

Another Thriller in the Owen McKenna Tahoe Mystery Series

TAHOE CHASE

*The fastest you'll
ever run is when you
run for your life...*

TODD BORG



AN OWEN MCKENNA MYSTERY THRILLER

TAHOE CHASE

by

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PROLOGUE

It was the softness of the metallic click that sounded dangerous.

Cynthia Rorvik was filling the bird feeder out on the deck when she heard a faint sound of metal on metal. Her heart thumped.

Maybe it was the latch on the deck fence gate, the whisper snick of spring-loaded bar as it wobbled out of its cradle.

Cynthia inhaled a short, reflexive breath and held it, listening, her hearing one of the few things that still worked as well at 79 as when she'd been a teenager. She hadn't heard the doorbell, although the deck slider was shut and she'd been making noise with the bird seed bag. Maybe someone tried the door, got no answer, and came around the house.

Cynthia set the seed bag down in the fresh snow on the bench, walked over to the edge of the deck, and looked along the stone walkway that led to a gate in the fence. The gate was in the dark shade of the big California Red Fir trees. In contrast to the bright snow on the ground and tree boughs, it was impossible to see anything in the relative darkness near the gate. It looked like the gate was shut. Or maybe it was open an inch. She couldn't tell. Cynthia stood silent, listening.

There were small cracks between the fence boards, but Cynthia could see no shape of a person through the cracks. She waited and watched. After several seconds of no other sound, she decided she must be mistaken.

She stepped back to the feeder and finished filling it. In the nearby Lodgepole Pines, several Mountain Chickadees fluttered in excitement, their quick-step, aerial dance moves too fast to see in detail. The birds came down to the feeder one at a time, then each flew off with a seed. They chirped and sang, a coffee-klatsch of busy birds trading gossip as they feasted.

Cynthia listened instead for the lonely chick-a-dee song from up in the tree off the corner of the deck. In a moment it came, the beautiful, three-note, minor-third music that was Molly.

Cynthia pulled several black oil sunflower seeds from the bag and walked over to the corner of the deck. She put the seeds on the palm of her gloved hand and held her hand out. The tiny, one-legged chickadee she'd named Molly swooped in and landed on her outstretched index finger. The bird never went to the feeder, perhaps unable to muscle in with the other birds. Balancing on her one leg, Molly hopped a step forward and picked up the seed. The bird cocked her head at Cynthia as if in thanks, then flew over to the closest tree. Molly landed on a short broken twig, and bent down to position the seed so that her single foot could hold the seed even as it held her perch.

As Cynthia watched, Molly used her beak to crack open the shell and eat the seed inside.

In a moment, the bird flew back to Cynthia's palm, grabbed another seed, and flew off. Molly disappeared into the forest canopy. In a few moments, she came back for a third seed, then a fourth and a fifth. Cynthia knew that Molly was stashing the seeds, adding to her winter food cache.

Molly came back, landing this time on the deck railing, hopping in the snow, cocking her head.

Cynthia liked to think that Molly enjoyed her company.

Then, in a flash of light and puff of snow, Molly seemed to vanish. The movement was so fast it was as if she were the disappearing bird in a magic trick.

Cynthia knew what it meant. She looked up for a cruising raptor, but saw none. A lurking cat? She glanced over the deck railing.

She sensed a sudden movement off to her side.

Cynthia's heart beat so hard that it hurt. She jerked her head to look and saw a person.

~~“Oh, thank God it's you,” she said. “I saw movement and I...”~~ She stopped talking to breathe. She put her hand to her throat. Fast breaths. In and out.

“I'm so sorry that I startled you!” the visitor said. “I thought I heard someone on the deck, so I came around the house.”

Cynthia nodded. “Not to worry. Just let me catch my breath. Have you seen that hawk we talked about?” she asked.

“Yes! That's why I stopped by. It was flying down by Lake Tahoe Blvd. At least, I think it's the same bird. Quite a bit bigger than a crow. Dark on its back, light on its breast and under its wings. It was doing a swooping motion just in front of me while I drove! Then it made a big turn and came up the mountain. I followed it up Tahoe Mountain Road. I know you can't, you know, follow a bird. It doesn't like they stay over the roads. So I lost it. But I kept looking. Then it came back, diving like before, staying right in front of me. Then flew into these trees. I could see from the street.” The person pointed and peered into the trees where the Mountain Chickadees had been, then walked over to the deck railing and looked down.

“There it is!”

“Really?” Cynthia hurried over to the edge of the deck. “Molly disappeared in a flash a moment ago. It must have been the hawk. Where is it?” Cynthia couldn't see anything from where she stood. Her house perched on the edge of the mountainside, and the deck projected out over the steep slope. Mt. Tallac loomed across the valley of Fallen Leaf Lake. The sun reflected off its brilliant snowfield. In the distance to the north, the vast blue of Lake Tahoe shimmered. There was so much light that Cynthia's eyes couldn't adjust to make out anything in the dark shade below the deck.

Her visitor pointed again. “Look! It has something in its claws. Or whatever they're called. Maybe you know what kind of hawk it is.”

Cynthia shaded her eyes from the light off Mt. Tallac and studied the snowy rocks thirty feet below the deck. She saw nothing except movement to her side as the person pushed her against the railing. Cynthia grabbed at the deck rail, her teeth clenched in terror as her visitor reached down, lifted her up on her ankles, and flipped Cynthia over the railing.

I'd just fired up the coffeepot in my office on Kingsbury Grade when Spot, my Harlequin Grey Dane, lifted his head off the floor. His nose pointed toward the window and its view of Lake Tahoe in the distance and the snow-covered mountains beyond. But his gaze was vague. He was seeing something else. One ear swiveled left, then right, then both turned rearward. It was a sight I'd seen many times, my dog looking inward, focusing on a sound I couldn't hear.

Spot's nose twitched, big wet nostrils flexing. Then he cranked his head around and looked at the closed door. I still heard nothing, and I certainly didn't smell anything over the aroma coming from the gurgling coffee maker.

There was a soft two-rap knock, and the door opened.

An old man stood in the doorway. He was large of frame but bent a bit forward at the waist and showing favor to stiff joints. He was handsome despite the wear of years, his eyes as blue as those of a Husky sled dog. He wore a black watch cap, which he took off as he nodded at me. The top of his head was as bald as a cue ball, but the sides and back had a ring of white hair. Matching his hair were white eyebrows, thick and long but brushed and trimmed into submission. Above his upper lip was a small white mustache, cut very short.

The man made a little foot-stomp on the mat, shaking off the bits of snow left on his shoes after his walk up the stairs and down the hall.

As he walked through my office door, he seemed strong and well-balanced, yet he held his arm out just a bit, the watch cap wavering in his right hand. It made me think of how people walk when they are in an earthquake and know that the floor might shift at any moment. Probably, the ground beneath him had shifted recently.

Now that Spot saw our visitor, he got up to satisfy his olfactory curiosity. I grabbed his collar to hold him back. I gave a little tug, patted him on his rear, and he sat down next to my chair, his head over the top of my desk. He panted as he stared at the man.

The man looked at Spot, then turned around and glanced at the rest of my small office as if to make sure that we were alone. He took a step back to shut the door, then came toward my desk.

"My name's Joe Rorvik. I've asked around a little. You come recommended. Although it was hard to find you with that scaffolding on the building. It blocks the address number."

I nodded. "Sorry. They're making repairs." I reached out my hand. "Owen McKenna," I said. Rorvik switched his cap to his left hand, leaned forward, and we shook. I was careful not to squeeze hard on the man's swollen knuckles.

I'd heard the man's name before, but I couldn't place it.

I put my palm to the front of Spot's nose, a sign that means 'stay,' and I moved around the side of the desk, gesturing at the chairs behind the man.

"Get you a chair?" I said.

"Thanks, I'll get it," Rorvik said. He turned just enough to reach out and pull up one of the two chairs. He sat, grunting a bit with discomfort. He hooked the cap onto the arm of the chair.

The coffee maker did the spit and gurgle that meant it was through dripping. I reached for a mug. "Coffee?"

"Please. With cream if you've got it."

"I've only got these," I said, holding up one of the little plastic containers of pretend cream. "They might be out of date by a few years."

Rorvik frowned. "Black then."

~~I filled the mug, handed it to him, then poured my own and returned to my chair. I waited.~~

The man hesitated. He looked left, then right, the motion noticeable because of the intense blue color of his eyes. He radiated melancholy.

"I'm hoping you can help me," Rorvik said. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his lips, then sipped coffee, the actions in reverse order from those of most people. He moved his mouth and tongue like he was at a wine tasting, then swallowed. Maybe he was a coffee connoisseur. Then again, maybe his motions were those of distaste. I was pretty sure my coffee wouldn't rate higher than about seven on a hundred-point scale.

"What's your problem?" I asked.

"My wife is lying in intensive care in Reno. A coma. She's unresponsive and likely to die."

"I'm so sorry. What happened?"

The man swallowed. "She fell from our deck. The cops think it was an accident. I think someone tried to murder her."

TWO

When he said it, I recalled the story that had been in the news a week or so before.

"I remember," I said. "I was very sorry to read about your wife's injury."

Rorvik made a small nod.

The familiarity of his name came back to me.

"You're the ski racer Joe Rorvik," I said. "The Olympic medalist famous for the Rorvik Roar."

In Tahoe we get as used to seeing sports superstars as we do movie and TV celebrities. But Rorvik's racing career was long before I was even born, and his image was not common around the Tahoe Basin, so I hadn't recognized him.

Rorvik nodded. "My last race was sixty-one years ago this winter." He sipped more coffee, made more of the mouth movements.

"I think the paper said your wife's name is Cynthia?" I asked.

Rorvik nodded. "Rell to me."

"Rell?"

"Goes way back to when I met her. After I retired from ski racing, I was working a job near U.C. Berkeley. I was bored, so I took a theater workshop. Thought I'd try my hand at acting." He sipped more coffee, his eyes looking off at the memory.

"I quickly learned that ski racing skills don't translate to the stage. But I met Rell in that class and couldn't keep my eyes off her. Not that she was a beauty queen or anything. She was actually somewhat plain-looking at first, tiny as a hummingbird and wearing frumpy, second-hand clothes. But I noticed her because she had a fire inside. So I asked her out to a dance and picked her up at her parents' house where they lived in Fremont. Her parents were grim, small-minded people who treated her as if they resented that a ski racer was paying her attention, as if I was going to take her away from them, out into the big world. Which of course is exactly what I did."

I understood that Rorvik's story was a way to avoid talking about the current situation. I didn't interrupt.

"After I got Cynthia out of that house and to the dance, she lit up. You know how an optical illusion does that thing where you see something one way and then it flips the opposite way and you can never see it the first way again? Well, that was Cynthia when we went on that first date. She was vivacious and charming, and she had a wicked-fun sense of humor. She suddenly went from plain to more beautiful than any other girl at the dance. She became my Cinderella. Pretty quick, Cinderella got shortened to Rell. Rell Rorvik after we married."

He paused.

"Any word on her condition?" I said.

"Worse and worse," Rorvik said. "They take these new pictures. Brain scans. Different areas light up. On the kind they showed me, red shows the most intense activity. Yellow for medium, and blue for the least intense. Rell's picture had little bits of blue here and there, areas that make the heart beat a little faster. But no color at all in most places. They say this is common with severe brain damage. According to the doctors, she's gone forever in every way that matters."

Joe Rorvik looked down at his lap, swallowed, then raised his head back up to me, his jaw muscles bulging.

"Rell and me had a deal," he said. His eyes held mine. No mist that I could see. Just pure blue in the irises and, in the whites, a red that had no doubt been building up for days.

He continued, "From the beginning, we always made agreements about most of the important things in life. One of them was that neither of us would let the other be hooked up to a machine if it was just prolonging an inevitable death. Of course, when we spoke of it, we were really talking about me, because I'm thirteen years older than her. Yet now it's time for me to pull the plug, as they say. He looked out my window, then looked at my dog who was still sitting obediently behind my desk.

"C'mere, boy," Rorvik said, and he patted his thigh.

Spot turned to look at me, looking for approval.

"It's okay," I said. I gave Spot a touch to let him know that he could move.

"His name is Spot," I said to Joe.

Spot stood, walked around the desk, and approached Rorvik slowly but with his tail held slightly up. Dogs sense more through tone and scent than non-dog people would believe, and Spot seemed to know that he should not be boisterous with the old man.

Rorvik reached out and put his hands on either side of Spot's snout, then rubbed up and over Spot's eyes and ears, and down his neck.

Spot was immediately smitten. He closed his eyes, lowered his tail a bit, then lowered his head to rest his jaw on the arm of Rorvik's chair.

Rorvik rubbed him several more times. Rorvik's frown was deep.

"The problem with disconnecting the life-support," he said, gritting his teeth, "is that I find that I can't let her go like this. I have to be able to tell her what happened. They say she can't hear, can't understand a thing. The hearing part of the brain is one of the areas with no color on the scan. But I still have to have a final talk. I suppose it's just for me. At any rate, once I can explain it to her, then I will have settled up my personal business between Rell and me. Then I can let her go and I can try to move on."

"What would you like me to do?" I asked.

"I want you to find out what happened."

"Mr. Rorvik, I take your concerns seriously. But the cops must not have found anything to raise your concerns if they think that her fall was an accident. What would I go on?"

"Call me Joe. Yeah, that's what they think," he said. "And maybe they're right. But I don't think so. Rell is careful. She's not excessively cautious, but she's prudent. She wouldn't lean over the desk railing or do anything else risky. She must have been pushed."

"From what I read," I said, "it sounded like there was nothing missing, so she probably didn't interrupt a burglar."

"That's true," Rorvik said. "I checked the house. Nothing missing that I could see. I even had a spare money clip with five hundred dollars in it sitting in my desk drawer. It was still there."

"Yet you still think that someone pushed her. If there wasn't a burglar, then it would suggest that someone went to your house just to murder your wife. Why would someone want to murder your wife?"

"I can't imagine it. She's a sweetheart. Everyone loves Rell. No one would want to hurt her."

"You've stated two opposing views. She wouldn't fall accidentally. But no one would push her either."

Rorvik looked at me for a bit. "I know. It doesn't make sense. That's why I need you to figure it out."

"If someone did push her," I said, "that would mean that person had an enormous problem with your wife. Either the would-be murderer hated your wife, or he saw your wife as an obstacle to something he really wanted."

Joe narrowed his eyes. "Well, no one could hate my wife, I can tell you that. No one would even dislike her."

“Then she must have been in the way of what the murderer wanted.”

Rorvik paused. “Give me an example of that.”

“Let’s say that Rell witnessed a crime. The perpetrator wants his freedom, but the only way to ensure that he gets away with the crime is to kill the witness before she can tell the cops.”

Rorvik flinched when I said the word kill.

“Rell would have told me if she’d witnessed a crime,” Joe said.

“Maybe it happened right before she was pushed.”

“As best as the cops and the doctors can establish the time of her fall, I talked to her on the phone shortly before it happened. She didn’t mention anything.”

“Maybe she couldn’t tell you because the killer was with her, preventing her from saying anything.”

Rorvik didn’t like that thought. His frown took over his entire face.

“Are you certain you made a thorough check of everything a burglar might take?” I said.

“Well, I don’t know how one would tell. But I looked around. Everything seemed okay.”

“Another possibility,” I said, “is that a burglar came to your house to burglarize it. He thought no one was home but discovered that your wife was out on the deck. If she got a good look at him, he probably worried that she could identify him, so he pushed her off. Maybe the experience spooked him enough that he decided to leave without taking anything.”

“It doesn’t make sense to me,” Joe said. “I think that any man bold enough to push a woman off the deck would take a quick look around and pocket the easy valuables. We have some valuables.”

“Maybe the burglar wasn’t spooked by pushing your wife off the deck,” I said. “Maybe he simply heard a noise and thought that somebody else was coming. So he left without looking through the house.”

Joe made a slow nod.

I saw in him the pain that so often accompanies the end of life. Even if you live a happily-ever-after life, it still has to end. Even the best endings are extremely painful for at least one of every party. In Joe’s case, the ending he was coping with was as bad as it gets.

We want to comfort people in these situations. But Rorvik didn’t come to me for comfort. He came to me to learn what had happened, which would be an indirect comfort at best.

Spot tired of standing. He sat his rear down, moving awkwardly so that he could lower his head onto Joe’s lap.

“Let’s reconsider the possibility that her fall was an accident,” I said. “Maybe no one came to your house at all.”

“I can’t see it.” Rorvik looked out my office window toward the lake, but I don’t think he was seeing the water.

“Maybe she had a little stroke,” I said. “Got dizzy and lost her balance.”

“I doubt it. She was a hiker. In great shape. She had no history of high blood pressure or any other health issues. She took no medications. So that is unlikely. And the doctors saw no evidence of a stroke in the X-rays. And even if she’d had a stroke, she’s only five-two. That’s not tall enough to accidentally fall over the railing.”

Rorvik’s arthritic hands gripped each other on top of Spot’s head as if in a wrestling match. “Will you help me?” he asked, his voice plaintive, almost desperate.

“Joe, sometimes people get an idea that I can figure out exactly how something happened, and then they are disappointed when I can’t deliver. Will you be disappointed if I find nothing?”

“Yes, of course. I want to know what happened. I owe it to Rell. But if you find nothing, I’ll accept that I did everything I could.”

“Then what?” I asked, wanting this sad man to face the possibility that I might not be able to

up the loose ends of Rell's fall from the deck.

~~“Then I have my sit-down with Rell,” he said. “I explain that the cops think it was an accident and that you were unable to find out anything more. Once she knows that I did what I could, the she'll accept it.”~~

“Rell will accept it,” I said. “But will you accept it? Will you find some peace after this?”

Joe's eyes filled with tears. “I don't know,” he said. “But I'll still go ahead and let the doctor turn off the machines. Rell and me, we had a deal.”

THREE

Joe Rorvik said that I could come out anytime but that sooner was better. Rell was waiting, he said. He gave me directions to his house, southwest of South Lake Tahoe, in the Angora Highlands neighborhood, up off Tahoe Mountain Road.

After finishing up some other business, I took Spot in my Jeep, went through South Lake Tahoe and headed out of town on Lake Tahoe Blvd. I found the turnoff and climbed up the mountain to the Angora Ridge and the Angora Highlands. Because Joe's neighborhood is closer to the Sierra Crest than the high mountainous ridge west of Lake Tahoe – there was much more snow than at my cabin on the east side of the lake. Even though it was still early December, the snow banks were already half way up to the street signs. The vertical snow walls that were cut by the giant rotary plows made the neighborhood remind me of a medieval walled city, but one where the fortress ramparts were made of white ice. Here and there, the walls were breached by driveway openings.

I parked in Joe's driveway at noon. His front door was set back under a large entry roof and nearly hidden from the street. Flanking the door were two, large, shiny metal sculptures, abstracts that could be, if one had an open mind, interpretations of ski racers.

A skinny young man in his middle twenties was stringing Christmas lights. He had one sculpture evenly wrapped and was working on the second one. In a glance, I could tell that he wasn't just hanging lights on them to get the job done, but cared a great deal about getting the placement exactly right. The bulbs seemed to be in two sets of parallel lines, each intersecting with the other at precise angles.

"Oh, hello," he said in a pleasant voice as I walked up. "You must be the private investigator Mr. Rorvik said you'd be stopping by." He shifted the bundle of lights to his left hand, then shook his hand, his grip cold and limp. He had watery eyes that were overwhelmed by heavy black-framed glasses. His pimples and pallor made me wonder if he ever saw the sun or got any exercise or anything besides pizza and ice cream. He wore a thin red stocking cap from which spilled long messy hair so red it almost matched his pimples.

"I'm Dwight Frankman," he said. "I live down the street."

I introduced myself.

Dwight gestured at the lights. "I try to help the Rorviks now and then. They... They don't have any family, so I occasionally stop by to check on them."

"Nice of you to help out," I said.

Dwight made a little nod. "Mr. Rorvik is waiting for you. You can go right in." He opened the front door a few inches and called out in a high, soft voice.

"Mr. Rorvik? Mr. McKenna is here to see you." Dwight pushed the door open farther.

I thought it best to wait outside.

Joe Rorvik appeared in a few moments.

"I see you've met Dwight," Joe said. "Best neighbor two old people could have." He put his hand on Dwight's shoulder. "I told him I didn't need Christmas lights this year. Without Rell here to enjoy them, what's the point? But here he is, anyway, trying to cheer up an old man."

"Oh, Mr. Rorvik," Dwight said, "watch this, and you'll be glad I put up these lights." He walked over to the wall and flipped the switch on a power strip that he'd plugged into an outdoor outlet. The sculpture to the left of the door lit up. Although it was daylight, it was shaded under the door.

hundred points of light suddenly reflected in the shiny metal. "Now tell me that isn't worth the effort"

~~Rorvik looked at the lights and nodded. "You're right, Dwight. Very nice. I thank you."~~

"Don't let me interrupt your meeting," Dwight said. "I'll be through here in a little bit, then I head home."

Rorvik motioned me inside and shut the door behind me.

"Dwight lives a block away," Joe said as we walked toward a big room at the rear of the house. "He seems to like to help us. He says we're the grandparents he never had. What family he has is in the Bay Area, so we all benefit from the friendship." Joe stopped and pointed back toward the door. "I couldn't see your vehicle, but I wonder if you brought your hound?"

"Yes, actually. He goes most places with me."

"Then you can bring him in if you want."

I wasn't sure how sincere the invitation was. "When you came to my office, it seemed like you knew Great Danes," I said.

"We never had one, but we like them. Before we moved up to the lake, we lived in Danville in the East Bay, and our neighbor Sissy Lakeman raised them. We got to know all of them. Rell is pretty much afraid of animals, but she loves Great Danes. She says that Danes are sweet toy lap dogs inside guard dog bodies. Your guy's got some size on him. At your office, just having his head in my lap was heavy. What does he weigh?"

"One-seventy."

"Bring him in. Please. It will be a good distraction for me."

I went back and let Spot out of the Jeep. He trotted up to Dwight. Dwight backed up, fear on his face.

"Don't worry," Joe's voice came from the doorway. "He might be a giant dog, but he's friendly. I've already met him. He won't hurt you."

Dwight was up against the wall.

I held Spot's collar so he couldn't touch Dwight.

Dwight tried to relax, but the tension in his body was obvious.

Spot stretched his head toward Joe, who then pet him.

"See?" Joe said to Dwight.

Dwight made a little nod.

Joe was obviously Dane-fluent. He turned sideways, rested his hand on Spot's back and walked him through the open front door. Joe was stooped enough, and Spot was tall enough, that Joe could use Spot's back for support.

I watched them go. Spot held his tail high as always when he's happy and exploring. I followed and shut the door behind me, leaving Dwight safe from Spot.

"Get you something to drink?" Joe said when we were inside.

I hesitated.

"I'm about to have a beer," he said as if wanting me to join in.

"Sounds good," I said.

Joe walked Spot around the kitchen island to the fridge. Recognizing the implicit permission, Spot reached his nose deep over the kitchen counters, investigating food scents. If Joe minded a giant dog wiping the counters with his jowls and neck, he didn't show it.

The big living room projected out from the rest of the house. In the back wall, a sliding glass door opened onto a deck. Picture windows flanked the door. More windows on the side walls faced the forest on both sides of the house. Through the trees in one direction, I could see the vague shape of a neighboring house. In the other direction, there were only trees.

The large deck overhung the slope that dropped away below. It was likely the deck from which

Rell had fallen. The slider and picture windows faced west and framed a grand view of the massive cliffs of Mt. Tallac. A thousand feet below the summit, a cloud roiled against the cliff face. Trailing below as the cloud moved north was a fall of snow. It looked delicate and light, but I knew that if one were in that snowfall, it would be a whirl of wind and cold and biting bits of ice and snow.

At the edge of the view, just visible through trees to the north, stretched Lake Tahoe, blue where the sun shone through and angry gray where the snow showers dotted the surface.

Out of sight, hundreds of feet below us, was Fallen Leaf Lake, the large scintillating body of water just southwest of Tahoe. Legend has it that it was formed when an Indian boy was chased by the devil. The boy had a magic branch with leaves that, when they fell off, instantly created lakes behind the boy, preventing the devil from catching him. I wondered if there was a devil someplace in Joe and Rell's life.

I wanted to investigate the deck but thought that I should wait a bit before we discussed the details of Rell's fall.

On a table near the picture windows was a pair of binoculars and a bird book. "Who's the birder?" I asked.

Joe came over and handed me a Fat Tire Amber Ale. "Rell's main focus is birding." Joe sat down on a chair, his breathing noticeable but not really strained. He took a sip of his beer. Spot lay down on the floor next to him.

"Was Rell trained as an ornithologist?" I asked.

"No. She's an amateur, but she's gotten more serious as she's gotten older. Her life list is up to five hundred sixty-something species. Her goal is to join the Six Hundred Club." He looked up toward the peak of Mt. Tallac. "I guess she won't make it. I didn't realize that until now." He turned away from me.

I drank beer, gave him some time, looked for a way to change the subject to something less sad.

The house design was Mountain Modern, post-and-beam and rustic touches combined with slick granite counters, slate floors, stainless steel appliances, and Scandinavian furniture. The view out the windows from the chairs was spectacular. As I glanced out, I thought I saw something move in my peripheral vision, moving fast.

Maybe it was a bear going through the forest. But it didn't seem like a bear. It seemed like a person trying to hide in the trees.

FOUR

I looked toward where I'd seen movement, but there was nothing to see.

I didn't want to scare away anybody watching us, so I turned from the windows and studied the room for places from which I could look outside without being obvious.

Spread through the living room were four tall, white sculpture pedestals. On each one stood an elaborate origami sculpture, white paper folded into a shape, detailed enough to be clearly recognizable. They were sizable works, each as tall as a wine bottle. One was an eagle, another an ice skater in a spin. The third was a dog leaping to catch a Frisbee. The fourth was a ski racer. Draped over it was a gold necklace. In its center was a small golden pair of skis.

Joe saw me looking at it. "That's my lucky necklace," he said. "I was wearing that when I won my Olympic medal."

"Wow. This is an important historical artifact," I said. "And these origami pieces are beautiful too." I walked behind one so that it was between me and the windows. By looking just past it, I could see outside. Anyone watching might think I was looking at the origami. "Rell found time for several pursuits," I said.

"No, those are mine," Joe said.

I was surprised that the big ski racer of Rorvik Roar fame would create something so fragile.

"You have a serious skill with paper," I said. "How did you learn it?"

Joe smiled. "Lots of practice." Joe stood and walked over. He picked up the leaping dog and handed it to me. "It's kind of a combination of art and science," he said.

I turned it around, being as gentle as if I were holding a Ming vase. I held it up at eye level, which made it easier to disguise my real purpose of looking out the window. There was so much snow that anyone in the forest would have to be wearing snowshoes. In fact, it was probably too deep for a bear until the thaw/freeze cycles firmed it up and crusted it over.

"Don't be timid with it," Joe said, pointing at the origami piece. "It's just paper. You can hold most pieces by any part. If you drop it, no big deal. Most of my pieces are pretty tough. They bounce."

"The art is obvious," I said. "Where does the science come in?"

"We start with a two-dimensional medium and turn it into three dimensions. Math meets art. Some of the best origami artists are top-level mathematicians."

I walked over to the pedestal that held the eagle. I picked up the sculpture and carried it over to the windows as if to get it into more light. By turning the origami, I was able to give the forest a thorough look. I saw nothing. I thought about Dwight. There was no car, so he'd walked up the street from his house. I saw no snowshoes, either, so if he were now out in the forest, he would have had to have brought his snowshoes and stashed them nearby.

"Joe, I can't remember if I shut the car door after I let Spot out. Give me a moment to check."

He nodded. I walked back to the entry, opened the door, and looked out. Dwight was still there finishing the lights on the second sculpture.

"Oh, hi," Dwight said. "I'm just about done."

I nodded as I stepped outside and closed the door behind me. I walked away from the house as if to take in the lights on the sculptures. From where I stood, I could see no person in the trees and no tracks, either.

"Dwight, I thought I saw someone outside in the forest. Have you seen or heard anyone?"

He immediately looked worried and made a furtive glance out toward the street. “No, I haven’t. The snow is deep. You’d need snowshoes or skis to get off the street. Plus the rotary walls are so high it would be hard to climb up and over them.”

“Right. Maybe let me know if you see someone?”

“Sure. But I’ll be leaving in a bit.” Dwight was holding a step ladder below the eave. A string of lights hung from his shoulder. He climbed up three steps on the ladder as I moved by. As he reached out to put the light string on the eave, I noticed his legs vibrating. I’d seen it before. Fear of heights can kick in just two feet off the ground.

“Here, let me steady the ladder for you.” I held it firm.

“Thanks very much,” Dwight said. His face went red with embarrassment. He hung the lights on hooks that were screwed into the eave. Now his hands were shaking. “Sorry,” he said when he was done. He climbed back down and took a deep breath, calming himself.

“That ladder just doesn’t feel right. And, well, I’m ashamed to admit that I’ve always had a little problem with heights. Dogs, too, for that matter. I have a recurring nightmare where a mountain lion jumps out of the trees onto my back and puts its jaws around the back of my neck. I see a dog as big as yours, and it makes me think of it.”

“I understand,” I said, even though I didn’t.

We moved to the other side of the entry, and Dwight again climbed up three feet and hooked up the other end of the light string while I held the ladder. It must have helped because he shook a little less. When he climbed down, he glanced out toward the street. My question about a possible person in the forest had obviously made him worry.

He turned back to me. “Thanks again,” he said, and I went back inside.

Joe was sitting in an upholstered chair. Spot was lying on the floor next to him, his head in Joe’s lap, eyes closed, soaking up Joe’s pets.

“Door shut?” Joe said.

“Yeah. You mentioned that origami is a combination of art and math,” I said. “Is that your background? Mathematics?”

“No, not at all. I couldn’t solve a quadratic equation if my life depended on it.”

“I don’t even know what a quadratic equation is,” I said, “so you obviously know more about math than I do.”

“Really, I don’t,” Joe said. “But part of a ski racer’s job is to see a mountain slope – even the narrow path defined by the gates on a race course – and understand the nature of its shape, how the valleys and ridges connect and how to pick the fastest line through that landscape. Mountain valleys and ridges are not unlike the folds of origami.”

“Cool linkage,” I said, “ski racing and origami.”

“Yeah,” Joe said as if he’d heard it before. “In fact, origami artists refer to the paper folds as mountain folds and valley folds depending on whether the folds go away from you or toward you.”

Joe sipped his beer, more relaxed now that we were talking about origami. “I love the concept of origami. Even though I made these myself, when I look at the finished work, I can’t really see the original piece of paper anymore. The alchemy even works its magic on the alchemist.”

I was struck by the old man’s infectious passion. I picked up the ski racer, and carried it over to another window. “This stands over a foot tall,” I said. “You must use large paper.”

“Come, I’ll show you.” Joe gently pushed Spot’s head off his lap, stood up, and led me through an opening to a study of sorts. Spot jumped up to follow.

There were bookshelves on the wall, filled with row after row of amazing paper sculptures, mostly white, some with colored and patterned paper. On another wall was a counter with a roll of what looked like white butcher paper in a dispenser. In the middle of that wall were two large windows that

looked out to the trees.

~~In one corner was a large plastic garbage can. It was filled to over-flowing with small origami sculptures.~~

I strolled into the study and stepped to the side of one of the windows, somewhat out of sight from anyone who might be outside, but able to see if something moved.

“This paper is thirty-six inches wide,” Joe said, unaware that I was watching the trees. He continued, “Usually we work with square pieces, but I can make the paper as long as I want. Tear off a piece and fold it into something, repeat a thousand times, and you’ll get pretty good.”

“Like skiing,” I said. “I’d love to see it in action.” I moved to the other side of the window and leaned up against the wall to make myself hard to see from outside.

Joe pulled some paper off the roll and tore off a piece about a foot and a half long. He sat down at a large table in the center of the room. There was a grid printed on the table. Joe lined the paper up on the grid and used the table edge to tear the paper. When he was done, he had a square piece 18 inches on a side.

Joe folded the sheet in half, then unfolded it and folded it in half at right angles to the first fold. Unfolding it again, Joe folded two corners over.

Using the crease marks as guides, Joe began new folds, some to keep and others to create more crease marks. I’m sure there were geometric principles behind his actions, but they eluded me.

I saw no more movement out the window. But I kept watching.

Joe worked fast and with confidence. In a few minutes, he stood up and handed me a sculpture of a tall man with a large head. The man was wearing a hooded cape and looked strong and intimidating.

“Amazing,” I said. “It looks like Darth Vader’s brother.”

“Sort of,” Joe said. “It’s my interpretation of Erebus, God of Darkness.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m new to Erebus,” I said.

“One of the early gods in Greek mythology. Perfect subject for origami.”

“Why is that?”

“Just because origami subjects are often light and happy. I suppose it’s a match-up between subject and the lightness of the medium. Birds and flowers and ballerinas. You do see some large animals depicted, bulls and elephants, but they are rare. Erebus is all about dark power, a perfect counterpoint to a delicate art made of a delicate substance.”

“I’ve never paid attention to origami. This can obviously be a...” Another movement outside? I focused on the place in the trees where I thought something shifted.

“This can be what?” Joe asked.

“Art. Origami can be a serious art medium.”

Joe nodded. “The Chinese were folding paper over a thousand years ago during the Sung Dynasty. And Europeans sculpted with both cut and folded paper during the Renaissance. But it was seventeenth century Japanese artists who elevated folded paper to something serious, more than just pretty shapes.”

“The math you referred to,” I said. I stepped over to the other side of his table where I had a view out the other window.

“Yeah. Not only can you use math to broaden origami possibilities, but you can use origami to expand your math exploration. The study of the math of origami has led to lots of practical applications like how they fold airbags in cars.”

It made sense as soon as Joe said it. “How to fit the bag into a small space and control the way it unfolds?” I said. “That came from origami?”

“Even more wonderful is what they now do in space. A Japanese mathematician named Koryu Miura used origami to figure out a way to fold and unfold giant solar panel structures so that they can

take the folded structure out of the rocket or space shuttle and completely unfold it by simply pulling on two corners. It automatically assumes the correct shape. The huge solar panels that power satellites no longer have to be laboriously assembled by space-walking astronauts.”

“Art powers science,” I said.

“Yeah. It’s pretty awesome,” Joe said, sounding for a moment like a teenager.

I was beginning to think that if I’d actually seen any movement outside, it was probably just a errant squirrel moving in my peripheral vision. Nevertheless, I kept watching. I’d learned long ago that patience was often rewarded. Certainly, impatience rarely was.

I thought about the shortest path from the study to the front door, as well as to the deck slide while I kept watch on the windows. I decided that the fastest route to intercept any trespasser would depend on which way the trespasser was going.

I gestured with the Erebus sculpture. “How do you figure it out? Are there books with folding diagrams?”

Joe nodded. “I started with some of those. Then I started inventing my own.”

“Like the mathematicians?”

“No,” Joe shook his head. “They use computers. Maybe blackboards, too, for all I know. They use equations to create complex shapes. I’m a fold-by-the-seat-of-my-pants guy. No equations in my art. I try different things, and the result is often unsatisfying or even stupid-looking. But I sometimes see a way to adjust it to make it better. It’s like any art. You keep learning and improving your craft bit by bit.”

I pointed to the garbage can. “Are these your rejects? There must be thousands of original sculptures in that can.”

“No, those are the entries in a contest that I ran last spring.”

I was surprised. “Joe, you’re not the kind to just kick back and relax, are you?”

“Well, when I heard the latest figures about how this country is getting more scientifically illiterate, I thought about encouraging would-be artists to see what they could do that might advance science. It was called the Art Meets Science Origami Contest. I wanted to see if any people out there had invented any designs that would advance science in some way.”

“Like airbags and solar panels in space,” I said.

“Yeah. So I offered a five-thousand-dollar first prize and four twelve hundred and fifty dollar prizes. Ten grand was enough to get the contest written up in several magazines and put on a bunch of websites. In addition to giving out prize money, I sent the five winning entries to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. They have the foremost origami mathematicians there. I haven’t heard back yet, but I think that the one that I awarded first prize to is going to raise their eyebrows.”

Ten grand was also enough to attract dirtballs looking for easy money. “How did people send you their entries?” I asked.

“Mail. UPS. FedEx.”

“Did the contest publicity information have your home address?”

Joe gave me a worried look. “My home address is the only one I have.”

FIVE

“No one would think that ten grand in prize money means I have ten grand in cash sitting around,” Joe said.

“Probably not. But it does suggest that you have resources, resources that might show up in other ways that someone could steal. You also said that you had five hundred in a money clip.”

“That they didn’t take,” Joe added.

I nodded. “Did you know or have you met any of the winners?”

“No.” Joe shook his head. “At least I don’t think so. I handled the judging and Rell mailed off the money. She would know the names. But I guess that means they’re lost unless I can find them in her notes.”

“We could find the canceled checks and get the names that way.”

Joe frowned. “She got money orders from the Post Office. I forget why, but she had a reason.” Joe paused, and looked off at nothing specific, his face sad. “I wasn’t a good listener. She took care of so much. I didn’t pay enough attention.”

Joe’s face went vacant for a bit. “Do you have a girl, Owen?”

“Yes. A good one. Her name is Street Casey. Maybe you’ll meet her.”

“Do you pay attention to her?”

It was a personal question that I wouldn’t have liked from most clients, but I didn’t mind coming from Joe.

“Probably not enough,” I said.

I turned back to the trash can full of origami sculptures. “Do you remember anything about the winners?” I asked. “Where they lived, for example?”

“Rell talked about it. Let me think. All over. I believe the winner was from Chicago. She might have mentioned Boston, too. I forget the others.”

“You said you sent the winning entries to MIT. Any chance you took pictures of them?”

“Yeah.” Joe walked into the kitchen, pulled out a drawer and brought me some photos. “I printed them on copy paper, so they are hard to see. But you get the idea.”

They were worse than hard to see. I could tell that they were complex geometric shapes, but that was about it.

I took one of the sculptures out of the can. It was a type of ball made of many similar sides.

“That’s a dodecahedron,” Joe said.

“Sure, I knew that,” I joked.

Another was a type of fan that expanded and contracted, snapping into each position.

“Not too many animals,” I said.

“A few. But my instructions for the contest explained that we were looking for anything that could have an application in science. So there is a preponderance of entries that reveal controlled motion or geometric shapes that might be considered hard or even impossible to fold out of paper. Each entrant also had to include a short explanation of why they thought their creation had scientific merit. And of course they had to include folding instructions.”

“Did the entry fee cover the prize money?”

Joe frowned. “There was no entry fee. The prize money was my contribution to art and science. A small price to pay in hopes of finding something of scientific value.” Joe pointed at the can full of sculptures. “Also, I very much enjoy thinking about the thousands of hours away from the TV that

these sculptures represent.”

“Are you going to do it again next year?”

Joe smiled and shook his head. “No. I may be naïve, but I’m not stupid. I had no life for many months while I fielded questions and wrote emails and judged sculptures all day long, seven days a week. And when I found a piece that I didn’t understand but could see that maybe it had merit, then I had to take photos from all angles and email them to origami mathematicians who were kind enough to give me an opinion. At one point, the project began to feel like I was living a nightmare that wouldn’t go away. I also made Rell pretty miserable during those months.”

Joe stood up as if even the memory of the contest made him weary.

I hadn’t seen any more movement outside by the time we moved back into the living room. Joe’s mood seemed better, so I pointed to the sliding glass door that led out to the deck.

“Is this the deck that Rell fell from?” I asked.

“Yes.” Joe pulled open the door and walked out. Spot followed him. I trailed behind, casually looking around, my eyes turning farther as I tried to scour the forest without being noticed. Although Spot would struggle in the deep snow, I could send him on a search mission to “Find The Suspect.” But even if a person was in the woods, that didn’t make them guilty of anything. There was no cause to have Spot take them down.

The sun suddenly poked out and was surprisingly hot despite the cold air of December. Joe pointed over the railing.

“This is the spot,” he said.

Hearing his name, Spot looked at Joe, anticipation on his face. He wagged a quick one, two.

I walked over, rubbed Spot’s head. “He means place, your largeness, place.”

My dog didn’t understand, but he liked the attention. People were saying his name. He knew that was a good thing. Maybe it would lead to food. He kept wagging.

I looked over the railing where Joe indicated. It was a long way down. The snow-covered ground was lumpy, probably granite boulders. The area was shaded, protecting the snow from the sun’s heat. The snow was tramped down and covered with footprints.

From nearby in a tree came the chick-a-dee call of a Mountain Chickadee. Over and over. I looked out but could not see any bird.

“That’s Molly,” Joe said.

I turned and looked at him.

“One of Rell’s birds. The bird eats out of Rell’s hand. But no more. I hear Molly every day. At least, I think it’s Molly. She sounds lonely. I put out seed for her, but she doesn’t come to eat.”

I nodded. I didn’t know what to say.

The railing was solid. It had balusters spaced every six inches. Rell couldn’t have gone between them. She had to go over. I stepped back and tried to visualize a 5-foot 2-inch woman coming at the railing, striking it, and the inertia flipping her over.

Just as Joe had said, it didn’t seem likely.

I turned to Joe. “Where were you when Rell fell?”

“I was in Reno at the doctor’s office.”

“When did you get back?”

“I got home just as it was starting to get dark. Maybe five o’clock. I spoke to her by phone right before I left Reno. That would have been about three-fifteen or three-thirty.”

“You found Rell below the deck?”

“Yes.” Joe swallowed. “I pulled into the garage and called for her when I walked into the kitchen. There was no answer. I opened the slider and called outside. Again, there was no answer. So I dialed her cell phone and heard the ring. I followed the sound and looked over the deck. I saw her lying on

the rocks below.” He made a little hiccup, turned away, and cleared his throat.

~~I gestured at the closest houses. “Do you know these neighbors?” I asked, as I shifted position to get a view of a different part of the forest.~~

“We’ve met and spoken, but no, we don’t really know them well.”

“Were they home?”

Joe pointed to the big tan house on the north side. “At first, I thought the neighbors on this side were home because I thought I saw him driving his car. After I found Rell and called nine-one-one, I knocked on his door. But the lights were off, and no one was home.”

Spot turned his head and lifted his nose high, nostrils twitching. But he made no other motions that would indicate a person out in the forest. The wind was blowing toward us from Mt. Tallac. So any scent on the breeze probably came from a long distance. The scent of a nearby person would be moving away from Spot.

“What are their names?” I gestured toward the house that Joe had pointed to.

“The Howsers,” Joe said. “They live in L.A. He’s an entertainment attorney. They come up to ski during the holidays and spend the glory days here.”

“Glory days?”

“The best of Tahoe summer. July Fourth through Labor Day.”

“Have the Howsers been here recently?”

“No. It’ll be hard to tell them about Rell. They like her.”

“What about the other side?”

Joe gestured toward the stone and timber-frame house on the other side. “Melanie Schuman. She’s a composer. Classical stuff for symphonies. I asked her if she was related to the famous Schumann. She said no. She said he did romantic stuff, whereas she writes postmodernist something or other. I forget her words. Something like ironic oratorio. She said it is like opera but without acting. Anyway, she’s only here in the summer now and then. Lives in the Bay Area. I always thought that composers just wrote music. But apparently, that’s just a part of it. They spend a lot of time working with orchestras and such.”

“Is there anyone else in the neighborhood that you know well?”

“No. Dwight Frankman is the closest to a friend that we’ve got. A couple times a year, he hauls our bottles and cans to the recycle center. We have a service do the snow removal, but sometimes Dwight stops by with his shovel to do the walk when there isn’t enough snow to send the service out. When you get older, these things make a big difference.”

“Can you remember the names of any other homeowners?”

“Just a guy named Michael Paul. As you know, most houses in Tahoe are vacation homes. Empty most of the year. This neighborhood more than most. One of our vacation-home neighbors had a party one summer. He wanted all the neighbors to get to know each other. As far as we could tell, the only other person besides Dwight who lives in this end of the neighborhood full time is Michael Paul. Paul is almost as young as Dwight but much more mature. He started a tech company in Silicon Valley. I think he sold the company to one of the big banks a few years ago. Now he’s a retired playboy. I think he still has a house in Mountain View, but he spends most of his time up here.”

“How old is Michael?” I asked.

“I’d guess late twenties.”

“Is Michael married? Does he have a family?”

Joe shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’ve seen him driving with different young women in his car. I should say cars, plural. He drives a Ferrari in the summer and a Porsche SUV in the winter and a BMW spring and fall.”

“Not your average vehicles,” I said.

“Not your average girls, either. Expensive-looking girls. Paul even has a fourth vehicle for snowboarding, if you can believe that. It’s a big black Range Rover with a snowboard rack, spare tire and a gas can on the roof. He goes into the back-country to ski. Or I guess I should say ride.”

“What about Frankman? What’s he do?”

“Well, as you saw, Dwight’s practically a kid. He does computer work. One of those telecommuting guys we hear about. Even though he’s a computer guy like Paul, he’s kind of the opposite in personality. Very quiet. Polite.”

“Who does he work for?”

“He’s self-employed. He writes software. He obviously does well because he bought a nice place down the street.”

“Came here to snowboard like Paul?” I said.

Joe shook his head. “As far as I know, he doesn’t do any sports. We’ve seen him walking on the local trails. But, as you could see, he’s a skinny kid. It doesn’t look like he gets any exercise. I think he just moved up here from the Bay Area for the peace and quiet. Tahoe’s probably a great place to write computer stuff.”

Joe paused. “At least Dwight isn’t into tattoos.”

“Michael Paul got himself tatted up, huh?”

“Is that the lingo, these days?” Joe shook his head. “Paul’s got ’em all over his body. His friends have tattoos, too. They all wear shorts and sleeveless shirts to show them off. Although Paul’s tattoos start below his neck and aren’t on his hands. So if he wears long sleeves and pants, you might think he’s normal.”

“You don’t like tattoos?” I said.

“No,” Joe said. “But I’m a libertarian. You leave me alone to do my thing and I’ll leave you alone to do your thing.”

“Do you know if Dwight is married or has any family or relationships?”

“He’s not married. Rell said that she asked him if he had parents or siblings, and he said no, really, just a couple of aunts back east. I asked Rell, how can you ‘not really’ have siblings? Either you do, or you don’t. But she thought maybe he did but was estranged from them. She didn’t want to pry. Either way, Rell thought that was why Dwight’s been nice to us, because he doesn’t have others to turn to.”

“So both Dwight Frankman and Michael Paul are well-off.”

Joe nodded. “In my day, the guys with slide rules in their pockets were critical in manufacturing but they didn’t make that much money. Now the modern software engineer rules the world with binary numbers, and they can make a lot more money than the version from seventy years ago.”

“Which helps in attracting expensive companions,” I said. “Any idea if Dwight and Michael know each other?”

Joe seemed startled at the thought. “I don’t know if they know each other well, but I often see them talking in the street. I never think about them in the same context, though, because they are so different other than their computer backgrounds. Michael’s real athletic, the opposite of Dwight who’s kind of a wimp. Michael’s got muscles. Not all bulk like a football player, but more like a…” he paused, looking for the word.

“Like a ski racer,” I said.

“Yes,” Joe said. “Fit and strong. Charming, too, in spite of the tattoos.” Joe made a little smile. “Not that I was ever charming, although Rell seemed to think so when we were young.”

“Does Rell know Michael or any other neighbors?”

“No more than I know them.”

I about-faced and leaned my back against the deck railing, my elbows on the rail. I could see

both sides of the house. Nothing moved.

~~“I’m wondering if you’ve been able to think of anyone who may have had a disagreement with Rell?”~~ I asked.

“No. I was serious when I said that everybody seems to love her. I’m not blind to what people think. I can see that they don’t all love me. In fact, few do. But Rell is one of those people, kind of all.”

A bird feeder hung from a pole that projected out from the deck. I pointed to it.

“It looks like Rell keeps the local bird population well fed.”

“She did,” Joe said. “A few days after her fall, I realized that it was empty. So I found a seed bag in the garage and filled the feeder. But the birds have left.” Joe’s voice was imbued with sadness.

“Is there a squirrel or something chasing them away?”

“I don’t know. I probably filled the feeder wrong. We went from being a bird oasis to a bird desert. Maybe you can look at it. Does it look like I filled it correctly?”

“I don’t know anything about bird feeders,” I said. “I can see that there’s seed inside and it comes out the bottom, so it looks good to me.”

“Then the birds just left because Rell disappeared on them.”

I walked across the deck, looked along the side of the house toward the gate. “Is that gate even locked?”

“No,” Rorvik said. “We always keep the deck slider locked so the gate need not be locked. That way the snow service can get in to shovel the deck.” He looked off toward the forest. “Maybe that was a terrible mistake.”

I walked along the house, opened the gate, and stepped through. There was a sudden sound of running footsteps, softened a bit by snow and ice, receding up the street. A car door slammed. A big, throaty engine started and revved.

I sprinted across Rorvik’s driveway as tires made the rising, grinding pitch of spinning tread on ice. Then came a small squeak of rubber gripping asphalt as a vehicle raced away, not what you expect in an upscale neighborhood of mostly empty vacation homes.

Spot shot past me, excited by my sudden action. I got out to the street as another vague hint of movement – this time colored yellow – came from down at the far street corner. The engine sound continued to rise, then quieted as the vehicle turned another corner.

Up where I guessed the vehicle may have been parked, I saw short, darkish lines burned into the snow and ice on the street. It was one of the only locations with a sight line to both the front door and rear deck of the Rorvik house. There was also easy access to the forest at the side of Rorvik’s house.

I yelled out toward the deck side of the house.

“Joe! I’ll be back in a few minutes!”

I opened the rear door to let Spot jump into the Jeep. Then I backed out and raced after a vehicle the make of which I didn't know, but which may have been yellow.

There is one main road out of the Angora Highlands neighborhood and it was the route I'd drive up, Tahoe Mountain Road. There is also a narrow seasonal road that leads down to Fallen Leaf Lake but it has no snow removal in winter. In the middle of December, the road to Fallen Leaf was already covered with two feet of packed snow. The only vehicles that could navigate it were snowmobiles.

I headed for the main road. There were two sharp corners I had to negotiate. I didn't want to spin out, so I took the corners at moderate speed. Then I sped up as I shot down Tahoe Mountain Road.

There are several places where you can see the road down below. I figured I'd get a glimpse of a speeding vehicle, but I saw none.

I pushed my speed fast enough to catch all but professional drivers and crazy drivers, but I appeared to be the only one on the road. When I got to Lake Tahoe Blvd at the bottom of the mountain, I saw no vehicle in either direction and no fresh tire marks, either.

Had the other vehicle pulled into a driveway to hide? Into a garage? Had I driven right past the person I thought I was chasing? Either that, or the person had driven down the mountain at insane speed and outrun me.

I drove back up the mountain and found Joe inside the house. I explained what had happened.

"Do you ever see anyone in the neighborhood who makes a habit of spinning their tires and driving very fast?" I asked.

Joe shook his head. "Everyone here seems to drive sensibly. Even Michael. Which surprised me if you want to know the truth."

"Because of all his vehicles? Or his tattoos?"

Joe made a small embarrassed nod. "Both. I guess I'm old. Other than Michael and Dwight, most of the people you see in this neighborhood are somewhat mature. So the young computer men stand out. Michael especially. I would have guessed that he drove fast, but I've seen him driving several times. He's very reasonable."

"Are there any vacation rentals in this neighborhood? Where college kids might come up to Tahoe to party?"

"There is a vacation rental half a block down that way." He pointed the opposite direction from where the person I chased had done a quick start.

"None the other direction?"

Joe shook his head. "You think someone was watching my house?"

"Based on the position of the tire marks and the driver's behavior, it looks likely. Earlier, I thought I saw movement out in the trees. But I couldn't tell for certain. Now it would seem that the driver of the vehicle was watching us from the forest to the side of your house."

"I can't imagine why," Joe said. "The person who tried to murder Rell would know from the news that she was in a hospital, about to die. So there wouldn't be any point in watching me or this house, right?"

"Not that I can think of," I said.

Joe squinted his eyes as if thinking hard.

"Joe, what was your business after you retired from racing?" I asked.

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