

When Never Comes

Chapter One

Without expression or fanfare, the attendant reached over to pull back the sheet. Christine braced herself as she forced her eyes to the body on the gurney, the waxy face a bloodless blue-white, slack in death but eerily unmarred. He wasn't wearing his jacket, and his top shirt buttons were open, his tie loose and askew. Yes, it was him. Had his face been a ruin she would still have known him. There was no mistaking the Robert Mitchum style cleft in his chin. And yet there was a jarring strangeness too. The movie star good looks were flaccid now, and slightly bloated, leaving behind only a blank husk of the man she'd married eight years ago. The iconic charm and carefully polished charisma that had made Stephen Ludlow an international media darling had been extinguished.

"Yes," she said hoarsely, then cleared her throat. "Yes, it's Stephen." She was relieved when the attendant dragged the sheet back into place, but angled her body away from the gurney just the same.

"What happens now?"

"The M.E. will determine cause of death," Connelly explained. "Though with the icy condition of the bridge I think we can safely assume the crash will be ruled an accident, death caused by either trauma from the crash itself or by drowning." He paused, letting the words sink in. "I'm sorry to be blunt, but there's really no nice way to say it."

She blinked heavily at him. "No. I suppose not. Do I just go home now?"

"There are papers you'll need to sign. But we were wondering—" He paused to clear his throat, his eyes skittering away briefly. "We were hoping you'd be able to help us with something else."

Christine felt the first icy pangs of uneasiness. Something about the change in his voice, his sudden reluctance to look her in the eye, made her scalp prickle. "Help you with what?"

Connelly looked down at his shoes and sighed. "It's a rather delicate matter, actually. One I wish to hell I could spare you. But the fact is..." The words fell away, his eyes straying again, this time to a gurney on the opposite side of the room. "We need your help, Christine."

Uneasiness morphed into dread as her gaze slid along with Connelly's to the nondescript white mound on the second gurney. He was shifting from foot to foot now, his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

"Stephen's wasn't the only body we pulled from his car," he said gruffly. "Unfortunately, no identification was found for the second victim. We were hoping..."

The attendant was there suddenly, his blue latex gloves hovering expectantly over the sheet. Connelly gave him a curt nod. No one spoke as the sheet came away, and in the silence Christine became aware of a clock ticking somewhere. Heavy. Hollow. Like a pulse. And then she found herself staring at a woman.

She was a ghastly shade of white, her platinum hair fanned out from her head in a snarled, sodden halo. There was a gash on her forehead, and a sickening depression along her right temple. Her eyes were open and glazed, a piercing shade of violet with fixed, bottomless pupils. She was also naked from the waist up, her breasts so full and round they couldn't possibly have been formed by nature.

Christine found herself unable to look away. A prostitute? A one-night stand? A causal dalliance or something more? And if so, how *much* more?

Connelly cleared his throat. "Do you have any idea—"

"No."

"I know this is hard, Christine, but please take your time. Look closely."

"I don't need to look closely. I don't know who she is or what she was doing in my husband's car." Her voice broke suddenly, and for an instant she thought about lunging at the detective "This is why you're here. Because of her. Because you were Stephen's friend and they thought you'd be able to get a name out of me. That's what you meant when you said you were here to *explain* things. When you said *things* you meant her."

"Christine, I know this doesn't look good. I can't even imagine what's going through your mind right now, but we don't know what this means. We shouldn't jump to conclusions."

"She isn't wearing a shirt, Detective."

“And there might be a perfectly valid explanation for that. Maybe when the divers pulled her out of the car her clothes...” He let the words dangle, the look on his face making it clear he’d drawn the same conclusion she had—the only conclusion that could be drawn when a half-nude woman was pulled from a man’s car in the middle of the night.

Connelly shifted uneasily, his beefy shoulders bunched. “Was he— Do you know if he was... seeing anyone?”

Christine glared at him, astonished. “You’re asking if I knew my husband was having an affair? Like that’s something we’d discuss over dinner?”

“I’m sorry. I thought maybe women had a sense about these things. Women’s intuition or whatever you call it.”

She eyed him coldly.

Connelly ran a hand through his thatch of gray hair. “Look, I’m just trying to do my job. I’ve got two years left in homicide and I’m out. Until then, I do what they tell me. When they realized who they’d pulled out of the bay they asked me to come down and talk to you. We’ve got a Jane Doe whose family is going to want to know why she didn’t come home tonight, and we can’t tell them until we know who she is.”

Christine bristled at the inference that it was somehow her duty to help identify the half-nude woman. “I’m afraid I can’t help you, Detective. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to go home. You said there were some papers I needed to sign.”

Connelly stepped away briefly, returning a moment later with the clipboard Ryan had been scribbling on. He pointed to a line at the bottom, then flipped the page, pointing to two additional lines. Christine signed without reading and pushed the clipboard back into his hands.

“Are we finished?”

“For now, yes. You’ll get a copy of the report when the ME’s finished his examination, and someone will call to let you know when you can come down and collect his things.”

Christine stared at him blankly. “His things?”

“Keys. Wallet. Cell phone.”

“Right. His things.” She turned toward the door, fumbling in her pocket for her own keys.

“Here,” Connelly said. “Let me walk you out.”

“Thanks, no. I can find my way.” She should thank him for coming down in the middle of the night, but somehow couldn’t manage it.

She was almost to the door when he stopped her. “I’m sorry about this, Christine. Truly sorry. Stephen was a friend, but he was also a highly visible public figure. The media’s going to want to know what happened. I’ll do what I can to keep the details quiet, but I can’t guarantee anything.”

Christine nodded, then turned back toward the door, not sure whether she should feel gratitude or dread.