

## ONE

Pete Thorsen didn't pretend to be a seer, but as he gazed out at the forlorn landscape, he somehow knew that it wasn't going to be a good day. Three hours later, the sheriff called and asked Pete to meet him at the morgue to identify a body that could be his former lover.

The request made no sense to him, but he listened intently as the sheriff described the one-car accident. Then he said, "It can't be Lynn Hawke. She's in Seattle. Who's the other woman you mentioned?"

"Laura Mati."

"It must be her."

"It could be," the sheriff said. "Do you know Mati?"

Pete thought for a long moment. "No, I'm sure I don't."

"But you do know Lynn Hawke."

"Yes."

The sheriff was silent for a moment so Pete asked the obvious. "Since you called me, you must have a reason to think I might know one or both of these women."

"We found your business card in the vic's purse and no other contact information."

Pete thought about what the sheriff had said. He knew Lynn Hawke had his business card at one time, but Laura Mati? How would a woman he didn't even know get one of his cards?

He then asked a logical follow-up question. "If you have the victim's purse, you must have her driver's license and credit cards. Why do you need eyewitness identification in addition?"

"Normally we wouldn't, but there are extenuating circumstances in this case. I realize it's an imposition given the weather and everything, but would you mind meeting me at the morgue so we can get the ID we need?"

"You're not telling me something, Sheriff. This makes no sense."

"If you not willing to come," the sheriff said, his tone suddenly different, "could you give me the name of someone else who might know either or both of these women?"

Pete immediately thought of Harry McTigue or his girlfriend, Rona Martin. They had known Lynn Hawke longer than he did and in fact were the ones who'd introduced him to her two years earlier. Then he remembered that they were in Cincinnati for a newspaper publishers' conference and wouldn't be back until the weekend. There were other possibilities, but none he felt comfortable naming. When the sheriff continued to press him, he reluctantly agreed to meet him at the morgue at 2:00 p.m. that afternoon.

After he hung up, emotions he thought were firmly in his rearview mirror began to return. His relationship with Lynn Hawke had lasted exactly two months, but they were intense and stirred feelings in him he hadn't experienced since his late wife died. Then she called out of the blue one day and said she was on her way to the airport to go to Seattle to be with her suicidal daughter and wasn't sure when she'd be back. Even more disappointing, she didn't seem interested in talking to him when he called and repeatedly put off his proposals to come to Seattle.

Pete checked the time. It was 8:30 a.m. on the West Coast. If Lynn were still in Seattle, it couldn't be her in the morgue and he'd spare himself a very unpleasant experience that he'd already begun to dread.

He punched in Lynn's cell phone number, the only telephone number he had for her, but got no answer. *Same old Lynn*, he thought. He called again a half-hour later. After a third try, he banged the table with his fist and screamed, "God damn it, Lynn, answer your phone!" His research cards that were spread out on the table went flying and some of them landed on the floor.

Pete ignored the cards and walked to the window and looked out. The weather hadn't improved since early that morning. Angry waves rolled across the lake and exploded against the beach in cascades of gray and white spray. The dark clouds that hung low over the water churned and heaved and tossed in the wind. On shore, everything looked like it had been brushed with a thick coat of molten pewter. Pete pursed his lips. It reminded him of a morning after scene from a nuclear disaster film.

He slipped on a heavy coat and went outside and picked his way across the ice to his Range Rover. The stinging wind nipped at his face. Like everything else in sight, the vehicle was embalmed in ice. He chipped away at the coating on the windshield and on the other windows for a half-hour and then banged the driver's side door to break the seal so he could get in. The engine sputtered and came to life. He hoped that running it for a half-hour would melt enough of the ice so he could see to drive.



The traffic on U.S. 31 was a mess even at mid-day. He was sandwiched into a train of vehicles that moved at less than forty miles an hour because of the road conditions. As he slowly made his way east, he tried to remember someone named Laura Mati he might have known at some stage of his life. In his law practice maybe, or going back further, in college or law school. It certainly wasn't a woman he'd dated; that he'd remember. He tried to remember the maiden names of wives of friends and came up with nothing. Nada.

Distracted by his thoughts, he barely braked in time to avoid rear-ending the rust-pocked Malibu in front of him as tail lights flashed red

like a string of progressively-timed holiday lights. He breathed out, and when the traffic began to move again, stayed an additional half-car length behind the sedan out of an abundance of caution.

He glanced out his side window. If anything, the storm had been more intense to the east of where he lived. The houses, the out buildings, the vehicles that hadn't yet moved that day, the tractors and other farm implements parked in side yards for the winter, the trees, the shrubs. Everything was covered by an inch of ice. Only the highway was clear and it was dotted with pools of water where the ice had been melted by salt spread by the county trucks that morning. Nothing dried in the gloomy weather and the temperature hovered just below freezing.

As the traffic resumed its slow pace, Pete thought about the good times with Lynn. Low stakes gambling at the casino, shopping and dinner afterward, the first time they practiced archery together. And the first time they made love. It had been good. Better than good even. But it was over and it wasn't in his DNA to continue to mope about a relationship that didn't work out in spite of what he'd hoped. He'd put it behind him and moved on.

Until now. Ringing down the curtain on a failed romance was one thing; the prospect of seeing her dead body stretched out on a slab in the morgue was another. Particularly since deep within him, where secrets lurked that he didn't share with even close friends, he harbored a faint hope that one day Lynn would move back to the area and they'd resume their former relationship.

The traffic continued to be stop-and-go, but the slow pace didn't bother him because he wasn't in a hurry to get to the morgue. Other drivers with more pleasant missions were less patient. The white SUV behind him swerved into the opposite lane, accelerated past Pete, and cut sharply in front of him to avoid an oncoming vehicle. Pete hit his brakes and muttered an obscenity at the idiot who'd just gained a single car length by his reckless driving.

Pete dropped back to a comfortable distance behind his new pace car and pulled the collar of his L.L.Bean storm coat tighter around his neck.

He could feel the damp chill worming its way through his clothing and into his bones. Two weeks earlier, the heater in his Range Rover had stopped working and he'd put off getting it repaired, telling himself that warm weather was just around the corner and he wouldn't need it for months. That was delusional, he now realized, because while the calendar might trumpet the arrival of spring, the ice storm demonstrated all too clearly that March weather in northern Michigan could alternate between splendid and downright brutal.

He saw the sign for the hospital and followed the access road until he came to the sprawling medical complex that was dominated by a multi-floor central building flanked by several smaller buildings. He parked in the underground lot and killed his engine. He sat there for a minute and then forced himself to get out and walk toward the door that was marked with a sign that said "Elevator."

Pete looked around the first floor waiting room, but didn't see any uniforms. He approached the receptionist, gave his name, and asked if Sheriff Emory Bond had arrived yet.

"Sir, Sheriff Bond called and said to tell you he'd be late. He had to make an unexpected stop."

"Did he say when he'd be here?"

"No, sir. He just said to give you his apologies and that he'd get here as soon as he could."

Pete's angst elevated a notch. Now that he was at the hospital, he was anxious to identify the body, hopefully as someone other than Lynn Hawke, and get out of there as soon as possible. Hanging around waiting for the sheriff would only add to the uneasiness he already felt.

To kill time, he picked up one of the health-related magazines from the table next to him — a typical medical rag found in every hospital or doctor's waiting room. Article after article chronicled the foods a person should avoid, the desirability of monitoring one's blood pressure six times a day, and the risk of contracting some dread disease if your great-grandmother once had or might have been exposed to it. He sighed. If

you weren't feeling a little bit off when you entered these places, chances were good that would change.

He tried not to think about the morgue, but stories he'd heard over the years kept popping up in his mind like unwelcome relatives. The chemical odor was the one constant, and none of the stories topped Harry's for graphic detail. As a cub reporter, he had to go to a Chicago morgue to cover the aftermath of a grisly crime and said he was haunted for weeks by the odor that clogged his pores and filled his nasal passages and clung to his clothes in spite of countless washings. Twice-a-day showers did nothing to expunge the odor. Pete winced at the thought.

He checked his watch again. He'd been twenty minutes late himself because of the road conditions, and more time had passed since he arrived. He went to the men's room, more out of nervous energy than anything, and checked his cell phone for messages when he returned. Then he leafed through a six-month old copy of *Sports Illustrated*.

He was about to go to the reception desk again when a tall man in tan gabardine slacks and a chocolate brown corduroy jacket walked into the reception area with a hurried stride. He doffed his trooper hat and looked around. Pete waved to attract his attention. The sheriff saw him and came over.

"Emory Bond," he said. "Pete Thorsen, right?"

Pete nodded and accepted the sheriff's outstretched hand.

"Sorry I'm late," Bond said. "I had to stop at the scene of another accident on the way. No fatalities with this one, thank God."

Pete had no interest in engaging in social pleasantries or talking about Bond's other cases. He just wanted to do what he'd come for and then get out of there.

"I appreciate your coming," Bond said. "Again, I'm sorry to have to drag you over here on a day like this."

Pete took another stab at getting an answer to the question that had nagged him since their telephone conversation that morning. "Sheriff, explain to me again why you feel you need eye-witness identification if you have the woman's driver's license."

“I’d like to explain after you identify the body if you don’t mind.”

Pete shot Bond a look that said he wasn’t satisfied with his latest evasive response. *Don’t share too much information with civilians*, Pete thought. It must be something they taught at the police academy.

“Are you ready?” Bond asked. “The Medical Examiner is waiting for us and he has to leave for another appointment.”

“Fine,” Pete muttered.

Pete followed the sheriff down the hall and they took the elevator to the lower level. They stood shoulder to shoulder and stared straight ahead the way people seem to do in elevators. Pete’s eyes flicked toward Bond. He was Pete’s height, an inch or two over six feet, but looked a dozen pounds lighter. Sheriffs must have more time to work out than lawyers.

The elevator door slid open and Bond stepped out and headed down the narrow hall. He said over his shoulder, “I’m having the body brought to the viewing room so you don’t have to go into the cooler.”

Pete was grateful for the courtesy, but said nothing. An icy knot formed in his stomach when they reached the door marked “Morgue.” He followed Bond into the viewing room. The lights were more muted than he imagined they’d be, but the surroundings were stark and the faint odor of chemicals wafted through the air. He remembered Harry’s story and imagined the odor beginning to penetrate his clothes.

Bond handed him a surgical mask. “I suggest you put this on.”

Pete slipped the elastic cord around his head. It eliminated most of the chemical odor when he breathed in.

Bond went to a box on the wall and pushed a button. “Yes?” a voice responded.

“Ethan, it’s Emory Bond. We’re here.”

“Okay.”

Pete stood next to Sheriff Bond alone with his thoughts. Disjointed images flashed through his mind and his stomach felt empty. *Is this the way it ends*, he thought, *with people waiting around a stinking viewing room to identify your body?* He also thought of Cara Lane and the sweltering

August day when they hauled her water-ravaged body from the lake. The EMTs had passed with ten feet of him with her body and he'd never forgotten how vacant her eyes looked.

A door opened and a man in green scrubs and a white surgical mask pushed a stainless steel gurney into the viewing room. A white cloth covered the hulking shape on the gurney. Pete recognized the man as Ethan Pennington, the Medical Examiner for the three-county area including Leelanau County where the accident had occurred. He'd met Pennington when he was investigating whether Cara Lane's death was really a swimming accident and liked him well enough, although he had a feeling that covering his ass was priority number one with him.

"Mr. Thorsen," Pennington said.

"Doctor."

"Okay," Bond said, "let's get this over with." He looked at Pete who was staring at the floor and added, "You ready?"

Pete nodded slightly and closed his eyes.

He heard a rustling sound as Pennington peeled back the cover. He opened his eyes and stared at the waxy face of the dead woman.