

# CHAPTER ONE

THERE WAS NO movie magic to accompany my final act. No music building to a crescendo. No long-lost loved one rushing in breathlessly at the last moment to save me from my wretched plans. No adorable, furry creatures sneaking up from out of nowhere to rest a hairy head in my lap, eyes beseeching me to stop. No close up face shots of me sitting on the edge of the long dock at sunset while tears slowly streamed down my face. Because this was real life, not some scripted Hollywood blockbuster.

My final moments were greeted by the gentle lapping of water at the edge of the bank and the distant chirping of birds streaking through the colorful sky. No more, no less.

My bare feet grazed the surface of the cold water. The cool, October air from two days ago had been replaced by a warm breeze. The Indian summer had released a horde of mosquitoes. They buzzed around my head while others converged into a thick cloud inches above the water's surface.

Bradford Lake used to be a popular spot for people to visit with their children, but now, its reputation was tainted, and no one came to enjoy the secluded place. The lake was a natural one, however, it had been the dumping ground for chemicals and waste products from local sawmills and farms. By the time the EPA stepped in during the 1970s after numerous complaints from concerned residents, it was too late. Access to the lake was closed the year I turned ten. The water was foul and full of all sorts of bacteria and garbage. After several people turned up sick from swimming or boating in the dirty water, people found other watering holes to play in.

The lake's reputation wasn't helped any from another problem. Multiple suicides throughout the years, committed by people jumping off the edge of the dock, changed everyone's perception of the area.

Locals nicknamed the place Suicide Lake. Most of the residents of Whitten County feared the mountain lake was haunted from all the lonely souls who ended their time on earth with one jump.

My ex-mother-in-law mentioned numerous times how in her younger days, folks traveled for miles to catch a glimpse of the epic sunsets and play in the placid, blue water. Those silly conversations about trivial, bullshit-thoughts had driven me crazy during the last two months. I considered them Eleanor Runsford's way of trying to make up for all the years she'd looked the other way while her son used me as his personal punching bag.

All of the jumpers were women, and all of them had a common thread: abusive husbands or boyfriends. When Eleanor broached the subject, she'd always tear up, mentioning how traumatized the poor women must have been to settle on suicide as the only way out. "There are ways, agencies in place to assist women in those types of situations, so why didn't they use them?" was one of Eleanor's go-to responses.

My answer was the same as well. "How do you know they didn't try? People tend to whitewash or overlook what goes on behind closed doors."

Eleanor never discussed the horrors her son inflicted on me. God, after all these years, I still couldn't say his name out loud. She even stood by him after he was convicted and sent to prison for killing his second wife. Fifteen years was his punishment after a wicked brawl while in the midst of a drug-induced haze.

Fifteen years.

How was the sentence fair?

Just?

Righteous?

He'd beaten the woman to death with his bare hands after finding out she'd been unfaithful. The jury bought into the lies told by his attorney that the act wasn't premeditated, and he'd been convicted of manslaughter rather than murder. A life was over in minutes after sustaining multiple blows to the head, abdomen, and chest, yet it wasn't murder. I found the whole mess preposterous. A woman's last moments on earth were full of terror and pain. And all the bastard got was fifteen years?

It wasn't justice.

Not even close.

The sick freak wouldn't even spend the full fifteen behind bars. He'd get paroled after being "rehabilitated" and then be released back into society while his victim rotted in the grave. In fact, Eleanor had left an open letter from the Arkansas State Parole Board on the table last week. I read it, and it turned my stomach. Next month the slime-ball was up for parole. Just the notion he might be released and move back to town made my head spin. More reasons—the unfairness of the world around me, and the terror of my ex coming back—were why I was ready to leave.

I shouldn't have thought about Eleanor. Stupid, blind, crazy old bat. The bitch's way of dealing with the nightmare the fruit of her loins beat into me was to bring up the demise of strangers. I would have preferred we talk about real, painful feelings from real, painful events, yet the discussions never happened.

Ever the doting mother, one unable to see the real face behind the mask of humanity her son wore, Eleanor refused to view her child as a killer. She blamed the "tragedy" on drugs.

Typical.

Looking up at the orange and pink rays from the setting sun, I grimaced at what a messed up life I'd lived. Some of the madness was my own fault—I wasn't afraid to shoulder a bit of the blame. The therapists I'd been forced to see a variety of times during my life assured me of that fact with damn near the exact same phrase: none of this was your fault, Renee.

Consoling words; mind numbing pills; an admission to the psych ward. From all of that, I came to the conclusion it didn't matter where the faults were placed.

What mattered was simple: I lived with them and now I wouldn't.

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POOR ME.

Poor little Renee Michelle Runsford, *nee*, Thornton.

That's what people would say when my body was discovered, all bloated and flesh missing from being nibbled on by fish. Yet another sad story to be passed around on social media then forgotten. Boom! A big firework exploding in the sky for all to see and ogle. A burst of excitement for people to *ooohh* and *aaahh* over. When the bright lights disappeared, memories of me would last no longer than the smoky remnants.

Boo-freaking-hoo.

I threw a pebble into the water, watching the ripples spread out from the point of entry. They started out small then widened into large, lopsided circles. Some of the edges caught the orange rays of the disappearing sun, making the water look like it was on fire.

I didn't miss the comparison to my life.

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THE FIRST BIG boulder that crashed into my personal space happened at thirteen. Up until then, though not anywhere near close to the words *normal* or *perfect*, my life had been...tolerable. My father, the late, great piece of shit known to others as Raymond—I'm—too—much—of—a—Redneck—to—have—a—middle—name Thornton, disappeared from my life. Mom—the always sad and perpetually whiny Caroline Clark Thornton, told me dear old Dad found a new family to spend time with rather than us.

I was so hurt, so saddened to see Mom in such pain, I didn't question her story. I was too preoccupied with other things like helping to pay the bills and attempting to maintain my grades. Determined to be supportive, I lied about my age and snagged my first job at a laundromat. The pay was pathetic yet it did help put food on the table.

Unfortunately, some of the money made its way to Gene's Liquor Store and bought bottles of wine. I didn't realize the connection until a few years later. By then, it was too late to help. Caroline—I—was—once—the—Homecoming—Queen Thornton was a raging alcoholic.

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THE NEXT ROCK thrown into my personal pond happened three years later, and I still felt the ripples even after all this time. After a long Saturday working at the laundromat, I arrived home and discovered Mom in a drunken stupor. Unlike most times when she overindulged and simply cried herself to sleep, ol' Caroline Thornton was on a rampage. The ugly memories clouded my vision, my mother's words as fresh in my mind as the day she spoke them.

"He left us! The no good, dirty, piece-of-shit! Left us to fend for ourselves. How could he? I mean, he married *the* Caroline Clark! I was homecoming queen, you know. Could've had any man I wanted in this county, yet I picked him. Gave him a family. Took care of our home. Cooked dinner. *Serviced* him whenever he wanted. Ungrateful bastard."

"Mom, I think you've had enough for one night."

"Don't you talk to me like I'm a child, Renee! I'm the mother here. I'll say when I've had enough, and I haven't yet. Don't think there's enough booze in the world to forget what he did to me. To us."

"Okay, Mom. I'm going to fix some coffee. It's been a really long day. Would you like some?"

"Oh, my sweet Renee. Always looking out for me. Of course I would. You make the best coffee."

"Thanks. I've had a lot of practice," I muttered.

Fortunately, Mom was too intoxicated to catch my heavy sarcasm.

"You should let me highlight your hair. It's too boring. You'll never catch a man with that pile of mouse fur on your head. Some blonde streaks would help. And why aren't you wearing any makeup? A lady should always put her best face on when she leaves the house. If you keep going out looking so frumpy, people will think you're nothing but poor, white trash. You could be beautiful, Renee, just like me, if you'd try a little."

"We are poor, Mom."

“Well that certainly isn’t my fault! It’s your father’s. I’ve been trying to get a raise at work, but so far, no luck.”

“Maybe you should look for a different job, Mom. You’ve been slaving away at the store for years. If that doesn’t work, Mr. Richardson might give you one if you quit missing so much work.”

“Oh, little miss high and mighty! Big words coming from a girl who works in a laundromat all day! What you do isn’t *near* the stress I have at work. Period.”

“Here, Mom. Have some hot coffee.”

For a few minutes, the conversation dwindled down to nothing but sporadic comments about mundane things, mostly about my boring face, bland choice of clothing, and mousey hair. I thought the night would end on a somewhat normal note. I was used to Mom’s constant bitching about my appearance.

Boy, was I wrong.

After Mom finished her coffee, she pushed the empty cup to the center of the table. She fumbled around looking for a cigarette in the pockets of her tattered robe. Twice, she nearly fell from the chair. Once she found the pack, lit one, blew a heavy plume of smoke from thin lips smeared with red lipstick, she dropped the bombshell.

“Your dad didn’t leave us.”

Stunned, I replied, “What do you mean? Of course he did! For that Cyndi chick who worked at Snack-n-Go. Remember?”

“I sort of lied. To protect you.”

“Sort of lied to protect me? Exactly what does that mean? Did he leave you for another man or something?” I blurted out.

For the first time in years, Mom laughed. It was a strange sound, mixed with the heavy wetness constantly in the chest of a smoker. “Wow, sixteen and already a hard-core cynic. No, Renee, your dad wasn’t gay. He was a cheater like I said. And he did have an affair with Cyndi Robertson.”

Confused yet curious, I asked, “Then what part of your story was a lie?”

“That he left us.”

Irritated at her drunken ramblings, I stood and went to the sink, unwilling to listen to any more. “I’m going to take a shower and do my homework. Goodnight, Mom.”

“No, you aren’t. Sit down, I’m not finished with getting this off my chest. I’ve got to. If I don’t, I think I’ll go insane.”

Mom never shared her innermost thoughts and feelings with me. Something about the tone in her voice made the hairs stand up on my arms. “I’m listening.”

“I suspected he was cheating, so one night, I followed him. He said he was going for a ride on his Harley to clear his head. I knew he was lying, because I saw it behind his eyes. Sure enough, I caught them together at Bradford Lake. Oh, I was so angry. One minute, I was screaming and yelling at them both, and the next, I was standing at the water’s edge covered in blood.”

“You... are you saying you killed Dad?” I whispered.

“Yep. And Cyndi. Took a tire iron and smashed their cheating heads in. Dumped them and the bike in the lake and came home.”

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MOM'S WORDS HAD burned a hole in my chest. I left that night, running out of the house despite her drunken pleas to come back. I ran down the dark street of our trailer park, through the center of town, out past the baseball fields, until I collapsed into a sobbing heap.

The only comfort I found was in the arms of the man who would end up being my ex. He happened by and saw me crying and pulled up. His strong arms enveloped me in a warm embrace while I wept. He didn't ask what was wrong, just provided companionship.

Oh, and a bottle of tequila, which we drank together under the moonlight until both of us were so drunk, I'm not sure how we ended up having sex.

We did, and the stick turned blue two months later.

A month before I gave birth, Mom died in a car accident on her way home from a bar, and I married the father of my child. A sweet, baby boy we named William, who only lived for six months. Burying the little body of my son sent me on a trip to a psychiatric hospital.

Things had been screwed up ever since.

Now I was homeless after losing my oh-so-exciting menial job at a call-center for various companies. The job prospects were nil for a forty-nine-year-old high school dropout living in a small town. With minimal education, I didn't qualify for much. I couldn't compete with young, twenty-somethings who were well schooled in technology. Unemployment kept me fed and the lights on but wasn't enough to pay the mortgage. After the six months of minuscule checks stopped, I couldn't even afford the filing fee for bankruptcy.

No siblings. No children. No extended family. No close friends willing to take me in, so things boiled down to one, horrifying truth.

I'd been forced to rely on a woman who for years had been a painful thorn in my side. With my house in foreclosure, I swallowed my pride and showed up on the doorstep of Eleanor Runsford. To her credit, she opened the door and ushered me inside. I'd been living in a back bedroom, hiding myself from the world, for two months.

God really had a sick sense of humor, and to be quite honest, I was tired of it.

Staring down at the worn out comforter I brought with me, I let a deep sigh escape, feeling oddly connected to the disheveled rag. At one point, it had been a vibrant collage of colors, loved by someone, a warm treasure they snuggled up to every night.

Not anymore. The colors had faded into a dingy mishmash of nothing, a used up rag cared for by no one. Tossed uncaringly into a back bedroom where no one would see it. Just like me. No one would ever miss the pile of thread should it disappear, and I doubted anyone would really miss me, either.

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I ROLLED THE full bottle of Xanax around in my hands for the longest moment. The small piece of plastic, a worthless outer shell that would serve as proof I took my own life, was one of the last things I would ever touch.

How utterly symbolic.

Although Eleanor had myriad medications to choose from, Xanax seemed the fastest avenue and was the one she had the most of. This was not the first time I contemplated killing myself but I had never come this close to actually accomplishing it. The previous times I'd entertained these thoughts I was like Hamlet, lamenting my lot in life and all the sadness and pain that had been

my constant companion. All the other times I stopped myself, unwilling to end my life for fear of God's retribution against suicide.

When these morbid, suicidal thoughts entered my mind, I would bounce between hysterical crying jags to under-the-covers-for-days bouts of depression.

This time was different. My mind was no longer like a ball bouncing around a tennis court. No more thoughts bounding wildly from one side to the other. A few weeks ago, I wandered into the deepest, darkest recesses and crouched in the back corner, closing every tie to my world as I went. And as my mind retreated, my soul followed, veering so far away from God I just didn't care anymore if offing myself would damn me for all eternity.

Hell, I was damned right here on Earth already.

Fear of fire and brimstone was replaced by this constant throbbing of mind-numbing memories. My new medical issues didn't help any, either. I wanted more than anything to vanquish everything away. To blink my eyes just once and start over; to be the recipient of some other-worldly miracle. Seriously, just to clasp, even if only briefly, onto the notion that there was some sort of hope.

Those wishes never came to pass, so here I sat, ready for the end.

The enjoyment of life had been drained from my body and soul with each wound I sustained over the years. I was being bled dry and the final mortal wounds came this year, one right after another. Vicious blows that didn't just knock me on my ass but stomped me into the ground. Now, I was a lifeless corpse stumbling through life with no purpose or direction.

It was time to go. Time to join the others and take the plunge into Suicide Lake.

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I LOOKED OUT across the water and over to the tree line. Gray, leafless and dead; a perfect summation of what my life had become. My final day in this wretched world and my last view was of dead trees, a used up comforter, and a plastic pill bottle.

Why would I have expected more?

Uncapping the lid, I shook out my salvation, counting them as I went. Twenty pills seemed enough to do the trick. I grabbed my water bottle in my lap to chase the first three down, putting the remainder back in the bottle. I wanted my body to become as tranquil as the water in front of me, ready for the constant ache in my back and heart, to cease.

The sun was almost gone. Three pills downed, I stopped. Before swallowing any more, I took in one last look of the beautiful lake. I understood, fully and completely, why others came to this spot to end their lives. The tranquility was a welcome reprieve from the chaotic world. A final memory burned into the brain of peace and beauty.

I glanced back down when something hard bumped against my foot. The last glint of the sun's rays danced off the top of the water. Squinting, I noticed the dark, red glow was back.

Instead of basking in the lovely color on the gentle ripples, I screamed.

The red sheen wasn't from the sun.

It was from blood, and it coated my feet, which rested right next to a stiff hand poking up from the depths below.

I jumped to my feet, scrambling to get away from the corpse. The comforter, water bottle, and pill bottle went flying. Instead of going after them, I let them disappear under the water.

Heart pounding and body shaking, I backed away from the edge of the boardwalk. My first instinct was to grab my cell and call for help. I felt around in my pocket, only to remember I didn't bring it with me because it had been turned off three days earlier for nonpayment.

"Damn it!"

"Ma'am? Are you okay?"

Spinning around, I came face-to-face with a man. It took me several seconds to realize he was a cop.

And I knew him.

"Clifton! You scared the shit out of me! What are you...oh, never mind. I'm just glad you're here. I, uh, didn't bring my phone, so I was going to head to town and call for help."

Clifton Simpson walked toward me. In the dimming light, dressed in his uniform with the vest underneath giving him extra padding, he seemed bigger than I remembered.

"Renee? Renee Runsford?"

"Thornton. I changed back after my divorce."

Clifton moved closer, all of his six-foot plus frame only inches away. He smelled like stale coffee, sweat, and cheap cologne. I hadn't seen him in years but recognized the thick head of jet black hair—now interspersed with flecks of white—and his deep, rhythmic voice. How I didn't hear him walking down the boardwalk earlier escaped me. Guess I was too wrapped up inside thoughts of my horrible life.

"Oh, that's right. Forgot. Sorry. So, we got a call from a concerned citizen. Said they saw a woman sitting out here on the edge of the dock, alone. Asked for a unit to stop by and check it out, so here I am. What are you doing out here, Renee? You been drinking? You look unsteady."

"My mother was the drinker in my family, not me, so no. I look unsteady because I just touched a dead body."

"Excuse me?" Clifton replied. His forehead knitted together in disbelief and confusion. "A body?"

Stepping away, I moved to the edge of the dock and pointed. "Yeah, a body. Didn't you hear me scream?"

Clifton pulled out a flashlight and walked past me, peering over the edge. "I did, but thought...oh, shit. Doesn't really matter at this point what I thought."

Backing away, Clifton put his arm on my chest, forcing me to step back. He grabbed the microphone on his shoulder and radioed for assistance.

The warm breeze from earlier was gone, along with the annoying mosquitoes. Darkness settled like a death shroud over the lake. A chill of fear made me shiver. Clifton noticed and led me to his unit. He pulled out a jacket and handed it to me.

"You should've worn something warmer," he said.

"Wasn't planning on staying out here long," I grumbled. My mood was deteriorating as the Xanax flowed through my veins. Sirens wailed in the distance. "May I go now? Sounds like your buddies are close."

"Sorry, Renee, but you'll need to stay here until one of the detectives speak with you."

Aghast, worried they'd notice I was barred out, I opened my mouth to protest. I shut it just as fast when I remembered the pills—and the bottle with Eleanor's name—had fallen into the lake.

The radio on Clifton's shoulder crackled to life, saving me from having to respond. The sirens were closer, and I could see headlights bouncing through the winding road leading to the lake.

So much for a quiet, peaceful evening to end my life. There certainly would be noise and activity now.

Damn.

Of course, someone else's tragedy trumped my own.

Figures.



## CHAPTER TWO

THE BIG, MOUNTAIN of a man leaned against the hood of Clifton's unit. His eyes were dark brown and full of accusations swimming around in the murkiness. He was busy staring at the others processing the scene, Eleanor's pill bottle in his hand. At only five-foot-three, I felt like a dwarf standing next to him. Detective Richard Greenwood had to be at least six-two. Since he'd acted like one from the moment he pounced on me, I mentally nicknamed him Detective Dick.

"Tell me again why you came out here?" he asked.

He was chewing on a straw like it was his lover's ear. The disgusting sounds and wiggles from the piece of plastic reminded me of the times my mother tried to quit smoking. Perhaps he was, too, and maybe lack of nicotine soured his normally peppy demeanor.

I withheld a chuckle at the thought. There was no way, not even when a baby, Detective Dick had been peppy. Or happy. He wore edginess and anger like accessories to compliment the worn-out dress shirt, khaki pants, and days' worth of stubble. He could step onto the set of any cop show and fit right in.

The noise level around the boardwalk was ridiculous. It looked like the entire group of emergency personnel of Whitten County came out to investigate. Blue lights from patrol cars filled the dark area, competing for attention from the flashing red ones off the ambulance. Shaking my head, I wondered why an ambulance had been dispatched. The body was dead, so why not just send the meat wagon from the coroner's office?

"Mrs. Runsford, did you hear me?"

"Uh, as I mentioned twice, my name's Ms. Thornton. Yes, I heard you. I'm cold and tired of yelling over all this noise. Oh, and freaked out. I've already gone over this twice. Can't I just go home? I told you what little I know."

"Deputy Simpson must have given me the wrong name. Sorry about that," he replied, scribbling notes on a pad. "Would you prefer to go over your statement again at the station?"

I didn't like the tone in his voice—or the bald-faced lie. He'd worked the homicide investigation when my ex killed his wife. We'd only met in person once after he came by to question me about my experiences with my batterer. He was ugly and rude back then, too. When I wouldn't offer up anything to help him, he'd flown into a rage. The way I figured it, no one helped me when I filed reports of abuse. My words didn't mean anything back then, so why would they hold more weight because the bastard finally did to someone else what he tried to do to me for years?

The accusatory eyes glared at me, and a hint of irritation seeped into Detective Dick's voice. Anger bubbled inside my chest, which was sort of nice. It helped warm me up. "No. I'd prefer to go home and take a hot shower, and wash the blood off my feet. It's just plain unsanitary."

"Looks like the water washed it away."

I glanced down, surprised to see Detective Dick was right. There was not even one dribble or speck of red on my feet. Did I imagine that part? Maybe, but I certainly didn't imagine the body. God, this night just keeps getting better and better.

"Sticking your feet in the water was the unsanitary part. You do realize this lake is contaminated, correct?"

I nodded.

Shifting positions, he smiled at me. The weird way his thin lips curved over yellow teeth was worse than the accusing glare from before.

“So why did you come out here? Besides getting wasted. Or worse. How many pills were in the bottle, and how many did you ingest?”

“Look, Detective Di...Greenwood. I don’t appreciate your attitude. I’m just the person who found a dead body. I informed law enforcement, so my job as an upstanding citizen of Whitten County is done. Why I was out here and what I was doing is none of your business. Shouldn’t you be figuring out the identity of the dead then notifying relatives?”

My little tirade seemed to strike a nerve. The detective’s jaw clenched, snapping the straw in half.

“You might want to change your tone, Ms. Thornton. I haven’t charged you with possession yet, but that doesn’t mean I won’t. Last time: what were you doing out here?”

I let out a sigh, unwilling to continue the conversation at the station. “Look, the last few months have been really rough on me. I lost my job, had to move in with my ex-mother-in-law, which I promise you hasn’t been easy, and I don’t have insurance. All the stress makes me have panic attacks. I came out here to relax and enjoy the scenery, that’s all.”

“And you decided to take an entire bottle of Xanax—prescribed to someone else—with you?”

I bit my lip while contemplating the best response. The body was being raised from the water. Even from the distance, I could tell it was a female. My stomach lurched, so I turned away. “There weren’t many left inside. I thought, you know, I’d be in more trouble if I just pocketed a few and got caught with them on me. Having the bottle with a real prescription seemed like a good idea when I left the house.”

“Well, it wasn’t. It’s against the law to take medication not prescribed to you. Especially a schedule four narcotic. How many did you take?”

“Not enough to wipe away the memory of seeing a dead body.”

Detective Dick closed his notepad and stuck it inside his pocket. I could tell he was angry.

“Well, here are your choices, Ms. Thornton. We continue this conversation at the station *after* I take you by the hospital for a drug test, or you let one of the deputies take you home and sleep it off, then come to see me tomorrow for any follow-up questions I might have. Which one will it be?”

I should have kept my mouth shut. Should have let Detective Dick’s words bounce off my skin.

Of course, I didn’t. The Xanax gave me medicinal courage.

“Neither. You can’t force me to take a drug test! You have no reason to, and I won’t let some stranger poke me with a needle! Yeah, I took three pills to ease my frazzled mind. So what? Trying living in my shoes for a bit and see how *you* would handle it! I guarantee you, Detective, you wouldn’t last an hour before grabbing something to numb the pain. I’ll drive myself home, and since I gave you my address earlier, you know where to find me if you have any more fucking questions to ask.”

Detective Dick yanked a set of cuffs from his belt. Before I could move, he grabbed my arm and spun me around.

“Renee Thornton, you’re under arrest for—”

“Detective? A word please?”

Clifton Simpson's voice boomed from behind me. I'd never been so grateful to hear anyone speak before.

"Not now, Deputy Simpson."

"Now, sir."

Detective Dick finished clicking the cuffs on me. From the rough pressure of his hands, my words had pissed him off. Though flying high, I decided to keep my mouth shut.

"I said not now. Take her to the station and book her on felony possession of narcotics."

My mouth dropped open.

Clifton stepped forward and whispered into the detective's ear, just loud enough for me to hear. "It's Martha Cayhill."

Detective Greenwood groaned. "How do you know for sure?"

"This," Clifton responded, holding up a soaked wallet.

"Well Christ in a bucket," Detective Greenwood muttered. "Christ in a bucket. Has anyone mentioned that little tidbit over the airwaves?"

Clifton shrugged then glanced at me. "I don't know, sir. If someone did leak it, hordes of hungry reporters will fill up the place. You'll be swarmed by lights and microphones."

Detective Greenwood raked his beefy hand across his face. "Get her outta here."

Clifton waited until the rattled detective stormed off before freeing me from the cuffs.

"Come on, I'll follow you home. You're staying with Eleanor, right?"

Rubbing my wrists, I grimaced. Small town life—God, how I hated it. Everyone knew everyone's business. "You aren't going to haul me in? Won't Detective Dick be pissed at you?"

Clifton smiled, a hint of mischief gleaming on his face. "Detective Dick? That's funny. I forgot you always had a dark sense of humor. I'm sure that isn't the first time someone's referred to him by that name. No matter. I'm following orders. He said to get you outta here, which is what I'm doing."

"Uh, yeah, he put me under arrest, remember?"

"I didn't hear him finish reading you your Miranda Rights. Did you?"

Cliff had a point. I replied with a weary smile.

"Just...don't have an accident on the way home. It'd be my ass for sure. You good to drive?"

"I'm fine, Cliff. Really. Thanks for taking it easy on me. First good thing that's happened to me in a long time. Here," I said, handing him back the coat, "appreciate you letting me use it."

Ushering me toward my car, Cliff shook his head. "Keep it. I'll pick it up tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah, when I come by to ask you some more questions. After a good night's sleep, you might remember something. Wouldn't you rather I stop by? You don't seem too fond of Greenwood."

Pausing at the door, I chuckled. "I believe the feeling is mutual. We, um, exchanged harsh words when he interrogated me before, you know, when the second Mrs. Runsford died?"

Cliff looked back toward the boardwalk. "Greenwood's not known for being a soft touch."

"Tell me something I don't know," I muttered. Afraid Cliff might use the opportunity to delve further into my volatile, previous relationship, I switched topics. "So, was that really Martha Cayhill, the mayor's wife?"

Cliff's playfulness disappeared. A sad look crossed his face. "The ID said it was. She's wearing the same outfit and ring from the missing person's poster, too. I checked."

"How long's it been since she disappeared? I can't remember. A year?"

“Sixteen months. Glad I’m not the one who’s gotta tell the Mayor, or answer questions from the press. It’s gonna be a nightmare. The only good thing coming out of this is you’ll probably get the reward money.”

“Come again?”

“The Mayor offered ten thousand dollars, and the city matched it, remember? That’s twenty grand for information leading to her whereabouts. In my book, that makes you the recipient. Of course, it’s not my call, but if it was, I’d certainly make sure you received it.”

Stunned, I really didn’t know what to say. Though the money would be a blessing out of the blue, it didn’t seem right to claim it. After all, it wasn’t like I’d been out actively searching for the woman. Besides, just because my plans to off myself were blown for the night, there would be other opportunities later to finish what I’d started. The dead didn’t need money on the other side. Lights to the right caught my attention and pulled focus back to the present. “Looks like the party’s about to start.”

Cliff followed my gaze and grimaced. “Damn, someone *did* notify the vultures. Come on, let’s get out of here before we’re on the nightly news.”

Without a word, I slunk behind the wheel of the beat-up Chevy. After the third try, it cranked to life. Cliff’s unit pulled up behind me, and we edged our way through the throng of oncoming reporters.

While driving through the dark, twisty road leading to the main highway, I felt sick to my stomach. The Xanax wasn’t the only reason, or the fact I’d touched a dead body. The rumbling was from the morbid connection I had with Bradford Lake. If what my mother said to me so many years ago was true—and I had no reason to doubt her after spending years trying to track down my father with no luck—the tranquil waters were his final resting place.

And Cyndi’s.

Would have been mine, too, had I not discovered a body that may or may not be the Mayor of Ridgeport’s missing wife.

Pulling out onto the main highway, I mentally kicked myself for picking the dirty lake to take my life. Now, instead of being able to slip away into obscurity, I was part of an investigation into the death of another person.

Life sucks, and then you die.

Or, maybe not.

At least not yet.