

TRACEY BATEMAN

thirsty

a novel



Praise for
Thirsty

“*Thirsty* does exactly what a novel like this should do. It grabs you by the throat and doesn’t let go. But it does more than that, deftly delivering truth and beauty in a way that transcends the genre.”

—SIGMUND BROUWER, author of *Broken Angel*

“*Thirsty* is one of those rare treats that not only delves deep into generational issues and addictive behaviors, but also keeps the pages turning. Tracey Bateman writes with a sensitive ear to dialogue and family dynamics, bringing a human, and ultimately redemptive, angle to the vampire story. Well done!”

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“*Thirsty* is more than a run-of-the-mill vampire story. I loved the way Tracey Bateman incorporated the struggle against alcoholism into the theme. Great writing and a compelling read!”

—COLLEEN COBLE, author of *Lonestar Secrets* and the Rock Harbor series

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P R E S S

THIRSTY

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The characters and events in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

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*To the memory of Rodney Devine Sr.
My dad.*



PART ONE

*Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of
my own life, or whether that station will be
held by anybody else, these pages must
show. . .*

CHARLES DICKENS, *David Copperfield*

PROLOGUE

May 1992

Thick bass blared through amped-up speakers and drew Markus from his slumber. In the murky deep of his cave, he opened his eyes, instantly awake. His keen ears picked out the voices of eager girls and boasting boys. Dancing, whispering, giggling. Mating rituals. They were at least half a mile away, but the sound carried easily. Too easily for his liking.

He shoved out a full breath and angled to his feet. In the obscurity of his cramped quarters he stooped, unable to stand to his full height without scuffing his head against the top of the cave.

The heady scent of bodies brimming with life grazed the edge of his senses, guiding him to the mouth of the cave and just beyond. Flesh and blood mingled with sweat, campfire, roasting hot dogs, and booze. The converging smells dizzied him. And annoyed him.

He wrapped his ragged overcoat about him, a defense against the cool spring night, and moved away from the pounding noise and scent of humanity that both repelled and tempted him at the same time, a contradiction that had led, in part, to his retreat from society in the first place.

His booted feet stepped heavily through the woods, but Markus remained indifferent to the crackling branches and hard pine cones on the ground. For almost two decades he'd made his home here in the heart of the Ozarks. Safe in his cave above the river, tucked behind the security of oaks, pines, and cottonwoods.

No one ever came to this part of his woods. No hunters except him, no hikers, no one. That was the way it must remain. He needed the solitude.

The world he'd known had lost its charm. Beauty and grace had all but disappeared. The day he finally surrendered to this inevitable truth, he had retreated to this life of solitude where the chaos didn't touch him. Usually.

The sound of someone crashing through the woods caused him to stop. It would be best for him to remain unseen. He

wouldn't be forced into any hasty decisions. A girl staggered into the open, her eyes dull, deep sobs violently wrenching her stomach.

Markus watched her, scrutinizing her movements. She staggered again. Definitely intoxicated.

Bending at the waist, the girl moaned and retched. When she was spent, she stumbled a few steps, lost her balance, and fell onto a bed of downed branches and dead leaves, remnants of winter. She lay on her stomach where she'd fallen, resting her cheek against her arms. Markus hung back, still watching. He doubted she'd be much trouble for him in her current state.

Black hair slid over her shoulder, reminding him so much of the one he loved. He tried to shove away the image of the perfect face, sweet smile, supple skin. Each time he remembered her, it drove him deeper into despair. This girl looked so much like her he could hardly keep from calling out her name.

Kimana.

There, in the dim of twilight, he remembered her lovely face and couldn't bury his longing.

"Nina!" The shout came from a male who, judging from the crack in his voice, wasn't quite through puberty. Only sixteen or seventeen.

Markus tensed, his reflexes poised for response, but thankfully the control he'd cultivated over years returned.

“Ugh. Stephan,” the girl mumbled without lifting her head or opening her eyes.

Markus moved quickly into the shadow of an evergreen as a boy crashed through the trees and stumbled over the girl. He caught his balance, then knelt beside her. “Nina, are you okay?”

“Go away.”

“I’m not leaving you out here alone.” The boy touched her shoulder.

She slapped at him without landing a blow. “Keep your hands off me.”

The boy reached out again. She shot up to her knees and stared at him, her eyes wild, her hair tangled. The combination made her look untamed. His stomach tightened.

“I said stay away!”

The kid raised his hands in surrender. He stood slowly, as though a string attached to his shoulders pulled him to his feet. “I’ll take you back to the river.”

“I don’t need your help.” She used a couple of slurred profanities to articulate her opinion of him.

He paused. “I can’t leave you here all by yourself.”

“A little late to care about me now, isn’t it?”

Shoving his hands into the front pockets of his loose-fitting jeans, the boy released a frustrated sigh. “Nina...”

“Just go!”

Anger flashed across his half-man, half-boy face. "Fine. I'm going."

Markus watched them. She was behaving foolishly. The boy genuinely wanted to help her, Markus believed. He couldn't feel that way about his own motivations.

The girl lay back, clearly dismissing the kid. Markus almost felt sorry for him. Shaking his head, the boy backed away reluctantly.

When he had disappeared from sight, Markus stepped softly across the crackling leaves and branches. The girl's even breathing indicated she'd either passed out or fallen asleep. Either way, she was unconscious. Markus squatted next to her.

The girl sighed, and Markus's gaze darted to her round face. Dark, straight hair streamed down her neck, sticking to her wet cheeks. His pulse thudded in his throat as he stared at her. Long, wet lashes grazed the tops of her cheeks.

The lines of time converged, and he saw his Indian princess lying there on the forest floor. He longed for her in a way that made his gut tighten and his heart reach out to this girl who reminded him so much of her.

Perhaps for that reason, he scooped her into his arms and began to walk toward his cave. She couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds. So small and helpless. Her head lolled back over his arm, exposing the full length of her neck. A long,

slow shudder made its way up his body. With discipline cultivated over many years, he forced his attention to the path before him.

He reached his cave quickly and moved through the dark to a thick pallet of down-filled sleeping bags and quilts. Gently, almost reverently, he lowered the girl. Her lips parted, releasing a sigh.

He held his breath. If she woke and started screaming, he'd have no choice but to kill her. The thought repulsed him. Kimana's face seemed to mold into hers, and he fingered a strand of the silky black hair. If only he'd had this control back then.

She reeked of booze. He'd never cared for the smell or taste of alcohol, but the other scent wafting from her played havoc with his senses.

He paced the cave, struggling for control, his resolve slipping. A man could only take so much. Instinct, strong and without reason, took over, and he lost his battle. He knelt over her, reached out his forefinger, and drew a line down the side of her neck. His heart rate picked up in anticipation, like a young lover preparing for a first kiss.

Her eyes opened and looked up at him, dulled and confused. She moaned and her eyelids fluttered, then closed once more.

Easy, compliant prey. So why did he hesitate?

Her high cheekbones and full lips reminded him so much of Kimana, he hurt.

He drew back his emotions. He was being a fool. This girl was

not the love he'd lost. She was nothing more than a child who'd had too much to drink and gotten herself into a situation she could not control. It was time to end this.

In the distance, he heard frantic cries. "Cops! Get out of here!" Engines fired, and he heard the sound of tires spitting gravel and sand as the teens abandoned the party. He glanced back at the girl. Didn't they know she was missing?

He made a quick decision—not at all difficult—and took her in his arms once more. She whimpered and snuggled closer. Her breath seeped through his shirt, warming the flesh just above his heart. Pressing her head close to his chest, he sped down the ravine to the riverbank and laid her next to the still burning campfire. The police would find her. She might get into some trouble, but if he kept her with him much longer, he wouldn't be able to control his hunger. As it was, he'd spent too much time watching her. Her scent lingered on his arms, his chest.

Moments later, he watched from the trees above the bank as two police cars skidded to a halt and four officers jumped out. They looked around, clearly disappointed to have been thwarted in their effort to bust the group of wayward teens. A middle-aged male officer noticed the girl.

"Who is it, Dan?" another officer called out.

"One of the Parker girls."

"She alive?"

“Just passed out.”

One of the cops snorted. “Apple don’t fall far from the tree.”

“She’s just a kid, Tony. Lots of kids party and drink too much. Doesn’t mean they’re going to be the town drunk.”

“Don’t mean she ain’t, either.”

“You two shut up and call the paramedics. She isn’t moving at all. I want to get her checked out before we send her home to sleep it off.”

From his perch, Markus waited, watching over the beautiful girl. He stayed until the lights of the ambulance flashed through the trees as it sped away.

Long after she was gone, her scent lingered in his clothing, and he could still feel her warm breath and the weight of her small body in his arms.

CHAPTER ONE

I went up in a hot-air balloon once, when I was ten. The fair had come to Abbey Hills, and all the kids were buzzing about the ride. Everyone would be talking about it the next day, and I was determined that, for once, I'd have something to talk about too.

The thing was, I knew I'd never get to go if I asked, so I snatched five dollars from Mom's purse and went anyway. Mom blamed Dad. He'd taken her last five dollars before when the shakes got the better of him and the call of whiskey grew too loud to ignore. He never even defended himself against the accusation. Just apologized and promised to do better. I felt a little guilty about that, but nothing could have kept me from that balloon ride.

I knew I'd made a mistake the second I climbed into the basket and outrageous fear took hold of my gut. I could have gotten off before the rope released and lift took over, but I didn't.

Good choices aren't my strong suit.

Funny how much a person could sober up between last call and time to call a cab. An hour ago, when Nina had devised the brilliant idea of surprising Hunt and spending Christmas with him and the kids, she'd confidently imagined the warmth of his open arms. But now, as she stood on his doorstep watching the cab drive away into the dark, wee hours of the morning, she realized it had been an incredibly dumb idea. That was the problem with being only a little drunk—a girl was clear enough to see how stupid she was but not clear enough to make a smart decision.

An icy splash of wind shot across the porch, making her shiver as she waffled between knocking and risking the disgusted look on Hunt's face and running down the street in three-inch heels after the cab that had just rounded the corner.

Resolute, she ignored the voice telling her to sit on the porch all night and freeze to death. In the morning, Hunt would find her frozen corpse, and then wouldn't everyone be sorry for the way they'd treated her?

She knocked, taking extra care to avoid brushing against the eleven-year-old Christmas wreath—still as ugly as the day Hunt's

mother had given it to her. Stomping her feet on the porch, she hugged her body to ward off the cold. Patience had never been her thing. And at thirty-four years old, she wasn't likely to develop any, so everyone could just deal with it.

Come on, Hunt. It's the North Pole out here.

She raised her fist again. The porch light snapped on just as she was about to knock a second time.

Relief poured through her, feeling a lot like that first warm rush of a semi-dry white wine. Pushing back her hair, she arranged her mouth into the smile she knew showed off her dimple best.

Please be happy to see me. A foolish hope, she knew, considering he had divorced her six months ago.

In view of that, she'd settle for *not ticked*.

The door opened. Nina's stomach took a dive at Hunt's dark, sleep-tossed hair. Why did he have to look so good?

He leaned against the door frame, arms crossed. "It's two in the morning. What do you think you're doing?"

Not the greeting she'd been praying for, but then prayer wasn't really her thing. "You invited me for Christmas Eve." Her hands trembled. She shoved them into the pockets of her black leather jacket. It had been a Christmas present from him last year, just before he'd finally ended things between them for good. Nice consolation prize.

She raised her chin. *Buck up, Nina. Never let him see you cry.*

“The party’s been over for a long time. You missed it.” His eyes raked up and down her body, and not in a flattering way. “Looks like you made a party somewhere else, though.”

She shrugged.

“Well, you missed out. Meagan and Adam are in bed. Sleeping.”

“I figured. Guess I shouldn’t have come.”

“Probably not.”

“Okay.” An awkward silence thickened the icy air between them. “So I shouldn’t have come.” Nina dimpled. Time to turn on the charm. “But now that I’m here, do you think I can stay? I’d like to be here in the morning when the kids wake up.”

“No, Nina. Not when you’ve been drinking.”

“I jus’ want to see them open their presents.” Nina bit her lip hard. She’d slurred. Hunt hated that.

His mouth tightened, eyes cold. He didn’t bother to respond.

She waved toward the street. “Well, my cab seems to have gone, so I really don’t have any choice but to stay.”

He drew a long, drawn-out breath. His *God, give me patience* breath. “The cab may be gone, but you’ve still been drinking.”

“You don’t have to keep saying that!” Nina closed her eyes and gained control. “I know I’ve been drinking a little, but I know better than to come over when I’m drunk. See?” She took three steps across the porch, then three steps back. Too bad her legs had crossed as she walked. Twice. Her lips curved. A conscious effort. “Dang heels.”

“Right.” He rubbed his chin, his sign of weariness. “I’ll call another cab.”

She grabbed his arm before he could turn away. “Hunt.”

Heat radiated from the touch, and their eyes met. His beautiful pools of blue, so honest in their search. He seemed to always be searching. For the woman she used to be? Nina wondered if he was remembering when he still cared. Every second of their relationship replayed in her mind. A heartbeat, a lifetime. Christmas mornings around the tree, peals of excitement, loving. Each wonderful second of joy. The heart-ripping torture of a home torn apart with her own hands. Nina softened her grip to a light touch. “Pretty please? Just this once. For me?”

She knew she’d said the wrong thing even before his face hardened and his eyes lost the softness that only a second ago had weakened her knees.

“No,” he said, his voice ice, even colder than the god-awful air. “You can come in and wait for the cab if you want.”

In the face of such blatant and harsh rejection, sarcasm worked its way into her tone. “I thought you didn’t want me in your precious house.”

“I don’t. But I don’t want you getting sick out here in the cold either.” He stepped aside to let her in. “Come on.”

“No, thanks.” Too bad she’d given up smoking. Now would have been a great time to nonchalantly light a cigarette and blow smoke in his self-righteous face.

“Suit yourself. But try not to make a scene. I saw Mr. Taylor staring out his window. You don’t want him calling the cops again.”

Nina turned and looked up at the second-story window in the house across the street. The curtain fluttered. “Nosy old piss ant.”

Hunt grinned. “I’ll be right back.” He peered closely at her, and Nina’s breath stilled at the softness in his face. “Be good.”

“Please let me stay,” she whispered.

His lips flattened into a grim line, and his guard flew back up. “You just can’t leave well enough alone, can you?”

Nina’s eyes swam as he stepped inside and closed the door. She stared at the big, blurry wreath bow in front of her as she tried to wrap her foggy brain around the facts. Instead of sinking into the pillow-top mattress in the guest bedroom at the top of the stairs and waking to happy squeals from her kids, she’d be waking up to a messy studio apartment and *A Christmas Story* marathon on cable.

Hunt wasn’t being fair.

She shook as anger ignited in her gut. The elaborate wreath stared back at her, a mocking reminder that she’d never been good enough for Hunt.

She’d always hated that ugly, gaudy thing. Hunt’s mother had given it to them their first Christmas together. “Now don’t be offended, hon, but Christmas just isn’t Christmas without a wreath hanging on the front door.”

Well, when you’d been working three jobs to pay for school

and raising a daughter alone, there wasn't much leftover for fancy lobster dinners and fifty-dollar wreaths, was there?

Every Christmas of their eleven years together, Nina's sense of duty had walked her to the door and lifted her arms as she hung the wreath on it. Well, guess what?

She reached up, snatched the ugly, fake-pine, bell-and-bauble-laden monstrosity from its nail and began ripping it apart. She yanked and pulled, tore and tugged until all that remained in her hand was the shredded bow. Elation exploded through her, shooting a flood of laughter from her lips.

"Nina!"

She hadn't heard Hunt open the door. Still reeling with guilty pleasure, Nina turned to face him, but he wasn't looking at her. Instead, his bewildered gaze rested on the remnants of the wreath. Slowly, he raised his head and looked at her.

Fever rose to her cheeks. "You know I always hated it."

His silent stare shouted through the foggy mist in her brain.

"Don't look at me like that." Like she was something to be pitied.

"Nina, this has to stop. What's it going to take? You need—"

"No, don't tell me. Let me guess. I need religion." Nina threw the wrinkled bow onto the porch. It landed in the middle of the mangled wreath.

"I wasn't going to say that." Hunt's quiet voice made Nina's chest tighten.

“Good. Because I tried that once, remember? That God of yours never bothered showing up.”

“What do you want me to say?” He shook his head, helpless.

“Nothing, Hunt.” Hunt opened his mouth, but she held up her hand. “I mean it. I don’t want you to say anything.”

He crossed the threshold and stepped onto the porch. “At least come inside and wait for the cab.”

She lifted her chin, but a shiver claimed her body. Why couldn’t she catch a break?

“Come on, Nina. It’s starting to ice again.”

“No, thanks. I’d rather wait out here. I’m too mad to feel the cold.”

“Your teeth are chattering. Stop being so stubborn.”

“I said no.” She glared at him. “Why can’t you just take no for an answer? We’re divorced, remember? I don’t have to follow your every command.”

His nostrils flared and his eyes glinted. Angry calm. He was good at it. “No one expects you to follow my command. Least of all me. And you might want to lower your voice.” His fingers closed around her arm.

Nina yanked free of his grasp and stumbled down the steps. Her three-inch heel turned. She fought for balance but fell hard onto the gravel path.

“Nina!” Hunt rushed from the porch, skipping the last two steps. He knelt at her feet and unbuckled her strappy sandals.

“Leave me alone.” She kicked at the air, a warning that the next one would make contact with him.

“Stop being stupid.”

“Please, Hunt,” she whispered through a lump in her throat. Couldn’t he see she was humiliated?

He sat back, palms forward in surrender. “Okay, fine.” She could hear his weariness.

Nina hauled herself up and stumbled, barely avoiding crashing back to the ground. Hunt’s warm, familiar arm slid around her waist. Nina closed her eyes and tried not to give in to the desire to bury her face in his neck and take in his scent.

“Come inside and let me take a look at it,” he said.

She fought the darkness rushing in around her eyes. Steeling herself against the pain, she pushed her words through clenched teeth. “Not even if there were a bone sticking through my skin and blood gushing on the ground, *Dr. Hunter*.”

“Nice dramatics. I’m impressed.”

Panic clutched at her as Hunt shoved her shoes into her hands and lifted her into his arms without waiting for permission. She knew that look in his eyes. He was like the Terminator. She’d need a vat of acid to stop him when he was committed to something.

Ironic. She’d been the acid in their relationship.

Headlights beamed toward them from the end of the street. With Nina still in his arms, Hunt turned toward the vehicle. “That must be your cab. Go home and sleep this off. You can

come for dessert tomorrow night after the kids and I get back from my parents’.”

“Thanks for the crumbs off your table.”

Hunt shrugged. “Take it or leave it.”

“Put me down.”

He obliged. “Want me to help you to the cab?”

“No.”

“Okay then. Meggie and Adam will be awake in a couple hours. I’m going to bed.”

“I can’t believe how mean you’re being, Hunt. They’re my kids too.”

“I never said they weren’t.” His tone had reverted back to caution, ready to defend himself if necessary. “But when you’ve been drinking, you will not see them. I’ll never give in on that point. It would be best for everyone involved if you’d save yourself the trouble of even trying.”

A comeback was out of the question. She didn’t have it in her to mentally spar with him. She wrapped her fist around her shoes. Who cared if he didn’t want her? Who needed Hunt, anyway?

Her mind didn’t have time to catch up with her action as she lifted and flung both shoes away from her. One landed harmlessly on the porch. But the other. . . Nina gasped at the shatter of glass.

Her wide eyes found Hunt’s profile. He stared at his obliterated front window, the muscle in his jaw jumping as he clenched

and unclenched his back teeth. Blue and red lights flashed in the driveway, accompanied by the blip of a warning siren.

“Mommy? What crashed?”

Nina turned, her mind barely registering the police car at the sound of her son’s voice. Seven-year-old Adam stood in the doorway, his eyes sleepy and confused.

“It was nothing, baby.” She limped forward despite her screaming ankle. “The dumb window just broke on accident. But Daddy’s going to cover it up in a minute.” She stopped before the steps, not wanting to chance a stagger. Forcing gaiety into her voice, she grinned. “You best get back to bed. Santa’s going to be here soon, and you know what’ll happen if he finds you awake.”

Adam’s blue eyes widened as he looked toward the sky for signs of the jolly elf, then back to Nina. “Will you tuck me in?”

Hunt spoke up before Nina could respond. “Mommy has to go, sport, but I’ll be up in a second.”

Adam’s face clouded with disappointment, and he turned to go back upstairs. Then his eyes hit the shredded bow and mangled fake pine. “The wreath!”

He raised a chubby foot. Anticipating the move, Nina sprang forward, but Hunt was a beat ahead of her.

“Don’t move, Adam!” Hunt rushed barefoot up the steps and snatched up their son before Adam could bring his foot down on the broken glass that covered the porch.

Once again, Hunt had saved one of their children from her stupidity.

The sound of boots crunching on the gravel driveway made Nina turn away from the sight of her son being cuddled in his father's arms.

"Good evening, folks." A police officer strode toward them, his hand resting on his belt. "What seems to be the problem?"

Nina stared at Hunt. "I thought you were calling a cab."

"I did call a cab. Mr. Taylor must have called the cops. He did warn you last time."

"He didn't call," said a new voice. "I did."

Nina and Hunt turned.

"Meg?" Nina said, her voice suddenly small. "You called them?"

Their fifteen-year-old daughter stood in the doorway, wearing a pair of flannel pants and a T-shirt, shivering and wrapped in her own arms.

Nina expected Hunt to chastise the teen, but instead he spoke in the soothing tone he'd used when Meg was little and woke up screaming from night terrors. "It's okay, Meg."

Nina tried to hang on to her resentment, but Meggie did look a little white. She had probably awakened to their arguing and gotten scared. "Yeah, it's okay, Meggie."

No matter who called the police, Nina just wanted to get rid

of this guy so she could help with damage control for the kids. Remorse flooded her. How could she have been so stupid?

Practicing her smile as she turned to the cop, she widened her eyes and concentrated on not sounding drunk. "Officer, there's been a bit of a mix-up here tonight."

"A mix-up, eh?" The officer smirked. Nina decided smirking at a person you're about to arrest should be illegal. What happened to protect and serve?

"The only mix-up is in her mind." Hugging Adam close, Hunt stepped forward. "My ex-wife came to my house drunk, destroyed my wreath, and as I'm sure you saw, threw her shoe through my window, scaring the kids half to death."

Nina's mouth dropped open. Hunt was throwing her under the bus?

The officer nodded, eyeing her sternly. "I saw."

Nina gave him a sheepish grin. "I was provoked. And it's not a very sturdy window. We—um—always said it was flimsy."

The officer stepped forward. "Place your hands behind your back, ma'am."

"You're arresting me?" Nina stared at Hunt. "You're just going to let him haul me off to jail like a common thug? In front of our kids?"

"Good night, Nina." Hunt walked toward the door, limping slightly.

“Good night? What are you talking about? Hunt!”

He ignored her, instead addressing the officer. “She hurt her ankle. Could you make sure someone takes a look at it? It looks fairly bruised and swollen. A sprain, most likely.”

“Will do.”

The icy air wrapped around Nina as Hunt cradled Adam and headed for the front door.

“How much have you had to drink tonight, ma’am?” the police officer asked.

“None of your business,” Nina snapped. “Hunt, what’s going on? Tell him you don’t want me arrested.”

Hunt waited for Meg to step aside so he could enter. As she turned into the house, Meg looked over her shoulder. Anger mottled her face, and her glare silenced Nina, filling her with shame.

“Is Mommy going to jail?” Adam’s words trembled in his throat.

Nina didn’t catch Hunt’s reply as he stepped across the glass and entered the house. The door closed with a solid thud.

Bewilderment left Nina too weak to struggle against the cold steel circling her wrists. Pain pinched her right shoulder as her arms stretched unnaturally behind her back. Disbelief hauled her to the squad car, despite her screaming ankle. She didn’t resist as the officer folded her like a lawn chair into the backseat.

She turned toward the house as they drove away, hoping to find some evidence that Hunt was watching. That he still cared.

The hallway light snapped off.

Turning, she settled into the seat for the silent ride to the police station. She'd been arrested twice before but had never made it to lockup. Still, she'd watched enough Lifetime movies to know what went on, and shards of fear sliced through her as her imagination went wild. But those violent images weren't the worst things that could happen.

Her shoulders slumped, and she blinked away a tear. If she'd really, truly driven Hunt to the end of his rope—if he truly didn't care anymore—then they might as well give her the chair, because her life was over.