

The background of the cover is a photograph of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. The bridge's iconic orange-red towers and suspension cables are prominent against a cloudy, greyish-blue sky. In the foreground, the bridge's deck curves over the water. Below the bridge, the scene transitions to a beach with dark, jagged rocks in the shallow surf. A person is wading in the water on the left side of the frame. The overall tone is somber and atmospheric.

BETTER OFF DEAD

Glenda Carroll
A Trisha Carson Mystery

BETTER OFF DEAD

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"It is a great first novel for the author and the main character has secrets to be explored in future books. It is a fast read and will appeal to open water swimmers, athletes and mystery lovers." -- US Open Water Swimming Connection

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.”

Hamlet, William Shakespeare

During the time I struggled to find a plot for book four of the Trisha Carson mysteries, I tutored a high schooler reading Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. I explained how Shakespeare's plays stood the test of time and could easily be modernized. As we discussed what *Hamlet* would sound like today, the proverbial light bulb went off in my head. Later that evening, I started to write *Better Off Dead*, a mystery based loosely on *Hamlet*. Yes, that Hamlet who is consumed with grief and revenge and is driven crazy as the play goes on. So, Will S., many thanks for the idea.

I had a number of modern-day professionals helping me: Lourdes Venard, Kelley Scriven, Lisa Towles. Once again, the cover is the creation of Richard Burns, an excellent graphic artist and a masters swimming teammate and Bullet Liongson

A special thank you to the women swimmers of Tamalpais Aquatic Masters who kept asking me in the locker room ‘how's the book coming along?’

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A Trisha Carson Mystery

BETTER

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Chapter 1

“I really shouldn’t be here,” I complained to Lena as we drove up the long, pebbled driveway leading to an elegant home in an elegant community in Marin County. I never went to funerals. They made me itchy. That’s right, itchy. Within one block of the memorial, I broke out with a bumpy red rash that would probably last the whole day.

“You were specifically invited. You have to be here,” said Lena.

My eyes were on the parking valet who motioned for me to stop. “I never met the man who died. Andy Barlow? Who is ... was ... he?”

“I didn’t know him either. C’mon, his son asked us to be here. We are paying our respects.”

The last time I saw Harrison Barlow, the dead man’s son, dated back almost twelve years. Then, he was a geeky kid, eight years old, hardly talked. His clothes hung on him like wet rags and his hair stuck out of his scalp like porcupine quills. Lena, along with teaching kids to swim at the community pool, often gave private lessons to the affluent children in Marin County. Harrison was one of those.

Now a college junior, he had been summoned back to Marin from his university in London, England, when his father died.

“Didn’t you say Andy Barlow died in a boating accident?” I asked, scratching my neck.

Lena shuddered. “The worst kind. A powerboat ran over him ... His body was chewed up by the boat’s propeller.”

My mouth flew open. “That’s terrible.”

“That’s every open water swimmer’s nightmare,” Lena said, nodding.

We walked up the front steps to a strikingly modern home spread out over one level, all glass and brick and angles. Guarding the immense doorway was a five-foot easel and a large photo of Andrew Barlow, with the words “Celebration of Life” at the top. The photo emitted confidence and contentment. He looked happy and very much alive.

“Bet he didn’t look like that when they picked pieces of him out of the water,” I said.

“Trisha, that’s disgusting,” my sister hissed under her breath. “This is a celebration of Andy’s life, so keep the snarkiness to yourself. I read in his obit that he was cremated, and his ashes were spread off the San Francisco waterfront in the Bay.”

“His teeth are ... were ... really white,” I said, squinting as I leaned forward to examine the photo. “Bet he had some work done on his face.”

“And how would you know that?” Lena asked skeptically.

“Just a guess. Lee, look at the area around his ears and near his eyes. The skin looks stretched. Doesn’t it?”

Lena sighed.

“How old was he?” I asked.

“Fifties, I think.”

“He looks like a guy trying hard to stay young,” I said as we walked through the empty entry hall.

For reasons I never understood, Lena received a last-minute invitation to this memorial. Why did Harrison want his former swim teacher to be here? And stranger still, why was I specifically asked to attend? I planned on going in, offering my condolences, then escaping to the car. I’d listen to the San Francisco Giants podcast until Lena came out.

But my sister wouldn’t hear of it.

A butler-type person popped out of a doorway. “This way please.” He handed us both a program, led us through the highly polished house, and pointed to the beveled glass doors leading out to the side lawn. “Please go through those doors and find a seat. They should be starting momentarily.”

“Lena, my neck is one big itch. I won’t be able to sit through this. I need to leave.”

“Suck it up,” Lena whispered. She looked over at me and her eyes grew to the size of dollar pancakes. “How did your neck get so red, so fast?”

“I told you.” I desperately tried not to scratch.

We passed a table with a guest book, a bucket of ice, an elaborate silver water pitcher, sparkling crystal glasses, and white linen napkins. I grabbed a handful of ice and wrapped it in a napkin, resting it on my neck and sighing in relief.

The side yard resembled the setup for a garden wedding: rows of white chairs, a podium at the front with another large photo of the deceased. Off to the left, behind a tall iron fence, was the pool. It was a no-nonsense 3-lane, 25-yard competition pool complete with backstroke flags and a 36-inch timing clock on the pool deck. On the right side of the chairs were the rolling golden hills of northern California.

“Was Andy a serious swimmer?” I asked.

Lena shrugged. “Must have been with that kind of a setup.” She walked toward two seats in the second row, but I grabbed her arm and pulled her into the last row.

“Here. I want to sit here so I can make a quick getaway.”

Rock music from the sixties and seventies played quietly in the background.

“I wish they’d turn the music up,” said Lena, absentmindedly pushing her ginger curls off her face.

“Do you think the DJ takes requests?” I asked, hiding a smile.

“Trisha, knock it off. It isn’t a club.”

As the ice cubes dripped down my neck, I gazed around the room. Some of Marin’s finest were here. The mayors of San Rafael, Tiburon and San Anselmo, Larkspur, Ross, Corte Madera, and Sausalito sat together off to the right. Police chiefs in crisp uniforms sat behind them. And then came the local celebrities: musicians, artists, high-flying charity workers, movers and shakers in the LGBTQ+ community, and aging rock stars.

“Isn’t that ...?”

I pulled her hand down. “Don’t point, Lee.” But I leaned forward and tried to see who she was looking at.

The music faded away and Justine Barlow, the dead man’s wife, walked to the podium in stilettos and an expensive designer black dress that hugged her curves. Her stylish hair, prematurely white, was pulled back in a simple bun.

She blotted away a few tears. “I welcome you all here today to celebrate the life of my wonderful husband and my best friend, Andrew. Andy was the loving father of our son Harrison, a caring and encouraging older brother to Martin, a wonderful uncle to Marty’s twins Dawson and Daria, and a devoted friend to all of you.”

“Sounds like she’s reading from a dictionary,” I whispered to my sister. “I didn’t know the guy, but I could say something more original if the love of my life just died. Boring.”

“Be quiet.”

“Maybe he wasn’t the love of her life,” I said, elbowing Lena. “Bet she’s had work done too. What is it with this family?”

Lena glared at me.

Justine talked on and on. I looked around to try to keep myself awake. Off to the side beyond the pool, the two car valets were leaning against a Porsche, appreciating the smoothness of its lines.

Justine stopped her talk with a tearful hiccup. She stretched her hand out to the front row. “Harrison, please come up and say a few words.”

Almost imperceptibly, Harrison shook his head ‘no.’

“Please. Your dad would have wanted it.”

Harrison stayed glued to the chair, his back stiff. He glared at his mother, not moving. A man sitting next to him, I guessed his Uncle Martin, leaned over to whisper something in his ear. Daria leaned in her father’s direction to hear what he was saying. Dawson looked down at his sneakers. Harrison jerked as if he’d been

pricked by a sharp knife. Red blotches flooded his ashen skin. He stood up rigidly and rushed in the opposite direction of the podium, past his uncle, his cousins, the guests, and the row in which Lena and I were seated.

A melancholy gloom followed the young man like a dark cloud. Wearing a severe black shirt, vest, and pants didn't help his image. I couldn't decide if Harrison was a goth English major or a wannabe malnourished eighteenth century undertaker.

Uncle Martin stood up and walked to the podium to comfort the crying mother. He put his arm around her shoulder and drew her close.

"He's overcome with grief," Martin told the assembled guests. "I'd like to say a few words about my brother, and then there'll be time for all of you to talk about your remembrances of Andy, who died too young."

I whispered to Lena. "I don't need to be part of this."

Before Lena could grab my arm, I slipped out of my chair and moved toward the house. There is something to be said for making an escape in a solemn moment when talking is taboo.

I shooed away the car valets and found my ratty vintage Honda stuffed between a white Mercedes convertible and a slick black Maserati. I planned on sitting here until Lena came out. Trying not to think about my itchy skin, I reached for the radio. The baseball podcast lacked pizzazz. Instead, I switched to an easy listening station, closed my eyes, and hummed along with Otis Redding's "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay."

Almost two hours later, a few people trickled out. In the doorway stood Justine and Martin. But no Harrison. They nodded solemnly at each mourner as they passed by. I strained to see Lena, but she didn't emerge, at least not from the front door. The stream of mourners diminished to a trickle. Valets delivered extravagant cars to the guests, who slowly drove from the parking area into the street. Within fifteen minutes, everyone was gone.

Still no Lena. I slid out of the front seat, moved to the front of the car, and leaned against the hood. From the corner of my eye, I caught a movement back by the pool. Turning to get a better look, I saw Lena and Harrison heads close together, talking intently. Finally, Lena pulled back, cupped Harrison's face in her hands, and kissed him on the cheek. She patted his arm one more time and turned to walk toward the one car left.

"Lena," I called out and her head jerked up. She nodded, took a look back at Harrison now standing near the side door of the house, waved gently, and headed for the car.

"How's your rash?" she asked, slipping into the front seat.

“Much better. Funerals do that to me. Remember at Aunt Anna’s wake?” I checked the car mirror and was relieved to see the redness fading away.

“You were a mess.”

“So, what were you and Harrison talking about?”

“You won’t believe what he just told me,” said Lena.

“Try me.”

“He’s sure that his Uncle Martin killed his father.”

“Seriously? He thinks his uncle murdered his dad??”

Lena nodded.

“And that his uncle was having a long-time affair with his mother.”

“See. I told you. He wasn’t the love of her life. That’s ugly. Did the dad know?”

“I don’t know. Now Harrison wants you to check it all out.”

“Why me?”

“Because you solve crimes.”

“Have him call the police.”

“He did. But his dad’s death was ruled an accident, and they aren’t interested in looking into it any further.”

“Do you think the uncle killed his brother? For what reason? To be the main man in the mother’s life?”

“I don’t know. Harrison wants you to investigate.”

“I could talk to him, but I don’t think it will go anywhere.”

“Please, I promised him you would,” said Lena.

“Why’d you do that?”

“Tomorrow. He wants to see you tomorrow. Around ten. At the Two Seagulls café down by the waterfront in Sausalito,” she continued, ignoring my question.

“I don’t want to. Since you set this up, you tell him ‘no.’”

“You tell him,” said Lena. “Look, it’s only a conversation. His father just died and he’s upset. He needs to talk. All you have to do is listen to him and smile reassuringly. I know you can do that.”

“Yeah, I can. But I don’t want to.”

I don’t know why Lena involved me in this mess. I glanced at her. She had dressed appropriately for the celebration of life ceremony. Trim black slacks, a white silk blouse. Her bouncy reddish curls were pulled sedately back behind her ears. I personally didn’t think the black stilettos fit in, but it had been agreed on by everyone in my extended family that I know little to nothing about fashion. I wore wear a dark green, long sleeve dress, totally inappropriate for early fall in the San Francisco Bay area. The afternoon temperature had reached eighty-five degrees, and sweat dripped down the back of my neck.

“Can you tell me anything about Harrison or his family? There were some pretty impressive people at the ceremony today.”

Lena pecked away at her phone, but then looked up.

“I know about as much as you do. I haven’t seen him since before he went to college abroad. I think his father and uncle were partners. They had something to do with money. If I remember correctly, so did his mother. If she still works.”

“Like banking?” I asked.

“Investment stuff, I think.”

“Based on who attended today, he was an A-lister in Marin.” I paused for a minute and squeezed my eyes shut. “Okay. What we know for sure is that the father had an accident in the Bay and is dead. What we’ve been told by Harrison is that he thinks his father was killed, and that his father’s brother was having an affair with the mother. We think, but aren’t sure, that the father and brother were partners in a financial-type firm. Did I leave anything out?”

I opened one eye and looked at her. Lena shook her head.

“That sounds positively Shakespearean,” I said.

“How would you know anything about Shakespeare?” Lena asked.

“Just because I didn’t complete a four-year college doesn’t mean I didn’t take any classes.”

“And you chose Shakespeare?”

“Well, it fit my schedule.”

About the Author

If you want to find Glenda, 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 wrote a weekly sailing column for the *Marin Independent Journal* for 19 years. She also wrote for local, national and international sailing publications. She branched into travel writing and her features have appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Travel & Leisure*, *Ford Times*, *Chevron USA*, *Defenders of Wildlife*, and *Bay & Delta Yachtsman*.

The Trisha Carson series is set in the San Francisco Bay area. Her books have a swimming undercurrent, based on her own experience in open water swimming. She has raced in more than 150 open water 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 and History. She has an M.A. from Miami University, Oxford, Ohio and a B.A. from Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. She is the president of the Northern California Chapter of Sisters in Crime and is a member of Mystery Writers of America.

She lives in San Rafael, Ca with her dog McCovey.