

A SUPERIOR DEATH

NEVADA BARR



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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Praise for

A SUPERIOR DEATH

“Barr writes in a tangled, rich, descriptive language . . . it has an engrossing pull that gives a vivid feel for the terrain and those who have found their niche in this rather forbidding, gloomy, and chilling landscape . . . A wonderfully satisfying read.”

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—*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

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Hunting Season
Blood Lure
Deep South
Liberty Falling
Blind Descent
Endangered Species
Firestorm
Ill Wind
A Superior Death
Track of the Cat
Bittersweet

NONFICTION

Seeking Enlightenment . . . Hat by Hat

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*For Peter, who always knows who did it and doesn't think that necessarily makes them
bad people*

Special thanks to Daniel Lenihan

CHAPTER 1

These killers of fish, she thought, will do anything. Through the streaming windscreen Anna could just make out a pale shape bobbing in two-meter waves gray as slate and as unforgiving. An acid-green blip on the radar screen confirmed the boat's unwelcome existence. A quarter of a mile to the northeast a second blip told her of yet another fool out on some fool's errand.

She fiddled irritably with the radar, as if she could clear the lake fog by focusing the screen. Her mind flashed on an old acquaintance, a wide-shouldered fellow named Lou, with whom she had argued the appeal—or lack thereof—of Hemingway. Finally in frustration Lou had delivered the ultimate thrust: “You’re a woman. You can’t understand Papa Hemingway.”

Anna banged open her side window, felt the rain on her cheek, running under the cuff of her jacket sleeve. “We don’t understand fishing, either,” she shouted into the wind.

The hull of the Bertram slammed down against the back of a retreating swell. For a moment the bow blocked the windscreen, then dropped away; a false horizon falling sickeningly toward an uncertain finish. In a crashing curtain of water, the boat found the lake once more. Anna swore on impact and thought better of further discourse with the elements. The next pounding might slam her teeth closed on her tongue.

Five weeks before, when she’d been first loosed on Superior with her boating license still crisp and new in her wallet, she’d tried to comfort herself with the engineering specs on the Bertram. It was one of the sturdiest twenty-six-foot vessels made. According to its supporters and the substantiating literature, the Bertram could withstand just about anything short of an enemy torpedo.

On a more kindly lake Anna might have found solace in that assessment. On Superior’s gun-metal waves, the thought of enemy torpedoes seemed the lesser of assorted evils. Torpedoes were prone to human miscalculation. What man could send, woman could dodge. Lake Superior waited. She had plenty of time and lots of fishes to feed.

The *Belle Isle* plowed through the crest of a three-meter wave and, in the seconds of visibility allowed between the beat of water and wiper blades, Anna saw the running lights of a small vessel ahead and fifty yards to the right.

She braced herself between the dash and the butt-high pilot’s bench and picked up the radio mike. “The *Low Dollar*, the *Low Dollar*, this is the *Belle Isle*. Do you read?” Through the garble of static a man’s voice replied: “Yeah, yeah. Is that you over

there?”

Not for the first time Anna marveled at the number of boaters who survived Superior each summer. There were no piloting requirements. Any man, woman, or child who could get his or her hands on a boat was free to drive it out amid the reefs and shoals, commercial liners and weekend fishing vessels. The Coast Guard’s array of warning signs—Diver Down, Shallow Water, Buoy, No Wake—were just so many pretty wayside decorations to half the pilots on the lake. “Go to six-eight.” Anna switched her radio from the hailing frequency to the working channel: “Affirmative, it’s me over here. I’m going to come alongside on your port side. Repeat: port side. On your left,” she threw in for good measure.

“Um . . . ten-four,” came the reply.

For the next few minutes Anna put all of her concentration into feeling the boat, the force of the engines, the buck of the wind and the lift of the water. There were people on the island—Holly Bradshaw, who crewed on the dive boat the *3rd Sister*, Chief Ranger Lucas Vega, all of the old-timers from Fisherman’s Home and Barnums’ Island, who held commercial fishing rights from before Isle Royale had become a national park—who could dock a speedboat to a whirlwind at high tide. Anna was not among this elite.

She missed Gideon, her saddle horse in Texas. Even at his most recalcitrant she could always get him in and out of the paddock without risk of humiliation. The *Belle Isle* took considerably more conning and, she thought grumpily, wasn’t nearly as good company.

The *Low Dollar* hove into sight, riding the slick gray back of a wave. Anna reached out of her side window and shoved a fender down to protect the side of the boat. The stern fender was already out. Leaving Amygdaloid Ranger Station, she’d forgotten to pull it in and it had been banging in the water the whole way.

I’ll never be an old salt, Anna told herself. Sighing inwardly, she pushed right throttle, eased back on left, and sidled up behind the smaller boat. Together they sank into a trough.

The *Low Dollar* wallowed and heaved like a blowsy old woman trying to climb out of a water bed. Her gunwales lay dangerously close to waterline and Anna could see a bucket, a wooden-backed scrub brush, and an empty Heaven Hill bourbon bottle drowning in their own little sea on the flooded deck.

Two men, haggard with fear and the ice-slap of the wind, slogged through the bilge to grapple at the *Belle Isle* with bare hands and boat hooks. “Stand off, stand off, you turkeys,” Anna muttered under her breath. Shouting, even if she could be heard over the wind, would be a waste of time. These men could no more keep their hands off the *Belle Isle* than a drowning man could keep his hands off the proverbial straw.

There was a creak of hull against hull as they jerked the boats together, undoing her careful maneuvering.

The man at the bow, wind-whipped in an oversized Kmart slicker, dragged out a

yellow nylon cord and began lashing the two boats together as if afraid Anna would abandon them.

She shut down to an idle and climbed up the two steps from the cabin. The fisherman at the *Low Dollar's* starboard quarter began to tie the sterns together. "Hey! Hey!" Anna shouted. "Don't you tie my boat to that—" "Piece of junk" was the logical end of the sentence, but a fairly recent lecture from Lucas Vega on the importance of positive visitor contact and maintaining a good relationship with the armies of sport fishermen that invaded the island every summer passed through her thoughts.

"Untie that," she shouted against the wind. "Untie it." The man, probably in his mid-forties but looking older in a shapeless sweatshirt and cap with earflaps, turned a blank face toward her. He stopped tying but didn't begin untying. Instead he looked to his buddy, still wrapping loops of line round and round the bow cleats.

"Hal?" he bleated plaintively, wanting corroboration from a proper authority.

Anna waited, her hands on the *Low Dollar's* gunwale. The old tub had enough buoyancy left that a few more minutes wouldn't make much difference. And, by the sagging flesh of the man's cheeks and his dilated pupils, Anna guessed he was about half shocky with fear and cold.

Hal finished his pile of Boy Scout knots and made his way back the length of the boat. He was younger than the man white-knuckling the stern line, maybe thirty-five. Fear etched hard lines around his eyes and mouth but he looked, if not entirely reasonable, at least able to listen.

"Hi," Anna said calmly. "I'm Anna Pigeon. Hal, I take it?" He nodded dumbly. "Are you the captain of the *Low Dollar*, Hal?" Again the nod. "You've taken on a bit of water, it looks like."

The commonplace words were having their desired effect. The life-and-death look began to fade from his pale blue eyes. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve as if turning on the switch that would allow his lips to function. "Yeah," he managed. "Hit something in Little Todd. Didn't pay much attention. Time we got here we were taking on more'n we could bail. We started radioing then. I think the propeller got dinged and we're taking on water around the shaft."

Normalcy somewhat restored—given the world continued to pitch in a colorless panorama of blustering cloud and billowing wave—Anna spoke again. "Here's what's going to happen, Hal. First put on life jackets. You got any?"

He dragged two disreputable-looking orange vests out from beneath a seat, and the men began buckling them on.

When Hal's hands were free again, Anna said: "You'll need to cut that bow line loose. You . . . ?" She looked at the second man, who was beginning to come to life.

"Kenny. Ken."

"Ken. You untie the stern. Hal, I'm going to hand you my towline. Make it fast to the bow. Then the both of you get aboard my boat. The *Low Dollar's* riding too low in

the water. I'd just as soon nobody was on board. Got all that?"

Kenny started unlooping his line and Hal returned to the bow to tug and jerk at the knots he'd made. The boats climbed a slick cold hill of water, teetered at its summit, then slid down on the other side. Kenny screamed out that his hand was caught between the two hulls, but he was more frightened than hurt.

The yell did a good turn, convincing Hal that slicing through a \$1.59 piece of rope might be worth the time saved fumbling with his desperate knots.

In another minute both men were on board the *Belle Isle* and Anna was powering slowly away.

The towline grew taut, was dragged above the churning of the *Belle's* wake. When the full weight of the sodden *Low Dollar* hit, Anna heard her engines growl over the challenge, then dig deeper into the lake for purchase. The Bertram might not have the personality of a good horse but it had the power of a sizable herd. Anna was grateful: glad to have a good piece of equipment between her and the bottom of Superior, glad to be leaving the oceanlike expanse for the more protected channels and coves of the north shore.

To the right, amid the waves, she could see the rocky outcrop that was Kamloops Island. Had the water been flatter, or the *Low Dollar* less swamped, she might have towed the damaged vessel north of the little island to Amygdaloid Ranger Station where she had tools. Or even around to Rock Harbor where they had everything including telephones and hot and cold running seaplanes. Today, from the feel of the drag, the crippled boat would be lucky to make landfall.

Hal was stationed on deck watching his boat. Kenny sat on the high bench opposite the pilot's, his fingers clamped around the handholds on the dash. Anna had ordered him inside the cabin where he could warm up. His pallor and the clamminess of his flesh as she'd handed him over the gunwale concerned her. Anna stayed standing, her knees slightly bent, her center of gravity forward over her toes, riding the deck like a surfboard.

The fog was lifting. Several miles of shoreline were coming into hazy focus. The twenty miles of cliffs and coves between Little Todd Harbor and Blake's Point were now as familiar to Anna as the desert trails of the Guadalupe Mountains had been. Hoping to combat fear with knowledge, she'd spent her first two weeks as North Shore Ranger creeping about, chart in one hand, wheel in the other, her head hanging out of the window like a dog's from a pickup truck. She had memorized the shape of every bluff, every bay, the location of every shoal and underwater hazard.

On still, sunny days when the lake was more likely to forgive mistakes, she blanked her windows with old maps and crawled from place to place, eyes glued to the radar screen, ears tuned to the clatter of the depth finder. Like most landlubbers, she was less afraid of shallow waters—coves full of stones and half-submerged logs—than she was of deep. Though the brutal cold of Superior would drown her a quarter of a mile from shore just as mercilessly as it would ten miles out, Anna seldom came in from open water without a sense of returning to safety. "Safe harbor"—a phrase she'd heard

bandied about since childhood—had been given a depth of meaning with Lake Superior’s first angry glance.

“You’re new,” Kenny said as if he echoed her thoughts.

“You weren’t here last year.”

Anna refocused on her passenger. “Displaced desert rat,” she replied. “I haven’t been warm or dry since I left Texas.”

“It’s not like it used to be,” he went on as if she’d not spoken. “Used to be people on the lake took care of each other. You’d never pass a vessel in distress. Never. We could’ve sunk out there and nobody’d’ve so much as thrown us a line. People don’t care. All they care about’s getting a campsite before the next guy.”

“Did somebody pass you?” Anna asked, remembering the other blip on her radar. On such an ugly sea, it struck her as strange, though it was not uncommon. The brotherhood of sport fishermen, if it ever existed, was largely relegated to legend now; another link in the chain memory forged back to the mythical good old days.

“Not passed. A white boat with green—I didn’t see the name or I’d report it to the Coast Guard. They were out in the lake near where the *Kamloops* went down, headed east.”

“Maybe they didn’t see you. The fog’s been cat-footing around. Are you sure it wasn’t red and white? The *Third Sister* was heading this direction. They’re diving the *Emperor* tomorrow.”

“Green. And they saw us. They’d’ve had to. Not a sign.

The bastards left us sloshing up to our knees in bilge. They probably heard the rainbow were running in Siskiwit and couldn’t wait. When my dad used to bring me out here—oh, twenty years ago at least . . .”

Anna let him ramble, even remembering to grunt or sigh—listening noises her sister had taught her. “It comforts people,” Molly had said. “Besides, it beats me having to say, ‘Anna, are you still there?’ into the damn phone every five minutes.”

The noises turned out to be worth a thousand times what Molly had paid AT&T for the phone time to teach her. A ranger could get more information from a few well-placed “oh reallys” and “uh-huhs” than from an hour’s by-the-book interrogation. People wanted to talk. Chewing over betrayals, disappointments, and unrealized hopes seemed to do for humans what licking wounds did for animals: a cleansing of poisons, a soothing of hurts.

Anna let Kenny talk, and she made Molly’s therapeutic sounds, but she didn’t listen. She had her own wounds to lick, her own dreams and disappointments. At that moment she would have given a week’s pay for one good hot, dry day, for the sight of one small fence lizard, the scent of sage on the wind.

The moment these thoughts blew in, Anna closed her mind to them. The lake didn’t allow for dreamers, not when the waves were three meters, not when a dilapidated sea anchor hung off the stern. The desert, with its curtains of heat and scoured, star-deep

skies, was for dreaming. This land of mist and dark water took all of one's mind up with the day-to-day chore of staying alive.

In the lee of Kamloops Island the water flattened out reassuringly. Even so, the *Low Dollar* was beginning to drag down the *Belle's* stern. Anna cut throttle to an idle. All forward motion stopped immediately. She went up onto the deck where Hal stood staring morosely at the streaming blue hump that was his boat.

"We aren't going to make the dock at Todd," Anna told him.

"You can't let her sink," he said pitifully. "She's not paid for."

For a moment they stood in silence, the deck rocking gently. There was scarcely any wind, but thin lines of foam whipping white on the water beyond the *Low Dollar* never let them forget they were only there on sufferance.

"I can't tow it any further," Anna said. "I've pushed my equipment—and my luck—more than I should have already. Let's pull her up, untie the tow." She pointed to the ragged shoreline where a finger of rock thrust out parallel to Isle Royale, the main island. In the directionless light it was almost indiscernible from the green of the cliffs and the gray of the water. "Behind that's a cove with a sandy bottom. I think I can nudge your boat in there. It'll settle in shallow water and you can salvage her when there's more daylight."

Having unloosed the towline, Anna took the Bertram around behind the *Low Dollar* and, bow to stern, rooted her into the cove like a pig rooting a bucket through the mud. The *Low Dollar* rested on the sand, keeled over on her side. Anna sent Hal wading ashore to tether the boat to a tree so the lake wouldn't work her loose and lure her back to the deep during the night.

Watching him flounder through the frigid waters, Anna was unsympathetic. It was his boat. He could get his own shoes and socks wet. She looked out past Kamloops Island where waves rolled toward Canada, over the waters she had still to traverse before she would be "home."

"I'm not used to so much water all in a row," she said to Kenny, who had finally ventured out on deck.

He looked past her, then returned to the cabin without a word.

Hal scrambled back on board with an armload of canned goods. Their camp gear was all under a foot of water in the hold. "You won't freeze," Anna promised. There were half a dozen spare sleeping bags on the *Belle Isle* and as many army surplus woolen blankets. In hypothermia country it wasn't excessive.

Halfway around the hump of land that separated the cove from Todd Harbor Camp, Kenny came out of his stupor and demanded they return to the *Low Dollar* to retrieve some "personal" things. After medication, food, and shelter had been eliminated, Anna guessed it was booze and, though she could empathize with the need for a good stiff drink, she refused to go back in the rain and growing dusk to fetch it.

Her refusal cost her any goodwill she might have earned for bringing them and their boat in off the lake. By the time they were settled in the shelter at Little Todd Harbor

with her assurance that she would return with a Homelite pump in the morning, they'd grown almost surly.

Leaving them to deal with their damaged egos, Anna made her escape. Nine-fifteen P.M.: hers would be a late supper. She'd forgotten she was hungry. So far north, the sun was only just setting. It wouldn't be full dark for another thirty minutes—later, had there been no overcast. In June the days seemed to go on forever.

“Three-zero-two en route to Amygdaloid from Todd Harbor,” Anna put in the blind call. The dispatcher in Rock Harbor went off duty at seven, but the call would be taped and, should she go down, at least they'd know where to start diving for the body.

Involuntarily, she shuddered. A body wouldn't be alone down there. There were plenty of ships lying on Superior's bottom. Nearly a dozen provided scuba-diving attractions in the park: the *America*, *Monarch*, *Emperor*, *Algoma*, *Cox*, *Congdon*, *Chisholm*, *Glenlyon*, *Cumberland*, the *Kamloops*. Off her port bow a buoy bobbed, marking the deepest of the wrecks: the *Kamloops*. Her stern rested at one hundred and seventy-five feet, her bow at two hundred and sixty. Divers were discouraged: too deep, too cold, too dangerous.

Five sailors still stood guard in the engine room. Anna had seen an underwater photograph of them. Deep, cold, protected from currents, no creatures to eat them, they swam like ghosts in the old ship. For fifty years they'd drifted alone in the dark. Then in 1977 divers found the wreck. Years of submersion had robbed the bodies of most of their corporeal selves and they were translucent as wraiths.

Think of something else, Anna commanded herself. As she entered the familiar channel between Amygdaloid Island and Belle Isle, and saw the ranger station snugged up safe from storms at the foot of the moss-covered cliff, she allowed herself one short dream of cholla cactus and skies without milky veils of moisture, of a sun with fire to it and food hotter even than that.

After the lion incident at Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Anna had felt the need to move on, to start over. At heart, the Park Service was a bureaucracy and, in the wake of the discoveries, there had been much talk and little action. Still, Anna had worn out her welcome in West Texas. The next move, she promised as she eased the *Bertram* up to the dock, would be back to the Southwest, to the desert. And with a promotion; twenty-two thousand dollars a year was getting harder and harder to live on.

The *3rd Sister*, a handsome forty-foot cabin cruiser with a high-ceilinged pilot's cabin and a flying bridge decked out in red and white pin-striping, was moored across the dock. A hibachi stood unattended on the rough wooden planking of the pier. Anna could smell fish broiling over charcoal.

As she stepped onto the dock, lines in hand, a lithe form bundled in a heavy woolen shirt and a close-fitting fisherman's cap leapt from the deck of the diving boat and took the stern line to make the *Bertram* fast to the dock.

Anna finished tying the bow, tugging the half-knots snug, then coiling the tail of the line out of tripping distance. “Thanks, Holly,” she called down the length of the boat.

The wind took her words and flung them out over the channel. Anna was just as glad. As her helper turned, faced the last light from the western sky, she realized it was Holly's brother, Hawk, the third man in the *Sister's* three-person dive crew.

Many people made the mistake. The twins were so alike they seemed two sides of a coin; male and female brought together just once to share the same species.

At thirty-two, Hawk's sister, Holly, was tall, the cut of her features clean without hardness, her dark hair soft but not fine. Her body was lean and well muscled and her shoulders were broad. Yet only someone crippled with sexual insecurity would have called her mannish.

Hawk was all of this and yet the very essence of masculine. The curve of his shoulders and the blunt efficiency of his wind-chapped hands carried a different message. Where Holly was quick, bright, and strong, he was controlled, thoughtful, exact.

He dropped the line in a perfect coil and came across the planking.

The eyes might take Hawk for Holly, Anna thought, the senses, never. One would have to be as neuter as a snail not to feel the difference.

He stopped beside her, turning to take the sharp edge of the wind onto his own back. "Denny's made too much salad as usual. Plenty of pike," he said, nodding toward the hibachi. "Better join us for supper."

Standing so close, Anna could see the dark stubble on his jaw. A delicate and somehow pleasing scent of Scotch whiskey warmed his breath. She hesitated. Relief at regaining solid ground had released her fatigue.

"No clients today," he added as an incentive. "We dove the *Cox*. Just swam around the bow to get our feet wet. Too rough for tourists. Besides, we needed the dive alone."

"Supper would be good," Anna said. "Bring it inside? I'll light a fire and pour a suitable libation."

Hawk nodded and dropped over the gunwale of the *3rd Sister* as Anna trotted, wind at her back, up the dock and onto the shore of Amygdaloid Island. Home, she thought sourly, but she was glad enough to be there.

The North Shore Ranger Station just missed being utterly charming. Standing foursquare to the dock, the outside was picturesque with a peaked roof and walls of red-brown board and battens. The paint had weathered to almost the same shade as the cliff that backed the building. A central door, flanked by many-paned windows, gave it a look of old-time honesty. Two stovepipes, tilted and tin-hatted against the wind, added a sense of roguish eccentricity.

Inside, the age of the building told in many small comfortless ways. It was divided into two large rooms. The front half was the National Park Service office. Under one window was Anna's desk, a marine radio, and a vintage 1919 safe where the revenues from the state of Michigan fishing licenses were kept, as was Anna's .357 service revolver when it was not on board the *Belle*. Across from the desk three Adirondack-