

LOCAL HEIRRESS DEAD

BREAKING NEWS!

A NOVEL

An Extract

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Chapter 1

IT TAKES two and a half days to remove a body from a barrel of concrete.

And once the victim is identified, it takes an instant for your life to plummet from a Hallmark movie on downers to an Agatha Christie film scripted by Tarantino.

In hindsight, of course, I should have seen it coming that day at the lake. The signs were all there.

IT WAS SHORTLY after noon on the second Monday in July, and I sat in a borrowed canoe a hundred feet off the south shore of Donner Lake. Not more than four oar-lengths away, a police boat rested at anchor. My estranged husband, Dom Bertucci, was one of the three cops on board. They stared at the silver winch cable drawing an angled line from the boat's stern into the depths of the lake. I cradled my camera in my bandaged hand and calculated the odds of a front-page story. Pretty solid, I figured, since I was the only reporter at the scene, thanks to a tip from Dom.

“Olivia,” he’d said on the phone, “some teens diving at Donner Lake think they found a body.”

“Think?”

“They’re freaked out, not making much sense. Something about pirate treasure and mannequins. We’re sending divers down. I thought you’d be interested.”

Other cops might not give reporters a heads-up, but they were not Dom, nor were they politicking to be welcomed back to our marital bed. Other women might reject a cheater’s offerings, but they were not me, nor were they counting on his morsels to save their job.

The police and I bobbed in our boats, waiting for divers to connect the winch cable to whatever they’d found eighty or so feet below. Although we were close to shore and everyone wore life jackets, Dom clutched the winch controls with both hands. I knew his palms would be damp and his heart racing. Water deeper than a footbath did that to him.

Sweat trickled down my breastbone, partly from the heat, partly from nerves. Like any reporter, I love a good cops-and-bad-guys tale. But when I’m in a canoe in Donner Lake, I hyperventilate. As spectacular as the lake is, it carries with it an atmosphere of desperation that always reminds me people will do anything to survive. To calm myself, I steadied the camera and snapped a quick succession of pictures—marshmallow clouds that during squalls became dark, menacing fists; protective mountains whose impassable winter drifts sapped the will to live from the unprepared; and the calm water that summer storms whipped into a deadly chop.

I’d just captured a shot of Dom’s teenaged witnesses—a bedraggled foursome huddled together on the pier—when a diver popped up and signaled. Dom engaged the winch and the cable slowly retracted, glistening drops of water falling from its length. A rush of bubbles appeared on the lake’s surface, and I readied the camera. Several seconds later, two

more neoprene-capped police divers appeared. They removed their scuba masks, revealing grim faces.

The harnessed load finally broke the surface with a sighing whoosh. I snapped pictures rapidly as the winch's burden swayed and spun over the water. The dripping black straps enveloped a concrete-filled green and yellow barrel. I lowered my camera as the rotation of the winch's load slowed and the barrel's open end came more distinctly into focus. Two jean-clad legs protruded from the concrete like pens in a pencil cup.

I focused my camera on the shoes on the body's feet, zeroing in first on the stiletto heels, then on the straps securing the shoes to the feet. I counted six narrow straps across the arch and a seventh around the ankle. Even wet, the shoes' distinctive color stood out like a signature. "Dragon's fire," I said under my breath and my stomach did the little flippy thing it always did when adrenaline hit my system.

I glanced at Dom. His face told me I wasn't the only one who recognized those shoes.

Chapter 2

I BEACHED my canoe and approached the clutch of swimsuit-clad teens, not one of them over fifteen, sitting on the public pier, shivering despite the heat, their eyes glued to the police boat and the load hanging from the winch.

“I heard you discovered the barrel,” I said.

A skinny blond boy nodded. “Near the edge of the shelf. We were looking for stuff, y’know? Like we always do. Notes in bottles, fishing rods, cell phones.”

“We’ve been diving here almost every day,” the freckled girl next to him said. “There was nothing there yesterday or the day before.” She turned toward her friends, her braids swinging with the movement. “Right? We’d have seen it for sure. It appeared overnight. Right?” The others nodded.

The boy said, “We couldn’t miss the barrel. Just lying there. Filled with something, cement, I bet. And legs sticking out the top.” He shuddered and rubbed both hands over his face. “Maybe it’s a dummy from a store?”

I shook my head. “Afraid not.”

He hugged himself. “That’s sick,” he said, his voice going all pitchy. “What a freaky, awful way to die.”

I left them to their vigil and headed to the parking lot. I was halfway there when Dom shouted. “Olivia, wait.”

As he jogged toward me, warmth blossomed in my belly. Sometimes my body refused to listen to my head. In motion, Dom sizzled. In truth, he exuded heat pretty much all the time. It was the Italian in him.

“I know you think it’s Shauna in the barrel,” he said. “But until we’re sure you can’t print her name.”

“Everyone knows who wears those shoes.” My voice caught when I pictured Shauna in her trademark fiery red stilettos. I shook my head to chase the threatening tears away and reminded myself she’d been dead to me the minute I learned about her deceit. No crying then, no crying now. I cleared my throat and said, “I won’t need to mention her name. One look at the photos and people will figure it out.”

“You can’t use a picture either.”

When I sucked in my breath, Dom raised his hands. “You know I’m right. It could be someone else.”

“Those are her shoes, and that’s her in the barrel, and you know it.”

Dom shook his head.

“Designer stilettos with jeans?” I said. “That’s pure Shauna.”

Dom watched the coroner’s van enter the lot. Then he dropped his gaze to my bandaged hand. “What happened?”

“I gouged it trying out my new hobby.”

“You should pick different hobbies. Like reading.” Dom ran his hand through his hair. Silver glinted in the dark waves—more of it than I remembered. “Here’s the deal. If you use a picture, pick one without the shoes.”

“Fine. Just promise to tell me the minute you identify her.”

I checked my watch. I had five hours and a bit if I wanted to make the digital edition of the *Gazette*, Prospect’s local newspaper. It would take ten minutes to sort through my

pictures for one without the shoes and perhaps another ten to write what so far was a two-line story.

That left ample time to stop by Shauna's house before I sat down at the computer. Dom might be right—she *could* be alive. Of course she could. Politicians would stop lying; Nashville would stop singing about trucks; and I would wake up tomorrow thinking about Dom in bed with my former friend and not puke.

Afterword

This is an extract from the first title in the *Breaking News Mysteries*. I hope you enjoyed it and want to spend more time with Olivia.

To receive updates and news from me, please subscribe for my newsletter. You can do that here: <https://charlottesmorganti.com/connect>.

Breaking News: Local Heiress Dead is available for pre-orders (digital version) through Amazon (the links are on my website under <https://charlottesmorganti.com/Books>).

The paperback and digital versions of the novel will be released March 21, 2024 and will be available at several retailers.

In addition, the digital version will be available in my store: <https://charlottesmorganti.com/store>

