

DEAD CODE

Glenda Carroll

A Trisha Carson Mystery

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Also by Glenda Carroll

Dead in the Water

"**DEAD IN THE WATER** is....so well written you just can't put it down...If you're like me, you'll be trying to figure out who committed the murder while you're working out." - *Lynne Cox, NY Times Bestselling author, "Swimming to Antarctica," "Open Water Swimming Manual," "Swimming in the Sink: An Episode of the Heart."*

"Carroll combines a skill for mystery writing...with her sports journalism and Masters swimming background by nailing the details of what it's like to race in open water...I liked Carroll's characters immensely, but it was the story that kept me up late reading." - *Swimmer Magazine*

"(**DEAD IN THE WATER**) is a swim-centric mystery that will keep you turning pages while you think about your strokes. It's the first open-water-detective-novel that I know of, and it's great fun to read." - *Lynn Sherr. Sherr was a broadcast journalist and writer for more than thirty years at ABC News. Author of "Swim: Why We Love the Water."*

Drop Dead Red

"A smart, steadfast gumshoe who, in her second book, continues to flourish...Carroll's writing bounces off the page." - *Kirkus Reviews*

"Glenda Carroll, in her new novel, **Drop Dead Red** leads us through the nooks and crannies she knows so well in San Francisco and its neighbor, Marin County. Her heroine, Trish Carson, a sports swimmer, has intimate knowledge of those hearty souls who swim in icy cold lakes. Put these elements together with an unusual murder of ... swim leader, Shari Grantner, a beautiful, complex redhead, and the suspects around her, you have a mystery worth reading." - *Rita Lakin, author of the "Getting Old is Murder" series.*

To Joseph, Carolina, Caden, and Eddie, Jr.

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CHAPTER 1

“I can’t go into this lake by myself. I just can’t. Lena? Are you listening to me? I can’t do this. I’ll die if I do.”

I stood on a pebbly beach behind a circle of excited swimmers that curled ten deep around a tall lifeguard podium. Next to me was my younger sister, Lena, the one who’d pushed me into aquatic sports and its Zen-like subsection, open water swimming. The other athletes laughed and chattered nervously, waiting to hear the race instructions for the one-mile swim. Napa County’s largest lake, a glorious blue body of water with small islands in the distance, stretched out behind the lifeguard chair. A mild breeze barely made a ripple on its glassy surface, the air warm, against my increasingly clammy skin.

It should be inviting, welcoming, appealing. Not for me. My heart was racing. My stomach muscles tightened and cramped while the wide lake in front of me narrowed. The swimmers faded into the background until they disappeared altogether, leaving a chilling silence. I knew if I stepped into the water, I wouldn’t come out.

More than a year ago, after months of Lena urging me to ‘do something’ about my excess pounds, I stuffed myself into one of her much-smaller swimsuits, borrowed goggles and a cap and slipped into the water. My haphazard training turned out to be a lifesaver. Literally. Not long before, I’d been forced to swim down the shore of a lake much like this one, to escape a maniac murderer. The emotional effects of that swim lingered in the background. But now, with another body of water in front of me, they marched front and center.

I leaned over and put my hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath. I stared at my feet, wondering if they belonged to me.

“Trisha? Hello. What’s the big deal? There will be 150 people swimming around you,” said Lena. I turned my head and tried to fix my attention on her mouth. It moved, but her voice was indistinct. She smiled. ”Let’s make that swimming in front of you. Just follow them. You’ll be fine.”

She put her hand on my back and gave me a little push forward, closer to the pack. The tiny rocks hurt my feet as I shifted my weight back and forth. I squeezed my swim cap between my hands. I dropped it. Picked it up. Dropped it again. Picked it up again. *Did the temperature drop?* I stood there shivering, watching goosebumps grow on my arms and legs.

“You promised,” I said a little louder than I expected. A few swimmers glanced in my direction, but I ignored them. “You promised that when I finally believed I could get back in the water, you’d be swimming next to me.”

“Last year, you swam the entire length of a lake a lot longer than this, totally by yourself. You even swam around a point in San Francisco Bay, albeit to rescue me. This is nothing.”

“That was different. Someone wanted to kill me. It was the only way I could get away and it was the only way I could get to you. That was a necessity. This is a stupid choice.”

I bit my bottom lip so hard I tasted blood.

“I planned on swimming with you, you know that. But I couldn't find a babysitter for Little T.”

Six-month-old Timmy, or “Little T,” was Lena's adorable son. He slept in the baby backpack, his head resting on her shoulder.

“What am I supposed to do? Leave him on the beach?”

“Well,” I started to say.

“You're not serious?”

“No. Just. . . I don't know. I've been anxious before, but never like this. I've got to get away from this lake.” The swimmers lining the beach chatted, smiled and laughed. Me? I could barely breathe. “Nope. I'm not ready. Not yet. You swim. I'll watch the baby.” I reached for Little T. Lena shook her head.

“Move up a little closer or you'll miss the instructions for the swim.”

She reached over, grabbed the strap of my swimsuit and dragged me forward into the crowd.

“Didn't you hear me? I'm not swimming.”

A tall guy in black jammers inched closer as we talked, clearly eavesdropping but trying to look like he wasn't. He took a few steps in our direction.

“Swim with me,” he said. He stuck out his hand. “I'm Burk.”

“I don't think . . . I . . . I'm not very fast.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I'll do breaststroke or fly.”

“For a mile?”

He shrugged his shoulders again and smiled. “I can try.”

“Great. Problem solved,” said Lena.

Timmy woke up and started to fuss.

“Need to go feed him or change diapers or something,” said Lena.

Lena smiled at Burk. “This is my sister Trisha. Trisha Carson. This is her first open water race.

She's swum in lakes and rivers before, but not competitively.”

He fastened his eyes on mine. “Nice to meet you, Trisha. I'll see you at the water's edge as soon as the instructions are done. You'll be there.”

I didn't know what to say.

“That's not a question. Be there. We'll swim together,” he said, placing his hand on my arm. “Need to tell some friends what I'm doing.”

I turned to talk to Lena, but she and Timmy had already made a beeline for some shade. I watched her in disbelief, tiptoeing over the hot rocky beach toward the picnic table where we'd dropped our backpacks and towels. This Burk guy

could be the equivalent of a swimming axe murderer, for all she knew. And why would he give up this race to swim with someone he'd never met before? If my open water anxiety hadn't already been at full throttle, I might have given this particular point more thought.

I watched Burk as he walked a little north on the beach, zigzagging between groups of swimmers. Then, he turned around, caught me looking, and pointed to the shoreline, then at me, then back at the shoreline. I nodded. I was going in the water. For some reason, I felt like I didn't have a choice.

The race directions began, and I tried to listen. I heard individual words and phrases like "course," "starting waves," and "countdown." But then everything became crystal clear. "If you are in trouble anywhere along the course, wave your hand and someone in a kayak or paddleboard will come to get you," said the event director.

There it was. My way out.

The directions over, the faster swimmers in the first wave rushed the water, dove in, and swam out to the starting line between two round yellow buoys, about 300 yards away. The next fastest wave followed them five minutes later. I stood with the third group, eyeing the crowd for Burk. He came up behind me.

"Ready?" asked Burk.

"No."

"Come on. We're next."

I inched my way into the lake. The muddy bottom oozed between my toes and over my feet. I stopped when the water lapped around my knees. It had a crisp chill to it. A curtain of calm rippled across my body. My breathing steadied.

"Okay. Okay. Guess I'm doing this," I said to no one in particular.

I inhaled, ready to belly flop into the lake and take a stroke toward the starting line when Burk caught my arm.

"Might want to put on your cap and goggles."

CHAPTER 2

Once the horn blasted, signaling the start of our wave, the water erupted. Splashing, arms and legs everywhere, bumping into me, kicking me. One swimmer pushed me underwater and swam across my back. Burk took my arm and guided me to the side of the frenzied pack.

“I’m ready to get out,” I announced, spitting out lake water.

“Take a breath and exhale slowly.”

I did.

“Again.”

I sputtered but managed to control my breathing.

Burk said, “Let’s get going.” And off we went. From then on, every time I turned my head to breathe, there was Burk, smiling, swimming, and cheering me on.

“You’re doing great. Keep going.”

That’s all the encouragement I needed. Thoughts about quitting drifted away as I settled into a rhythm. I concentrated on my stroke, watching my arms stretch out in front of me in the murky water. I wouldn’t say the mile flew by, but surprisingly, I realized I was enjoying myself. When I saw the finish arch ahead, I came to a dead stop and started to tread water.

“Everything okay?” asked Burk, stopping beside me, water splashing around his neck.

“Yes. Better than ok. Thank you. I mean it.”

“Wait until you finish. Then you can thank me.” He laughed. “Now go. Sprint to the end. Go! Go!” And I did, arms and legs churning through the water.

When I stood up and jogged through the finish arch, I threw my arms toward the sky, smiled gloriously, and let out a huge whoop. I turned around to thank Burk but didn’t see him. I scanned the crowd, but he wasn’t there, either. I would have to find him later.

I ran past the other swimmers, up the hill, anxious to find Lena. She sat at the picnic table, pawing through her swim backpack.

“Can’t find my tinted goggles. Do you know where they are?”

“I did it,” I proclaimed, my big smile still on my face. “Not only did I start the race, but I finished it.”

“I knew you could. Do you feel better now?”

“Mostly relieved, but I feel quite proud of myself.”

Lena smiled. “I converted my big sister to the joys of open water swimming. Congratulations!”

She continued to rummage through her backpack. “Where are they? Ah, here

they are.” She slipped on her cap, fitted the goggles to her face and stood up.

I gave her an exceptionally soggy hug. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for pushing me. No way I would have been brave enough to do it without your support.”

“Good job. I mean it. Tell me all about your swim when I get back. My heat is going to start in about fifteen minutes. I’m so nervous I’m going to throw up. I haven’t raced in... I don’t know how long. Keep an eye on Timmy, ok?”

“What a happy baby,” I said, glancing over at Little T jiggling his plastic keys. I picked up a huge beach towel and wrapped it around my shoulders.

“Did that guy Burk stay with you?”

“Every time I took a breath, there he was, gliding along beside me. You know that he—”

“Trish, not now. No time. Tell me later.”

Lena started down the hill to the lake and then stopped halfway, turned around and yelled, “Everything okay? Does he need me?”

“Everything is fine.” *First time moms. Always so paranoid.* “Relax. He’s incredibly happy with me. Go. You’ll miss the start.”

She nodded, hesitated for another moment, then trotted across the stubby grass and onto the beach, heading for the group of swimmers waiting for the next race, a two-mile swim.

“Your mother is gonna kick some butt,” I told the chubby baby still completely preoccupied with his keys. He shook them and giggled at the rattling sound they made.

“You’ll be out there soon, Little T,” I said with a smile.

Tired but exhilarated, a pleasant sense of accomplishment spread through my whole body. I’d finished the swim. The black cloud hanging over me before the start had faded away with each stroke. I wrapped myself in the towel and shrugged off my wet swimsuit underneath, replacing it with a pair of shorts and a San Francisco Giants tee shirt.

“Come on, Tim, let’s get some food. I’ll introduce you to my swim partner. I need to thank him again,” I said.

I carried the baby on my hip across the pebbly beach, walking from one end to the other, scanning the crowd. I couldn’t find Burk. Maybe he left as soon as he dried off.

“That’s too bad,” I said, squeezing my eyes shut for a moment. *Shake it off, Trish. The swim was a big deal to you. For him, not so much.*

Just to make sure, I surveyed the swimmers one more time. Still no Burk, so Little T and I plunged into the crowd at the food tables. Swimmers lined up three deep, grabbing slices of oranges, bananas, and chocolate chip cookies. With a secure grip on the baby, I slathered a bagel with cream cheese. Then I grabbed a handful of grapes, carefully balanced everything, and walked back toward the picnic table, scanning the clumps of swimmers and friends spread out along the beach.

“Hey, to squ Trisha, good to see you,” said a woman that I couldn’t quite

place. "I'm a friend of your sister's. Did you swim?"

I nodded.

"Sorry to hear about Shari. She was a good friend of Lena's, right?"

"Best friend. They grew up together. I drove them to swim meets all the time," I said.

"I joined the last open water clinic she ran before she was. . . you know. So sad," the woman said.

I squirmed and mumbled something like, 'Gotta go.'

"Hope the bad guys leave us swimmers alone," she said. "But we have you to keep us safe."

I groaned internally and felt my face flush. Over the past few years, I'd solved a few murders in the open water community, including the drowning of Shari Grantner, Lena's oldest friend. But that didn't mean I liked talking about it.

"Nice to see you," I remarked as I moved past her, tightening my grip on Little T and the sagging plate of food. *Time to think about something pleasant. Where did Burk go?* He had been right behind me at the end, or so I thought. He must have jogged to another part of the beach once he ran through the finish gate.

A wave of fatigue swept through my body, from my wet head to my wobbly knees as I carried the baby back to the picnic table. The plan to connect with the swimmer drifted away. The need for food took precedence.

I put Timmy in his stroller, sat down on the blanket beside him, and devoured the food in front of me. The bagel and fruit gone, I pulled out two energy bars from my swim bag and ate them, too. Out in the water, the swimmers stroked their way to the large triangular orange buoy floating in the distance. Beads of crystal spray shot off the water-borne athletes and glittered in the sunshine. I glanced at my watch. Lena would be back in less than an hour. I stretched out on the blanket, plugged earphones into my cell phone and searched until I found KSPT, the local sports radio station. Had the SF Giants made a much-needed trade for a power hitter? I listened for the deep voice of the jock broadcaster who specialized in baseball, Tyler Stockton. But it wasn't Tyler giving his opinion about why the trade hadn't happened and why it no doubt wouldn't happen. A different radio personality, Jan Johnson, had the microphone instead. She was a well-known baseball fanatic who knew the game's stats like she knew her home address. When she lamented that the power hitter had been scooped up by the Florida Marlins, her call-in fans went ballistic. No doubt about it, she kept the unruly callers under control. But Tyler . . . his irresistible chuckle, his knowledge of the game, its history, his close contact with the team . . . the boy hit it out of the park every time he hosted a show. I muted the broadcast, pulled out the earphones, propped myself up on my elbows and gazed at the calm lake as the last of the swimmers disappeared behind a spindly point of land.

I'd seen Tyler just the day before as I finished my shift at Oracle Park, the home of the San Francisco Giants.

He had walked by me and waved before he disappeared beneath the bleachers. "Hey, Trish, I'll see you later. I'm stopping by Pearl's house to pick up The Babe

and take him for a walk.”

“I’ll be asleep,” I said. Tyler called his grandfather Pearl, a contraction of Grandpa Earl. As a baby, he’d mashed the words together and came up with Pearl. He still called him that after all these years.

I lived in Earl’s house now. A well-known architect constructed the beautiful estate in Kentfield north of the Golden Gate Bridge, on the edge of La Cruz Canyon. Earl had been my father’s friend for years and Dad lives there, too. Last year, I moved out of my sister’s extra bedroom in San Rafael when I found out she was expecting the plump little guy passed out in the stroller next to me. Earl had offered me his extra room, which turned out to be an elaborate suite built to be maid’s quarters. Basically, I now resided in a small apartment, complete with a kitchen that included a smart refrigerator that answered my many ridiculous questions on a daily basis.

I unmuted the radio show only to hear Jan break for a commercial. Jan was great, but I missed hearing the smile in Tyler’s rich voice. I’d heard him, at least I thought I had, open the front door last night around ten, calling for The Babe. In response, The Babe, Earl’s boxer—sixty pounds of sniffling, snorting sweetness—had whined and danced in circles, his way of greeting his loved ones.

I rested in a happy relaxed bubble for at least forty-five minutes, until I heard Lena’s whoop as she ran up the hill toward me and Little T.

“I won my age group,” she exclaimed, grabbing Timmy out of the stroller and twirling him around. “First time in, oh, I don’t know, three years.”

She pulled off her cap and shook her mop of curls like a wet dog. Timmy laughed and covered his face with his chubby hands.

“I was right in there with the women I used to compete against. We were swimming almost shoulder to shoulder. On the last leg, I just ignited and pulled away from them. One swimmer was so close behind me, I felt her fingers brush my toes with each stroke. But, after a few minutes, she dropped back, couldn’t keep it up. I finished ahead of all four of them. I almost tripped running out of the water and up the beach. But I won. I can’t believe it. So excited. And very tired.”

She plunked down on the wooden bench connected to the picnic table bench and put Timmy on her lap.

“How did it go? Did he cry? Did he miss me?” she asked.

“He napped the whole time. He didn’t miss you one bit.”

Lena brushed a wisp of hair away from Timmy’s face. “Do you work this evening?”

“No, the Giants are out of town.”

“Is Jon coming over?”

“He’s busy.”

“Please tell me you’re still seeing him. Finding you another boyfriend would be exhausting.”

“We’re okay. He has something to do and it’s hard to connect during the baseball season.”

“Trisha.”

“We’re okay. Really.”

Lena said. “Maybe you need one of these.”

“No babies for me. Anyway, I’m too old.”

“Mid-forties is not too old.”

“Right. My job with the Giants is seasonal and part-time. I live with my father and his friend. Nothing feels permanent. A baby is *exactly* what I need.”

“You don’t need to be sarcastic,” she said. “Gonna get some food and change. Then we can start home.”

Lena and Little T moved out of the shade, trotting down the hill toward the food table.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. Earl.

“Hey, there. How are you this beautiful day?” I asked.

“How come you left The Babe out all night?” The question was direct, if not startling.

“Not me. Tyler said he planned to take him for a walk. That’s what he told me at the ballpark. I heard him come into the house last night and call for the dog. He woke me up.”

“I’ll have to talk to that young man. This morning, there was no dog sleeping at the end of my bed. Instead, The Babe was sacked out in a lounge chair on the deck.”

“The deck? What was he doing out there?”

“I don’t know. I thought you would.”

“I’d suggest calling the radio station and talking to him, but he’s not on,” I said.

“No?”

“Nope. Jan took over his spot for the afternoon. She’s pretty good. Don’t worry about Tyler. He’ll show up.”

Earl let out a big breath. “I’m going over to China Camp for my volunteer stint. If he’s there when you get home, tell him I want to talk to him.”

He hung up. Although Ty could be flaky, he was devoted to his grandfather and would never renege on an obligation to Earl or The Babe. A chill passed through my body and I pulled a damp towel over my shoulders.

Two minutes later, Terrel Robinson, MD, called. He couldn’t reach Lena and wanted to know how the swim went and if Little T had enjoyed himself. Terrel, or “Dr. T,” is Lena’s live-in boyfriend and the baby’s father. If anyone needed a live-in doctor, it was Lena. Since my sister can be over the top on a good day and had spent much of her time in orbit since becoming a mom, she needed someone like Dr. T. A voice of reason, he calmed her down like a warm bath. As an Emergency Room physician in San Francisco, he dealt more with gunshot wounds than pediatrics. But that didn’t matter. He watched out for his son and my sister, and he took exceptionally good care of both of them. I genuinely liked the guy.

The swimmers had begun to trickle out of the venue and head for the parking lot. They carried deck chairs, small coolers, and their ever-present swim backpacks. I glanced at a group of athletes standing around the results board. I

recognized a few of them, thanks to my sister. Unable to help myself, I searched the crowd again for my floating security blanket and personal cheerleader. Without him, I never would have finished the race, or started it, for that matter. *Where did he go?* Instead of Burk, I spotted Lena with a group of women in their thirties, strong, tan and ready to swim another two miles. As I folded up the towel and cleaned the area around the picnic table, my phone buzzed with a notification from my bank. I get them all the time, yet another annoyance of modern technology. I deleted it and headed over to meet my sister, pushing the stroller. Our little extended family of three moved down a path bordered by huge maple trees, away from the serene lake and into the sunny, almost-empty parking lot.

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About the Author



If you want to find Glenda Carroll, she'll be in, on, or under water—and writing about it. She understands water sports on a very personal level since she swims, surfs and sails.

Glenda was a long time sports columnist for the Marin Independent Journal, focusing on sailboat racing. During that time, she also wrote for local, national and international sailing publications as well as travel magazines. PacificWaverider.com, a surfing website, asked her to write a twice-weekly column, which she did for more than three years.

She is the author of the Trisha Carson mysteries. They are set in the San Francisco Bay area, including Marin County, the East Bay State Parks and, of course, San Francisco. Her books have a swimming undercurrent, based on her own experience. She has raced in more than 150 open water swim events in Northern California, as well as Hawaii and Perth, Australia. She is listed in Openwaterpedia.com

Glenda tutors first-generation high school and college students in English. She is a member of Mystery Writers of America and Sisters in Crime. She lives in San Rafael, CA with her dog, McCovey.