

“Okay.”

“Not that we both don’t ski fast,” Strong said. “Maybe too fast for the terrain. That’s part of it. The risk.”

“Did you tell them that?”

“Yeah. I admitted we were both going too fast. But you have to understand, there were eighteen inches of new snow up there on the mountain. We were up to our knees and still flying. Alex loved powder skiing. Do you ski?”

“Now and then. I’ll never get past intermediate.”

“My father put all of us kids on skis by the time we were three.”

“All?”

“Me and Alex, and Kelly. My sister. She’s a lot younger. I’m thirty. Kelly’s only twenty-five. She’s the only one of us who doesn’t work at Paradise. She’s one of those perennial students.”

Nina wrote it down.

“Alex was twenty-seven. We closed Paradise, of course, and the whole crew came to the funeral. My father isn’t taking it very well at all. He loved Alex.”

“Philip Strong is your father, right?”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah.” Strong looked away, seemed about to say something, but thought better of it.

“Was there an inquest?”

“Not that I know of. Just—an autopsy. The coroner confirmed it was an accident within forty-eight hours. There’s supposed to be an autopsy report, but I haven’t seen it. I don’t want to see it.”

“So,” said Nina. “Maybe the police just want to clear up a question or two for the report. That’s what they told you. Why not believe them, Jim?”

“Because I could see it in their eyes.” He sounded convinced, but Nina still couldn’t understand his concern.

Looking down at her legal pad she said, “When a family member dies, everything gets magnified. Your brother died suddenly, so more care would be taken with the reports. It’s possible the police really were simply closing the books on the case.”

She was giving him an opening. It was time for him to tell her the rest, the part that scared him the most. The police did not waste time on obvious accidents.

Right on cue, he said, “There’s more.” He finished the water and crumpled the paper cup.

“More?”

“It’s my wife, Heidi. She took off the day after Alex died. I don’t know where she is.”

“She’s been missing for a week?”

“That’s right.”

“That’s a long time. She hasn’t called you? You really have no idea where she might have gone?”

“No. We’ve been married three years.” He said this tentatively, offering up the information as if no longer able to make a determination about which facts might be useful.

Was he afraid his wife’s disappearance would convince people he was guilty of something? Nina didn’t know him well enough to tell yet. He’d tell her in his own way, and she would have to be patient, allowing the facts to emerge.

Another silence. She made a note, looked expectant.

“She’s a headstrong girl.” Under his tan, he flushed and looked down at his tapping foot. “Heidi sicced them on me. She . . .” He played with his cup, opening it, crushing it again. “She went to the South Lake Tahoe police on the morning after Alex died, and she talked to the officer on duty, and signed some kind of written statement. I haven’t seen it.”

“Then how do you know—”

“That she did that? The detectives that came to the resort yesterday told me. And

because of this. I didn't show it to them." Strong pulled from the pocket of his jeans a pink Post-it note that stuck to his fingers as he unfolded it with shaky hands. He handed it to Nina.

Heidi Strong's handwriting slanted right, the sign of an extrovert, Nina remembered vaguely. Strong's wife had pressed hard and written the first line in capitals. "**I KNOW WHAT YOU DID TO ALEX.**" Below that spooky lead followed some short lines. Nina read it all in a glance.

***I KNOW WHAT YOU DID TO
ALEX.***

I'm leaving.

I never want to see you again. I mean it,

Jim.

Don't even think about trying to find me.

That was it. No signature, no date, just a few words, sharp and direct, incised into the paper.

"Wow," Nina said. No other word seemed adequate. She turned it over and looked for something more but there was nothing.

"I found it stuck on the toilet lid that morning. Here I was, taking a whiz, just waking up, thinking about Alex, not even knowing anything's going on with her, and I see this note. I thought, I'm dreaming. But I wasn't. I searched the house. She was gone, all right. She'd taken our big suitcase and the roller one that fits under an airplane seat and her electronic keyboard. Her clothes, some books, CD's, her ski gear—everything she really cared about. She even took Freaky."

"Freaky?"

"Our cat. She drove off in the camper, a Tioga. Just big enough for the two of us and maybe a kid, if we ever had one . . ." He chewed on his thumbnail. "At first I thought she'd cool off, and, you know, realize she had totally overreacted. I waited for her to come home, or at least, to call. But it's been seven days and I haven't heard from her. I've called everyone I could think of. Marianne—"

"Who is that?"

"Alex's wife. She swears she doesn't know anything. I had to tell my father, too, but he doesn't have a clue. Then I talked to Heidi's friends on the Ski Patrol. She's a supervisor at Paradise. Nobody knows anything, or at least no one will tell me anything. She just took off without a word."

"Well, she left these words, Jim. What do you think she means?" Nina held up the note.

"Obviously, she blames me for Alex's death. When she got to Boulder Hospital that night, they were operating on Alex, trying to save him. I knew he wouldn't make it—" Strong exhaled in a short gust. "Just a minute," he said. Jumping out of the chair, he went to Nina's window, the one that looked toward Mount Tallac, one of the high mountains that ringed Tahoe.

The snow had cleared quickly, leaving a sparkling, already melting inch of white on the pane. Strong leaned close to the window, and from the side, through the slashing sunlight that forced its way between the dark layers of cloud hanging over the town, Nina could see the deep brown of his lashes and the glistening of his eyes as he stared out. She looked down at the Post-it. A ray of early-afternoon sun lit up the note like a