

ONE

It was a rotten day to die.

That thought kept nagging at Pete Thorsen as he stared out at the flat, gray lake where a search and rescue team had begun to probe for the missing woman's body. All around him, the beach swarmed with people. Most looked miserable in the dog days heat, but followed the action out on the water with a peculiar intensity in their eyes. He'd seen that look before. Usually it was reserved for occasions like a 10-car pileup on the expressway or a high-rise fire. It was always the same, though; human misfortune never failed to draw a crowd.

The source of the anxiety was a stack of clothes on a small sailboat pulled up on the sand where the public beach abutted private property. The clothes had been found early that morning, and when they remained unclaimed a few hours later, someone called the sheriff's office. Now at one in the afternoon, the clothes were still there. The boat had been cordoned off with crime-scene tape strung around orange traffic cones and a uniformed deputy stood guard.

Pete removed his cap, ran a hand through his damp sandy hair, and glanced at his watch. He had a decision to make. He could hang

ROBERT WANGARD

around and wait for something to happen, which meant enduring more of the suffocating heat while he stood there feeling like some damn ghoul, or he could go back home and let Harry fill him in at dinner that night. Going home had a lot of appeal. Still, he hadn't seen anything like the crowd that had gathered at the lakefront in all the years he'd been coming to Clear Lake. He brushed the sweat from his forehead and clamped his cap back on. Maybe he'd give it another half-hour.

Sirens had been the one constant all day, and the sing-song wail of yet another one cut through the dead air. He turned to see what had to be the last police cruiser in the county not already there pull in and join the tangle of official vehicles parked along Shore Road. The siren went quiet with a final whoop, but the cruiser's light bar continued to crank out puffs of red and blue that gave an otherworldly glow to the thin veil of haze hanging over the lake. Every pair of eyes on the beach had shifted to the road, as if the cruiser were a messenger that would clear up the mystery surrounding the unidentified woman who'd abandoned her clothes and just vanished into thin air. Or as Pete suspected they really feared, was lying dead someplace out there at the bottom of the lake.

A police photographer squeezed past him and made her way through the crowd to the boat. Pete watched her for a while and began to wonder again, as he had when he first saw the yellow tape, why they were treating the area as a crime scene. As far as he knew, there was no evidence that a crime had been committed, and they apparently weren't even sure there was a body. The deputy standing guard beckoned to a colleague and together they held back the gawkers as the photographer began to snap pictures of the boat. Slowly she worked her way around the perimeter, ignoring two men who clamored for her attention and kept pointing at the boat's stern. One of the deputies stepped in and moved them back.

Pete watched the side-show for a while and then scanned the crowd. It didn't take him long to spot Bud Stephanopoulis. At six feet seven, Bud stood out even in the throngs of people on the beach. He made his

TARGET

way through the crowd to where Bud was standing and poked him in the shoulder. "Enlighten me, Bud."

Bud's tan, hawk-like face twisted into a smile when he saw Pete and then turned sober again. "Sorry," he replied, shaking his head. "All I know is that they found some woman's clothes over on that boat."

"Even I know that," Pete said, giving his friend a sly grin. "The authorities must know something if they're treating it as a crime scene."

Bud shrugged. "I heard a deputy say they don't want anything disturbed until they figure out what happened. They're not giving out any more information." He eyed Pete sympathetically, looking at his tee-shirt that was still soaked with sweat from the mile jog from his summer home at the west end of the lake. Pete immediately felt a little uncomfortable. Bud never seemed to sweat and wasn't sweating now in spite of the conditions. It reminded him of something he'd learned long ago, which was that Scandinavians didn't handle high heat and humidity very well. Italians and Greeks, they were the hot weather folks. But not Scandinavians. Upper 80s was the limit of his comfort zone and the temperature had blown right through that ceiling and was still climbing. Pete self-consciously mumbled something about how it was a mistake to try to get in a run on a day like this.

Bud seemed to enjoy Pete's discomfort. He glanced at the lake then back at Pete and pointed to his cap that had "Save the Boat" emblazoned on the front. "What boat is Sir Galahad saving now?"

Pete used Bud's question as an excuse to remove the cap and wipe his forehead again. He held the cap at arm's-length and looked at the logo. "Ever hear of the Viking longboat that sailed from Norway to Chicago for the 1893 Columbian Exposition?"

"Actually, I have," said Bud.

"It's bounced around the Chicago area ever since and a bunch of us are trying to raise money to restore the boat and find a permanent home for it."

Bud slapped Pete on the shoulder. "You need some Greeks in your group. We were the real seafarers, you know."

ROBERT WANGARD

Sparring with Bud never failed to get his competitive juices flowing. He put his cap back on and said, “Maybe, if you stop measuring time at the point when Ulysses sailed that little pond around the Greek city-states. We could use some Greek money, though. I’m going to have our treasurer contact you.”

That prompted a full-fledged belly-laugh from Bud. “Send him around,” he crowed. “I never pass up an opportunity to see one of you Nordic types grovel.”

As they stood there talking, the divers bobbed out of the water and clung to the side of the boat while they conferred with the stocky woman on board. Like everyone else on the beach, Pete strained to hear what they were saying. He saw the woman brush the sheaf of straw-like hair away from her face and point to an adjacent patch of water. Then she coaxed the boat’s engine to life and guided it slowly in that direction. After cutting the engine again, she resumed fanning herself with a magazine. Her bright blue life jacket was the only color on the still water.

“That’s our local volunteer outfit, right?” Pete asked after the two divers had slipped below the surface.

“Lizzie McCabe’s team,” Bud said. “This ought to be interesting,” he added, shooting Pete a knowing look. “The law enforcement people didn’t decide to mount a search until noon and Lizzie has her guys out there already. She likes to get to the scene of a reported drowning first and find the body before the state boys arrive. Then she’ll hit the bars and drink Labatt’s all night and brag about how they’re the real pros and make fun of the drop cameras and scanning sonar and the other fancy equipment the state team has.”

“Sounds like a lady who enjoys her work,” Pete said, chuckling. “How about that guy who drowned here a dozen years ago? Did she find him? It was right before I started coming up, as I recall.”

“Cam Hatley? No way. This is a deep lake, about 175 feet out in the middle. Cam was way down in the trough. It took the state team

TARGET

a full day to find his body even with their equipment. Lizzie did beat them to bodies in Long Lake and Glen Lake, though.”

“Hatley was drunk, right?”

“Totally shit-faced,” said Bud. “Took his boat out one night with enough beer to sink a freighter and capsized. Someone saw the boat bobbing around on the lake the next morning and went out to check, but no Cam.”

Lizzie was conferring with her divers again. There was more gesturing and conversation that couldn’t be heard on the beach, then she moved her boat one more time and the divers disappeared beneath the surface. Pete and Bud resumed their conversation and speculated about who the woman might be and why she’d folded her clothes so neatly and placed them on the boat. A bony, older man with pasty skin protected by a floppy tweed hat had been steadily inching closer to them. He’d taken an obvious interest in their conversation while his shih tzu fought its leash and appeared intent on humping every leg in sight. When Pete inadvertently made eye contact with the man, it seemed to encourage him to join them.

“Neatly folded clothes are a sign of suicide,” he croaked in a hoarse, conspiratorial whisper. His eyes — the only thing about him that could be remotely described as animated — flicked back and forth between Pete and Bud, seeming to invite dialogue. Pete said nothing, but wondered how someone would be able to just let herself drown. Bud looked at the man and pursed his lips and nodded politely. The man seemed crestfallen when Pete and Bud went back to their conversation.

After more talk about family and politics and the disastrous stock market, Pete decided his neck needed relief. He was six-two himself, but looking up at the former University of Minnesota basketball star for any length of time always made him think of scheduling a visit to a chiropractor. Besides, he wanted to get away from the aggressive little dog that had developed a special affinity for his leg.

He excused himself and made his way through the crowd to the water’s edge. The region was in the clutches of the worst stretch of

ROBERT WANGARD

August weather he could remember. On Saturday mornings when he didn't have a golf game, his usual routine was to sit on his porch, occasionally pecking away at his laptop, and watch the boats in the regatta with their colorful sails and sleek hulls slicing noiselessly through the water. But on this particular Saturday, the dead air had reduced some of the best sailing waters in northwest Michigan to a giant stagnant pond and forced cancellation of the event. He'd read somewhere that the ancient Egyptians believed the mid-summer heat and humidity made their dogs go mad. He thought about how edgy everyone seemed to be and decided that the ancients could have included humans, too.

As Pete watched the underwater team, his mind drifted back to that day 40 years earlier when they'd located his sister Loraine's body snagged in some brush along the side of the river, below a stretch of rapids. Two boys out for a day of fishing had spotted her clothes on the rocks. It was eerily similar to the scene playing out in front of him. That was a long time ago and he rarely thought about it anymore. But as he stood there, the painful memories crawled from the recesses of his mind like a replay of a tragic old film.

The hairy little creature making new sexual advances to his leg rescued him from his dark musings. He edged away from the dog and saw Shih Tzu Man standing a few feet behind him. The man seemed to have materialized out of nowhere, like he'd followed his new friend Pete to the water's edge, and was facing the lake with his eyes closed, swaying each time his dog lunged for another leg. His pale skin looked clammy than it had just a short time earlier. Pete was about to ask the man if he was okay when his eyes snapped open.

"They're searching in the wrong place," he said in his trademark whisper, looking at Pete as though he were a close confidant. "She's over there." His bony finger pointed to an area farther out and 30 or 40 yards east of where the underwater team was operating. Then his lids flopped closed again.

Pete took a deep breath and moved away, not wishing to chance being invited to join in a séance to commune with the woman's soul. He

TARGET

filtered through the crowd to the small sailboat. The name on the boat's stern, which he hadn't been able to see before, was "Destiny." He shook his head. If Shih Tzu Man saw that, he'd surely take it as a sign.

The photographer was gone and the woman's clothes had been placed in a large evidence bag. A sheriff's deputy stood talking to a gangly college-age boy with stringy blond hair, a wispy beard covering his chin, and frayed cargo shorts that ended below his knees. The deputy, at most 10 years older than the kid, could have been from a different planet. He was carefully groomed with a powerful torso that seemed out of proportion to the rest of his body. His uniform looked crisp in spite of the weather; only his flushed cheeks gave away his discomfort.

The kid scuffed at the sand with his green Crocs while the deputy paged through his small spiral notebook.

"Let's go over this again," the deputy said. "You came to the beach about 7:30 this morning to see whether there was enough breeze for windsurfing. That's when you first saw the clothes, right?"

"Yes sir, that's right."

"And when you came back about two hours later to check on the wind again, the clothes were still there."

"Yes sir, and the purse. That was still there, too. I thought that was kind of funny because women usually don't leave their purses, you know?"

Several onlookers had inched closer and did little to conceal their interest in the conversation. The deputy looked their way and led the kid farther down the beach. No longer able to hear what they were saying, Pete made his way back to where Bud was standing.

"I just heard something interesting," he said. "That kid talking to the deputy said the woman's purse was with her clothes. If that's true, they must know who she is."

"I hadn't heard about the purse," Bud said. He appeared to think for a minute, and then added, "If she did drown, maybe they want to keep her identity quiet until they can notify the family."

Pete nodded. "Who's the kid?"

ROBERT WANGARD

Bud squinted in the direction Pete had motioned. “That’s one of the Morrison boys. Adam, I think. Nice family. He goes to Alma College. Or maybe Albion, I don’t remember. I always get the two mixed up.”

Lizzie’s team had moved to an area closer to where Shih Tzu Man had pointed. Pete felt a little foolish when he got the urge to motion them out and over another 25 yards.

“I haven’t seen you since you got up,” Bud said, never taking his eyes off the lake. “How’s your law practice going?”

The missing woman had taken Pete’s mind off the memorandum, but Bud’s question rekindled the anger he’d felt that morning. His old nemesis, Marty Kral, seemed to dog him even when he put Chicago in his rearview mirror to spend a little time at Clear Lake. He toyed with the idea of flipping out a terse “fine” in response to Bud’s question, but felt a need to unburden himself. “Do you remember a guy named Marty Kral?” he asked. “I had him up for a weekend six or seven years ago, right after we brought him into our firm.”

“Sure,” Bud said, giving him a quick glance, “we played golf, remember? Small, dark guy? Kind of twitchy?”

“That’s him. He was on good behavior back then, but now he lobs grenades my way every 10 minutes. Our administrative partner just emailed me his latest memorandum. He’s demanding that I ax nine of our partners by year-end. Calls them deadwood.”

“Nine. Out of how many?”

“Fifty-two.”

Bud whistled through his teeth. “Is he right about them being deadwood?”

“Maybe one. Most of the others are within a year or two of retirement and already have had their compensation reduced. One guy on his list had by-pass surgery and has been out half the year.”

Bud gave him a long, hard look. “Why do you put up with him? You’re the managing partner. Why don’t you find a way to shove his ass out?” Bud had spent his business life in the rough-and-tumble world of

TARGET

investment banking, retiring before age 50, and it wasn't the first time he'd given Pete that advice.

"The day is coming," Pete said, clenching his teeth. He decided not to mention that he'd spent the morning using Kral for target practice with his new longbow.

"We need to get together for some one-on-one so you can take out your frustrations on the court." A grin spread across Bud's face and he nudged Pete. "I've missed seeing those eyes of yours turn black when I stuff one of your shots."

"Sure," Pete said, ignoring the crack about his eyes. "But let's wait until it cools off. I know how tough this heat must be on you seniors."

"Look, pal, who's the one sweating? In a couple of years when you hit the Big Five-O, I'm going to hire an eight-piece band to dress in black and play funeral dirges in front of your cottage 24/7."

Pete waved a hand dismissively. "Never happen. You're too cheap."

The high-pitched *whrrrrrr* of a powerboat slapping across the flat water from the other side of the lake interrupted their banter. The man at the controls throttled back when he got close to where the divers were working. He glided alongside Lizzie's boat, and while they talked, the two men with him busied themselves with the equipment on the rear deck.

A man standing near Pete lowered his binoculars. "They have a hoist and some kind of harness. Maybe they've found her."

Conversations on the beach went silent as they usually did when something was happening with the search. One of the men in the second boat threw something — the harness, Pete assumed — into the water. A diver grabbed one end and disappeared below. Fifteen minutes passed, although it seemed like an hour. Finally the men in the boat began to work the hoist and the stern settled in the water as the line tightened. Slowly the body came into view. Pete grimaced at the sight and a murmur rippled through the crowd. They'd not only found the woman, they'd found her eerily close to where Shih Tzu Man had pointed.

ROBERT WANGARD

The boats soon headed toward shore. Except for the rhythmic chug of engines running at little more than idle speed, the only sounds came from children romping and squealing on the playground, seemingly oblivious to the weather and the tragedy unfolding right in front of them. The poignancy of the moment washed over Pete as he continued to stare at the boats approaching like a small funeral procession. The crowd inched forward as gawkers jockeyed for a better vantage point. Pete could feel a surge of excitement run through the crowd. He grew tired of being pushed and elbowed. He left Bud and circled around the crowd to the water's edge on the left.

Two EMTs began to push a gurney across the beach. Even empty, the wheels cut into the sand and made it a tough go. Then there was the crowd. "Get back!" a sheriff's deputy shouted, trying to help. "Clear a path!" The people packing the beach gave ground, but only grudgingly. Recognizing reality, the EMTs followed Pete's path around the side. They wound up close to where he was standing.

The lead boat changed course to head for the EMTs. The man at the controls cut his engine when they neared shore and the crew splashed into the water. They lifted the blanket-wrapped body from the boat and carried it to the gurney. Lizzie McCabe stood in her boat observing, not exactly smiling, but not doing much to hide her look of triumph either. The EMTs took over and prepared to transfer the body to a heavy blue bag. At the first sight of skin, Pete saw people around him recoil or avert their eyes. One matronly woman wearing a lavender straw hat clasped a hand to her mouth and inched steadily backward, dribbling yellow-green vomit as she went.

That spectacle caused Pete to shift his gaze back to the gurney. When the EMTs peeled away the rest of the blanket, Pete could see that the dead woman was clad only in her underwear. Her gray flesh showed traces of goose-skin, and the unforgiving glare of the afternoon sun, even with the haze, magnified every blemish on her body, every ugly manifestation of death. Pete had been prepared for all of that, unsettling as it was.

TARGET

He hadn't been prepared for the woman's face. The high cheekbones. The wide-set eyes, recognizable even as they bulged like oversized opaque marbles. The long dark hair. He stood there, stunned, and stared at the lifeless body of Cara Lane.

© 2010 Robert Wangard. All Rights Reserved.