



LETHAL
LAKE

An Ardis Jensen Mystery

JOAN BLACHER



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ZUMAYA ENIGMA

2011

AUSTIN TX

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LETHAL LAKE

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ISBN 978-1-936144-74-7

Cover art and design © Chris Cartwright

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Blacher, Joan H.

Lethal lake / Joan Blacher.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-936144-74-7 (print) -- ISBN 978-1-936144-75-4 (ebook)

1. Forensic psychology--Fiction. 2. Counseling in higher education--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3602.L225L48 2011

813'.6--dc22

2011005222

Dedication

For my husband Norm

Acknowledgments

Many people contributed to the development of this book, but none played a more important role than my editor and publisher, Liz Burton, to whom I owe considerable gratitude for her patience and guidance. The following individuals also assisted me in various ways: with the research and writing of this book: Detective Bonnie Breeze, Detective Tony Bartolotto, Donald Greenberg, Esq., Charles Johnston, Robert Shayne, Deputy Sheriff Tim Hagel, and Warren Lovell, M.D.

CHAPTER 1

The horror began on Friday, Halloween night, although Ardis Jensen did not know it then. She and her husband Jim, dressed as Cleopatra and Marc Anthony, were enjoying an annual party given by Bradley McLaren, a regent for their university. A few unexpected events did occur, but nothing that seemed unusual for a Halloween party.

She withstood the chilly glances Jolene Dunning sent her way as Jolene passed canapés to groups of costumed guests. That woman made no secret of her dislike of Ardis, even though Ardis tried to be civil because their husbands were close friends and colleagues in the History Department at Clarion University.

Spying her toga-clad husband standing at the bar, Ardis headed across the room to join him.

“The usual vodka and tonic?” he asked as she reached his side.

She nodded and patted his arm. After years of an often-bumpy marriage, they were attuned to each other’s likes and dislikes.

He handed over her drink and reached for his white wine. Frowning, he said, “I can’t imagine where Alan is. He promised he’d meet us here.”

Alan Dunning's absence was odd, Ardis thought. This party was one of his favorites.

She and Jim stepped out onto the polished terra cotta patio as a gusty east wind swirled over the pool and through the eucalyptus trees surrounding it. She held down her skirt. A fiery sunset signaled that darkness was on its way.

Later, after spooning up the last mouthful of chocolate parfait she knew she should avoid, she leaned back and gazed at the vivid harvest moon peering over the horizon. Jim sat next to her, totally engrossed in conversation with a regent. As she looked around for someone to talk to, she spied, through the eucalyptus trees at the end of the lawn, a stormy-faced Jolene gesturing at a dark-haired man in a chef's uniform. As she sat forward, trying to get a closer view, Ardis saw him put his arm around Jolene, who angrily pushed it away. Scowling, he looked toward the patio, and when he saw her watching, he grabbed the resisting Jolene and pulled her into the eucalyptus grove.

Ardis was curious about the quarrel and wondered if the bitter arguments she knew Jolene and her husband Alan had about her working for the Encino Hotel's catering department could have been about this man rather than because her job didn't fit the image of a professor's wife. Alan had tried to cover up his rocky second marriage, but rumors about it continued to skitter around campus. Maybe, Ardis thought sadly, things had become so difficult he couldn't face tonight's party.



Monday morning, she walked into the Vista Park Counseling Center, eager to prepare for her afternoon clients. Passing through the garage-sale-furnished reception room, she noticed the upholstery on the off-white sofas

looked grungy. She sighed at the thought of calling Facilities.

Although she loved doing therapy with students, after eight years as Clarion's Director of Counseling, the administrative side of the job was wearing her down, especially since her boss never budgeted enough money for counseling services. Only she and another, half-time counselor were funded, and during the past two years, increasingly seriously troubled and emotionally disturbed students had sought help. Without sufficient counseling, she feared they might turn violent.

As she headed toward the secretary's desk, her heels clicked on the polished hardwood floors. We need more area rugs, she thought. Nervous clients didn't need that distracting noise.

"Morning, Sally, do you have my schedule?"

Sally looked up from her computer and smiled.

"You've got an easy afternoon, Ardis. Two new clients and your old standby, Debbie."

"Sounds manageable." Ardis collected her mail and started down the hall to her office, dropping her briefcase and purse on the sofa. She straightened the lampshade on her desk and sat down, flipping through the mail; she read only one interesting letter, an invitation to speak about forensic psychology at a national conference next February in San Francisco. Being invited was flattering, plus she would receive an honorarium.

As she glanced at her schedule, Sally buzzed.

"Your husband's on the line."

"Hi, Jim, what's up?"

"Alan didn't make it for his morning class, so I had to step in." She heard the worry in his voice. "He's never missed one since I've known him. Nobody's answering their phone."

Ardis took a deep breath. "I'm worried, Jim. His kids are probably in class, but God knows where Jolene is. You sure he didn't tell you he'd be gone?"

"Not a word."



Tuesday morning, Ardis slipped out of bed early, noting that Jim had gotten up even earlier. Both had slept fitfully much of the night, concerned over Alan's continued absence.

She plodded into the bathroom and groaned after stepping on the scales. Her weight had risen to 130 pounds, too much for her 5 foot, 5 inch frame. She needed more exercise.

After showering and dressing, she trudged downstairs to the kitchen, where Jim was engrossed in the *Daily Record* sports page.

"Morning, sweetheart," he said, laying down newspaper.

She poked a piece of bread in the toaster, poured herself some coffee and sat down. "Heard from Alan?"

Jim frowned. "Still nobody home."

"Have you tried calling Jolene at work?"

"I'll do that today, and try to find Susie." He stood up, gave her a kiss and started for the garage.

Ardis sighed. "What if you don't reach either one?"

He stopped. "I don't want to think about that yet."



As the roar of Jim's old Porsche ground into her ears, Ardis stuck her cell phone in her jacket pocket and stepped outside. She could see, gazing up at the darkening sky and ominous clouds, that rain was in the offing. As she strode down the brick walk, she glanced at the drooping red bougainvillea, thinking it would welcome rain. Hood over her head, she picked up her pace.

After thirty minutes, she turned around and started back home. As she left the uninhabited, manzanita-covered hills and neared Granville Road, she saw a metallic beige SUV swing around the corner. She gasped and started jogging, because the car belonged to the missing Alan.

When she reached her street, she found the car parked in front of her house. It wasn't Alan standing next to the SUV, however, but his nineteen-year-old daughter Susie.

As Ardis approached, she frowned when she saw the troubled look on the young woman's pretty face. Her usually shiny, no-strand-out-of-place hair was in tousled disarray, and her low-slung jeans and cropped T-shirt wrinkled.

"No class this morning, Susie?"

"I just couldn't go, Dr. Jensen." Her eyes brimmed over.

Ardis put her arm around the thin shoulders.

"Let's go inside." She led her into the den.

Between sobs that shook her skinny frame, Susie blurted out, "My dad hasn't been home since Sunday night, I knew Tad was staying with his best friend, and I didn't worry about Dad at first, but he still hasn't come home, and I'm scared." She wiped the tears off her cheeks on her sleeve.

Ardis's stomach tightened. "Jim's been teaching your dad's classes and calling your house."

She looked puzzled. "He didn't leave any messages."

"He didn't want to worry you. Do you think your dad's with Jolene?"

Susie shook her head and slumped back in the chair.

"They hardly speak to each other. I think she's at her boyfriend's."

Ardis stifled a gasp. She hadn't heard Jolene had a boyfriend.

Susie sat up straight. "I want to report him missing."

Ardis's concern grew. If Alan wasn't with his wife, and his daughter didn't know where he was, where was he? A horrible thought crept into her mind. Had his car plunged off one of the perilous back-country hillside roads? She'd keep that to herself, but Susie was right—something had to be done. Alan had been missing too long.

"I'll call Detective Hopkins of the Vista Park Police." She knew him through their having worked together several years ago on a Clarion student's murder case. He'd persuaded his chief to hire her because of her previous forensic psychology work with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and because his small town police force only had enough resources to deal with traffic violations, petty thefts, gang activity and domestic violence calls.

"Detective Hopkins here," he said, his deep voice.

"Still lolling around the briefing room eating donuts?" She liked to tease him.

"You have a problem over there at the funny farm?" he retorted.

"We might. I'm sitting here with a young woman whose father hasn't been home for a few nights. She wants to file a missing person report. I'll put her on."

Ardis listened as Susie gave him her father's description. When finished, she held out the phone.

"He wants to talk to you."

"I didn't want to tell her, Ardis," Hopkins said in a low voice, "but we just got a call about a drowning in the lake next to Sunny Hills Country Club. Crime lab techs are on their way there now. The body fits her dad's description."

Ardis's heart began to pound, but she kept her face impassive.

"I can be at the station in ten minutes."

CHAPTER 2

Ardis stood up as Larry Hopkins walked into the drab, stale-smelling police station anteroom. While he conferred with the behind-the-counter duty officer, she realized she hadn't seen him in more than a year. He looked about the same, except his sandy hair included more gray and his muscular six-foot frame looked bulkier.

"It's been a while, Ardis," he said as he joined her. "How's it going?"

She smiled, but her tone was grave as she said, "Depends on what you tell me."

He frowned. "You mean the drowning?"

"All I told Susie was I was coming down to get the missing person forms." She hoped that was it, not fathoming why Alan would be at Sunny Hills, a playground for the rich rather than a woefully underpaid university professor.

Hopkins scanned her face. "Be prepared. It could be her father's body."

Ardis winced. "You've already seen it?"

"Not yet. I'm on my way to the lake. You wanna go?"

She hesitated, not relishing the thought of visiting a crime scene. However, she wanted to know if the body really was Alan's.

“I’ll follow you in my car.”

He donned his leather jacket and started down the hall toward the parking lot. Ardis sat in her Volvo until she saw his dented maroon Toyota come around the corner then followed him down Vista Park’s main street, past the red-tile-roofed city hall and adjacent fountain-centered plaza. She stayed on his tail as he left Vista Park and reached Linda Verde Road, the main artery to Sunny Hills.

After ten minutes, they reached the narrow road ringing the breeze-rippled azure lake next to the country club. She held her breath as she gazed down at the water through the surrounding fence, thinking of the tragic role it must have played in the drowning.

Driving around its perimeter and down the sloping road to the lake’s club-side entrance, she watched the water lap at the aging gray pilings undergirding the weathered dock. Moored dinghies and motorboats bobbed on the whitecaps. A tangle of rushes and reeds clustered along the shore swayed next to and beneath the murky water. Manzanita and other native shrubbery climbed the banks.

They parked in the lot, behind two black-and-white squad cars, and walked to the county coroner’s van parked on the ramp leading to the dock. Two navy blue-jacketed crime lab staff, clutching investigation kits, hovered over a sopping bloated figure lying on the boards.

As Hopkins and Ardis trudged to the soggy body, he grabbed his nose.

“Phew! Get a whiff of that stink.”

Ardis nodded and breathed through her mouth, thinking there was no smell worse than that of a drowning victim.

“Got a floater, Doc?” Hopkins asked the kneeling medical examiner.

Dr. Pearson peered up at him through wire-rimmed glasses.

"Nobody saw him for at least four days because his body got tangled up in the bushes."

"What do you think?" Hopkins asked, his eyes scanning the water-soaked body.

The medical examiner continued probing.

"Cursory exam tells me drowning. No sign of injuries. Maybe he just slipped and fell."

Hopkins raised his eyebrows. "No foul play?"

"I'll know more after a more thorough exam." The ME stood up, pushed his glasses on top of his head and brushed off his chinos. "I'm done," he said to the techs.

Ardis looked closely at the body. Although the face was so puffy it was virtually unrecognizable, her heart jumped when she saw a beard and hair color identical to Alan's. On the left wrist was a watch just like the one he always wore. *Oh, God, it's him.*

"Any identification in his pockets?" she asked, wanting to make sure.

"They're empty," Pearson responded as the techs loaded the body onto a gurney.

Hopkins turned to her. "If it's the local guy, his daughter's gotta ID him."

Ardis sighed. "I'm pretty sure it's him."

I guess I'll have to tell her. I hate that part of the job."

"I'll go with you."

Pearson said, "I'm outta here," as he climbed into the back of the van and sat down next to the victim. After shutting the doors, the techs eased into the front seats, and the vehicle, red lights flashing, moved slowly toward the parking lot exit on its way to the county morgue.

Hopkins and Ardis somberly returned to their cars. She paused before climbing into hers and looked back at the serene lake, finding it hard to believe it had become

the watery grave for a valued friend and one of Clarion's most well-liked professors.

An hour later, she and Hopkins stood on the Dunning's concrete walk at the smudged front door, waiting for Susie. He paced restlessly while Ardis gazed in surprise at the rundown condition of the small white stucco house and its unkempt lawn. Not remembering when she'd been here last, she knew the house had looked far better than it did today. Its dejected appearance, she thought ruefully, fit in with the sad message she and Hopkins were about to deliver.

The door opened and a jeans-clad Susie faced them. A worried look crept into her eyes as she saw that Ardis wasn't alone.

"Come in," she said in a whispery voice.

"This is Detective Hopkins of the Vista Park Police," Ardis said as they entered and sat down on the sagging sofa in the living room. Susie took the chair across from them, clasped her hands and attempted a smile.

Hopkins took a deep breath. "I have some bad news, Ms. Dunning."

Susie's eyes widened, and her hand went to her mouth. "About my dad?"

"A body was recovered from Sunny Hills Lake this morning. The description sounds like the one you gave me for your father."

Tears welled in her eyes.

"How could he have drowned?"

Ardis moved closer to Susie and put her arms around her. "The police aren't sure yet, sweetheart. They've taken the body to the morgue and need you to identify it."

Susie burst into tears. "I can't."

"Would you rather have Jolene to do it?" Ardis asked, certain the answer would be a resounding "no."

Susie stopped crying and blurted out, "I don't know where that witch is, but she'd probably be glad if my dad is dead." She lowered her head and sobbed quietly.

"I'll go with you," Ardis said, hugging her tighter.

CHAPTER 3

Ardis put her arms around Susie's shoulders as they stood in the hallway next to the medical examiner's autopsy lab. Hopkins leaned against the wall behind them. Although Susie squared her shoulders, as though trying to gather strength to view the body through the still-curtained glass window, Ardis could feel her shivering. The antiseptic environment was chilly, but Ardis knew her trembling was more out of fear of seeing what was on the other side of the window than the temperature.

"I can't do it," Susie said, her voice catching, her face anguished.

"I'm right beside you," Ardis assured her, holding her tightly.

Finally, Susie took a step toward the window, paused, her eyes closed. After a moment, she opened them, pushed strands of hair away from her face and grabbed Ardis's hand. She turned to look beseechingly at Hopkins and nodded. He strode over to the glass and rapped.

As Ardis and Susie moved toward the window, the curtain slowly rose. Ardis's heart beat wildly, and pain shot through her fingers at Susie's clutching grasp. The medical examiner wheeled the covered body close to the

glass and lowered the sheet as far as the upper chest. Susie pressed her hands and face against the window.

“Oh, Daddy,” she cried when she saw his bloated face and matted beard. “What happened to you?” She began to sob, her tears dripping in rivulets down the glass. Suddenly, she said to Hopkins, “I want to go inside.”

“You sure?” Ardis asked, concerned that seeing the condition of her father’s body might be too much for her.

“I have to give him one last kiss,” Susie said.

Hopkins opened the door to the autopsy room and led Susie to the gurney. The overpowering acrid smell of formaldehyde drifted out into the hall, and the ME stepped aside while Susie stared at her father as though memorizing his features. She bent down to kiss his cheek, her tears spilling down her face onto his. After wiping her eyes, she slowly straightened up, turned away and all but ran out of the room.

Heading to a bench along the far wall, she slumped down and bowed her head. Hopkins lingered to confer with the ME before rejoining them in the hall. Ardis joined Susie on the bench as he headed their way.

“I’m sorry, Miss Dunning, but I gotta ask you some questions,” he said, taking a notepad out of his jacket pocket.

“Why?” Susie blew her nose.

“We’re not sure when and how your father died.”

Susie gave him a puzzled look. “Didn’t he drown?”

“The medical examiner hasn’t completed his autopsy.” Hopkins’s voice softened. “Tell me when you saw him last?”

“How else could he have died?” Susie’s voice was filled with uncertainty.

Ardis spoke up.

“Detective, can’t we go someplace else?” Sometimes he was so focused on interrogating people his humanity disappeared. His suggesting Alan’s death might not be an

accident must be more than the already traumatized young woman could bear.

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “Meet me back at the station.”

Stuffing his notepad into his jacket pocket, he started toward the elevator. Ardis and a downcast Susie followed, their heels clicking on the tile floor.

As she drove Susie to the police station, Ardis’s cell phone rang.

“Goddammit, Ardis, we have to change our plans.” Hopkins sounded grim. “The stepmother called. Nearly broke my eardrums raving about not being asked to ID the body.”

Ardis groaned. “Where is she?”

“About to careen down to the station to blow my head off.”

“Call her back and tell her we’ll meet her at her house.”

As she hung up, she remembered the temperamental Jolene was never one to suffer quietly, speculating the woman probably wanted to play the part of a grieving widow so as not to jeopardize her inheritance. She also wondered how Jolene had heard about Alan’s death.

“Susie, we’re going to your house. Jolene is there and angry about the police overlooking her.” She made a U-turn.

Susie slammed her hand on the dashboard. “I don’t want that awful woman around.”

“You might as well face her, and you’ll have Detective Hopkins and me there to protect you.”

“Can we pick up my brother at school first? I don’t want Tad to learn about our dad on TV.”

They rode in silence to the high school Susie slipped out of the car and hurried to the front door. As Ardis waited, she gazed around the shabby school campus. The beige stucco walls needed a coat of paint, and the bare spots in the front lawn and on the playing fields sug-

gested maintenance dollars were scarce. She watched a PE class jog around the track and remembered her son Eric doing the same thing. She sighed, thinking how quickly her son and daughter had grown up and gone away to college.

Seeing Susie and Tad heading her way interrupted her thoughts. His solemn face suggested Susie had already given him the tragic news. He bent his six-foot frame through the back door and slumped down in the seat. Susie slid in next to her, and Ardis drove out to the road.

She glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the top of Tad's spiky-haired head.

"I'm so sorry about your dad."

"I don't understand what happened," he mumbled.

"Nobody does right now."

Susie gave her a worried look.

"You promise you'll help with Jolene?"

"I'll muzzle her, if necessary."

She turned the car onto the Dunnings' street and parked behind Hopkins. Her stomach churned as they walked up to the front door and Susie opened it.

An angry Jolene, arms akimbo, stood facing Hopkins in the middle of the living room. When she saw Susie, she shook a finger in her face.

"You little creep. You should have called me, not the police."

Susie clenched her fists and her face reddened. "I didn't want to disturb you and your boyfriend," she said in an angry tone.

"Excuse me?" Jolene raised her arm as though about to slap her.

Hopkins moved quickly to step between them.

"No rough stuff," he said.

When Jolene lowered her arm he went over to the sectional, sat down and laid his notepad on the coffee

table. Susie followed and sat next to him, her Jolene stomped over to a tweedy chair, plopped down and glared at her.

As Ardis and Tad sat, Hopkins said, "I got questions and not a lotta time. You help me, we finish today. You don't, you come to the station tomorrow."

Jolene leaned back, her thigh-high skirt revealing much of her shapely legs. She smoothed back her wispy blond hair.

"I wanna know if it's really Alan?"

"You drove him to a heart attack, and he drowned," Susie blurted out.

Jolene's eyes narrowed "You..."

Hopkins jaw hardened. "Stifle it, you two. Tad, when did you last see your dad?"

Tad screwed up his face. After a long pause, he said, "At breakfast Friday morning. He was finishing his coffee and about to go to campus."

Ardis asked, "Didn't you wonder why he didn't come home after work?"

He looked down at his scuffed running shoes.

"I went hiking with my friends over the weekend and stayed with them Sunday night. Studied at the library Monday."

Hopkins turned to Susie.

"Last time for you?"

"I went to his office just before lunch on Friday." She wiped her eyes. "He said he was going to a Halloween party that night."

Ardis's nerve ends prickled Alan *had* intended to go to the McLaren's.

"Did he do or say anything unusual?" Hopkins asked.

Susie thought a moment. "One thing he said he was meeting somebody after his last class. He didn't say who."

Ardis's ears perked up, and Hopkins leaned forward.

"Any idea who it was?" he asked.

“Maybe a student or another professor. I don’t know.”

“Mrs. Dunning?” he asked.

“Not a clue.” She crossed her legs and examined her long, flaming-red fingernails.

Ardis made a mental note to ask Jim if he knew.

Hopkins continued. “Did your husband have any health problems? Take medication?”

“If so, he didn’t tell me.” Jolene shrugged.

Ardis groaned to herself. Wives she knew were well aware of their husbands’ physical condition. Jolene’s indifference simply confirmed what Alan had told her three years ago when he asked her advice about his failing marriage.

Susie spoke up, her voice barely audible.

“I know he was overdue for his annual physical.”

“Any idea why he put it off?” Hopkins asked.

“He said he was too busy. I wish I’d kept after him. I think that woman stressed him so much he got sick. He was always, like, taking Roloids.” She glared at Jolene.

Jolene stared back. “Wasn’t me. It was those damn students always calling.”

Well, it was clear. Jolene didn’t much care for kids, including Susie and Tad. No wonder Alan’s stomach bothered him. Or, could it have been something more serious—heart disease, or even cancer? Maybe he wouldn’t go to the doctor because he feared what he’d find out. She cringed at the thought.

Hopkins tapped his fingers on the sectional arm, and asked, “Mrs. Dunning, did your husband usually walk or jog around Sunny Hills Lake?”

Jolene sat up, thrusting her formidable chest forward so the seams of her knit top looked ready to burst.

“I was working all the time to make up for his pitiful salary. Couldn’t tell you what he did.” Her bored expression suggested she didn’t much care.

Tad spoke up. "I worked as a busboy at the club. He played golf, but I never saw him jog."

Suddenly, a phone rang, and Hopkins pulled his cell from his jacket. He listened, said nothing and hung up.

"That was the ME. I gotta go."

"Did he say anything about my dad?" Susie asked, her eyes pleading.

Hopkins shook his head.

"I'll call you."

He started toward the door. Ardis gave Susie a hug and followed him outside.

"Have you released Alan's name to the press?"

He shook his head as he climbed into his car.

"They're sniffing around the chief's office, but until we get the ME's latest report, we're tightlipped." He started to close the door, but she stopped him.

"Call me before you talk to reporters. I want to prepare the campus for the shock." She suspected the report would be grim.

TITLE: *Lethal Lake*

SERIES: An Ardis Jensen Mystery

VOLUME: 2

AUTHOR: Joan Blacher

GENRE: Fiction/Mystery/Women Sleuths

PUBLISHER: Zumaya Publications LLC

WEBSITE: <http://www.zumayapublications.com>

IMPRINT: Enigma

RELEASE DATE: March 2011

ISBN: Paperback: 978-1-936144-74-7; ebook: 978-1-936144-75-4

FORMAT: Trade paperback, perfect bound; \$15.99; 320 pp.; 5x8; ebook, \$6.99

Available wherever fine books are sold

For review: publicity@zumayapublications.com