

Chapter One

I never expected to return permanent to my Black Mountain home, but I missed the forest more than I thought possible. I missed the crisp fall air and the clear starry nights. So, when a merger ended my job at the city newspaper I decided to go into business for myself. Naysayers laughed about my choice and others made snide remarks about a woman in business, especially a thirty-something woman. Some warned that with the advent of phone cameras who even needed a photographer? Undeterred, I took a chance, swallowed my pride, faced the demons of my past, and moved back to my small hometown to open a photography studio.

Black Mountain sits snug in a narrow valley, encased by the Swannanoa River on the south, Lake Nebo on the east, and the cold black mountain on the north. The river flows east to Lake Nebo, an easy walk from town. The cold mountain lake, the morning mist off the water like a fine veil covering both history and mystery, is an unreliable neighbor. The lake, like the town, holds its secrets like families keep closed closets for the hidden puzzles of life. Until recently I didn't realize the hold the mountain town held over me. The mountain, like the lake, blurred the line between life and death, so seeing the dead body floating in the water didn't surprise me as much as you'd expect.

I'd seen my share of death during a deployment in Afghanistan. I understood the delicate balance between living and dying, between health and infirmity, between happiness and despair. I finally understood the difference between running away and growing up, and moving home was just the next step in getting older.

When Mama died and Pa turned to heavier drinking, I used his addiction as an excuse to stay away, only daring brief visits when necessary, the short uncomfortable stays enough to remind me why I didn't pine for my hometown. But when my brother died I spent several weeks home, the longest I'd been home since going off to college, and I started to look at the town differently, like when you watch an old movie time and again, and you see things you missed the first time through, or maybe you watch again, hoping for a different ending.

The ghosts of the past roamed through Black Mountain too alive to offer any reason to venture back and I didn't exactly leave under the best of terms. I never fit the mold of a small-town girl, my looks verging on the side of the nerd, short and all arms and gangly legs, obsessed with nature and the spiritual, including my ability to read auras. The gift, a hand me down from my Cherokee ancestors, both a curse and legacy, caused a rift in my high school social circle that lasted well beyond our puberty, chasing me from town.

Within a short distance through the woods from downtown Black Mountain, I found the body where the western edge of Lake Nebo spreads wide and dark. Named after an overlooking knoll from where you can see down through the Valley of the Three Forks, the lake serves as both a recreation source and watershed. According to the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses ascended biblical *Mount Nebo* to view the Land of Canaan. God told Moses he would never enter Canaan, but God never said I'd never return home.

According to Christian tradition, Moses was buried on the mountain. According to local tradition, the high ground around the lake served as a burial place for the old Catawba Indians. I wasn't sure why, but over the years I pondered that coincidence.

On Main Street, with its one-stoplight, I set up my new photography studio and became an entrepreneur. I spend one or two mornings a week, my camera in hand, hiking or running the trails around the lake, trying to capture nature's magic as she breaks another day over the head of the waking world. I often wonder if we will ever really wake up to her wonder or remain in denial of

her greatness and frailty until it's too late.

An early fall morning breeze from the north brought an icy chill and a broken gray overhead cover that blotted out parts of the sun and promised to keep the shoreline in a bleak emptiness. Surprised at finding a car in the adjoining parking area, even the usual mallards abandoning the stretch of beach that day, I zipped up my wind jacket and started out on the lake trail, annoyed at sharing my morning adventure with another.

A haze hung over the lake like a blanket on a murky unforgiving bed. In the viewfinder of my camera, I caught the moments of the morning, frozen in time against the backdrop of a dark forest curtain, unforgiving to the inexperienced. The lake, a cohort in mystery to the forest, can be an icy reminder that nature isn't always warm and welcoming, but can be cold and distant if the uninitiated are not prepared or careful enough.

My route took me to my destination, the lake boat put in ramp, and I took shots of a tire-rutted landing area under a heavily treed canopy, a broken split rail fence separating the path from the water, trash from day boaters washed up on the sandy shore, the murk off the lake like fog, and the small pier where swimmers enjoyed the sun and warmer water in the city park during the summer.

I stood on a spot I'd picked out weeks before and shot several frames. I'd planned to shoot from the same spot at least once a week to catalog the changing scene through the four seasons of the big lake. I thought it might make a good coffee table book one day.

A ten-foot by ten-foot floating dock with a diving board hovered heavily out in the water about 25 yards from the end of the pier. A graying cedar plank lifeguard stand sits high there and when in use, offers the teen on duty full views of the water play area. I shot photos of the stand and surrounding area, quiet now, a contrast to the summer shots with children in full play.

Through the viewfinder I chased the early gray light atop the nearly flat water, catching it here and then over there, trapping it in the reflected color-bearing fall leaves of the trees along the boarded dock, the light off the lake surface a faded memory. The lapping waves splashed against the support beams of the pier and in the bleakness there, under the wood deck, in the early morning shadow, I saw her body floating face down.

The Morgan County Sheriff came out to investigate but decided it was obvious that Barbara Walker drowned and declared it accidental.

In a voice thick with a mountain drawl, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses, Sheriff Banner advised me after I questioned him, "Well, Emma, since I don't see any evidence at the scene pointing otherwise what else could it be but accidental? We found her car keys beneath a pile of her wet clothes and among other items in her car's locked trunk, all her valuables. In addition, the woman wore a bathing suit so why would you think anything else?"

Why indeed? "I don't know," I said, looking up at him, using my hand to shield my light hazel eyes from the sun breaking through the gloom behind him, "pretty cold out here for a swim."

"Look," the sheriff said, a dirty orange aura I've found associated with men who hate to be contradicted, rising about him, "you're not going to get a wild hair and run off all over town chasing murder suspects like you did with your brother?"

"Well," I responded, ignoring the sheriff's reference to my feeble attempt to investigate my brother's death the year before, "my instincts were right with that."

"You got a lucky break on Early, between you stumbling about and the ATF boys canvassing the county, you were bound to find something. Even a blind squirrel will find a nut now and then."

Though curious about the woman in the cold dim lake, I accepted the sheriff's findings and moved on to tend to other things, ignoring my suspicions. After all, I had a business to run.