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COLLEEN COBLE

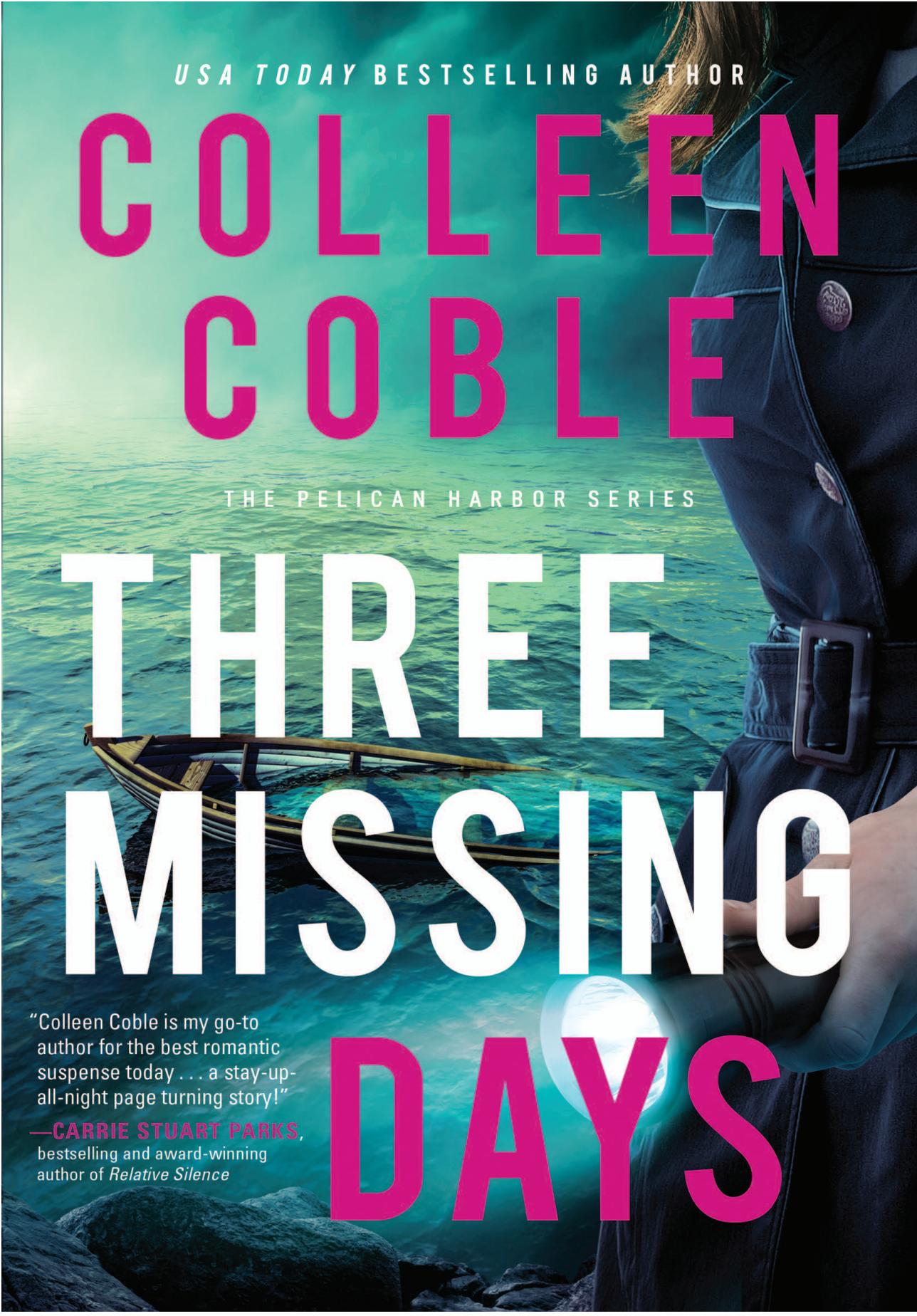
THE PELICAN HARBOR SERIES

THREE MISSING

DAYS

"Colleen Coble is my go-to author for the best romantic suspense today . . . a stay-up-all-night page turning story!"

—**CARRIE STUART PARKS**,
bestselling and award-winning
author of *Relative Silence*



ONE

I know what you did.”

The muffled voice on her phone raised the hair on the back of Gail Briscoe’s head, and she swiped the perspiration from her forehead with the back of her hand. “Look, I’ve reported these calls. Don’t call me again.”

She ended the call with a hard finger punch on the screen and stepped onto her front porch. The late-May Alabama air wrapped her in a blanket of heat and humidity, and she couldn’t wait to wash it off. She should have left the light on before she went for her predawn run. The darkness pressing against her isolated home sent a shudder down her back, and she fumbled her way inside. Welcome light flooded the entry, and she locked the door and the dead bolt with a decisive click that lifted her confidence.

She stared at the number on the now-silent phone. The drugstore again. Though there weren’t many pay phones around anymore, the old soda shop and drugstore still boasted a heavy black phone installed back in the sixties. The caller always used it, and so far, no one had seen who was making the calls. The pay phone was located off an alley behind the store by a Dumpster so it was out of sight.

The guy's accusation was getting old. Counting today, this made seven calls with the same message. Could he possibly know about the investigation? She rejected the thought before it had a chance to grow. It wasn't public knowledge, and it would be over soon. She clenched her hands and chewed on her bottom lip. She had to be vindicated.

But who could it be, and what did he want?

Leaving a trail of sweaty yoga shorts and a tee behind her, she marched to the bathroom and turned the spray to lukewarm before she stepped into the shower. The temperature shocked her overheated skin in a pleasant way, and within moments she was cooled down. She increased the temperature a bit and let the water sluice over her hair.

As she washed, she watched several long strands of brown hair swirl down the drain as she considered the caller's accusation. The police had promised to put a wiretap on her phone, but so far the guy hadn't stayed on the phone long enough for a trace to work. And it was Gail's own fault. She should have talked with him more to string out the time.

She dried off and wrapped her hair in a turban, then pulled on capris and a top. Her phone vibrated again. She snatched it up and glanced at the screen. Augusta Richards.

"I got another call, Detective. Same phone at the drugstore. Could you set up a camera there?"

"I hope I'm not calling too early, and I don't think that's necessary. The owner just told me that old pay phone is being removed later today. Maybe that will deter the guy. It's the only pay phone in town. He'll have to use something else if he calls again."

"He could get a burner phone."

"He might," the detective admitted. "What did he say?"

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“The same thing—‘I know what you did.’”

“Do you have any idea what it means?”

Gail flicked her gaze away to look out the window, where the first colors of the sunrise limned the trees. “Not a clue.”

“Make sure you lock your doors and windows. You’re all alone out there.”

“Already locked. Thanks, Detective.” Gail ended the call.

Ever since Nicole Pearson’s body had been found a couple of months ago, no one needed to remind Gail she lived down a dirt road with no next-door neighbors. No one wanted to buy the neighboring place after such a lurid death, so the area remained secluded other than a couple of houses about a mile away and out closer to the main road.

She stood back from the window. It was still too dark to see.

Was someone out there?

Pull back the reins on your imagination. But once the shudders started, they wouldn’t stop. Her hands shaking, she left her bedroom and went to pour herself a cup of coffee with a generous splash of half-and-half from the fridge. She had a stack of lab orders to process, and she couldn’t let her nerves derail her work.

The cups rattled as she snatched one from the cupboard. The coffee sloshed over the rim when she poured it, then she took a big gulp of coffee. It burned all the way down her throat, and tears stung her eyes as she sputtered. The heat settled her though, and she checked the locks again before she headed to her home office with her coffee.

No one could see in this tiny cubicle with no window, but she rubbed the back of her neck and shivered. She’d work for an hour, then go into the lab. The familiar ranges and numbers comforted her. She sipped her coffee and began to plow through the stack of

papers. Her eyes kept getting heavy. Weird. Normally she woke raring to go every morning.

Maybe she needed more coffee. She stretched out her neck and back and picked up the empty coffee cup.

Gail touched the doorknob and cried out. She stuck her first two fingers in her mouth. *What on earth?*

The door radiated heat. She took a step back as she tried to puzzle out what was happening, but her brain couldn't process it at first. Then tendrils of smoke oozed from under the door in a deadly fog.

Fire. The house was on fire.

She spun back toward the desk, but there was nothing she could use to protect herself. There was no way of egress except through that door.

If she wanted to escape, she'd have to face the inferno on the other side.

She snatched a throw blanket from the chair and threw it over her head, then ran for the door before she lost her courage. When she yanked it open, a wall of flames greeted her, but she spied a pathway down the hall to her bedroom. Ducking her head, she screamed out a war cry and plowed through the flames.

In moments she was in the hall where the smoke wasn't so thick. She pulled in a deep breath as she ran for her bedroom. She felt the cool air as soon as she stepped inside and shut the door behind her. Too late she realized the window was open, and a figure stepped from the closet.

Something hard came down on her head, and darkness descended.

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“I want you to leave my husband alone.”

Chief of Police Jane Hardy turned toward the snippy female voice that carried over the sound of the milk frother and blew away the good feelings induced by the aroma of coffee. The vitriol belonged to Lauren Dixon.

And was directed at *her*.

Her police dog, Parker, heard the note of aggression too and stepped in front of her with a soft growl. The ruff of his red fur stood at attention, and Jane put her hand on his head to calm him.

Dressed in a baby-blue shirt and tight jeans, the blonde exuded sex appeal. Her confidence was as compelling as her silky locks and sinuous long legs.

Lauren jabbed a finger toward Jane. “I’m talking to you, *Chief* Hardy. Defender of justice and keeper of the peace. You’re not doing a very good job of it in the personal arena.”

A wave of heat surged up Jane’s neck, and she glanced around to see several Pelican Brews patrons standing nearby and listening with avid expressions. The wail of a fire engine rose above the din in the room. She snatched her coffee and beignet off the high bar and exited the coffee shop with Parker on her heels.

Her forehead beaded with perspiration from the early morning sunlight before she reached the shade of the park down the street. She found an outdoor café table far away from any other people.

Lauren followed as Jane had hoped. If they had to have this conversation, she would rather it be in private. Jane plunked her breakfast onto the small black wrought-iron table and turned to face Lauren again. Parker stepped between them.

Jane tipped up her chin. “I have nothing to say to you, Lauren. Your fight with Reid has nothing to do with me.”

But they both knew it did. Lauren's ex-husband, Reid Dixon, was the father of Jane's fifteen-year-old son. Their past was murky and convoluted, and Jane wished they could find their way without entangling themselves in Lauren's machinations.

Lauren had disappeared eight years ago, and after seven years, Reid had her declared legally dead. Her appearance had upended everything. Something Lauren clearly liked doing.

Lauren tossed her blonde head and stared at Jane through narrowed green eyes. "Reid is still married to me."

"You're legally dead, Lauren. It was what you wanted. You walked away from Reid and Will without a thought. You haven't so much as called to check on either of them. Not even Will."

The glint in the woman's eyes dimmed a bit. "There were circumstances that prevented me."

"You were tied up in a cabin with no phone for almost eight years? In a place with no internet? Out of the country?"

Lauren's gaze didn't flicker this time, and she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's something Reid and I will have to work out and has nothing to do with you."

"Will is *my* son."

"He's legally mine. I adopted him."

While Jane wasn't sure if she'd fight for Reid, she'd do battle with her last breath for the son she'd thought was dead for fifteen years. "He doesn't want to see you, Lauren, and can you blame him? He was devastated by your abandonment."

"I can make it up to him if you step out of the picture."

"Step out of the picture? He's *my son!* I carried him in my body for nine months while you ran off at the first opportunity."

"Oh, you're the perfect mother, aren't you? Yet you had no contact with him for most of his life."

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Jane flinched. “You have no idea what happened all those years ago. Reid never told you.”

This time Lauren flinched. “I’ll admit your ghost was always between us. Reid didn’t like to talk about the past and never even told me your name. If you have any morals at all, you’ll give us space to work out our differences.”

Jane gasped. “The marriage is over. Your lies are easy to spot. All you want is Reid’s money.”

Lauren’s smirk held all the confidence in the world. “That’s not what my attorney says. I came back in time to set aside the decree. Check out Chapter 156 in Nevada law if you don’t believe me. It means we’re still married, and I still own half of Reid’s property. It’s like he never filed that paper at all. I only want what is due to me.”

The blood drained from Jane’s face, and she shook her head. “That’s not true.”

“Reid knows. My attorney filled his lawyer in two weeks ago. Looks like he’s keeping secrets from more than just me.”

Lauren spun on her high heels and walked away with her head high. The appreciative stares of every male from fifteen to sixty followed her down the street to her car.

The strength went out of Jane’s legs, and she sank onto the chair. While she wanted to deny what Lauren said with every fiber of her being, Reid had been odd the last couple of weeks, and she’d been so restless trying to figure out what was going on. She chalked it up to the pain of his recovery. She hadn’t been herself either with the nagging pain of being shot still lingering in her shoulder. And things had been hectic at the station, tying up loose ends after the thwarted attack on the oil platform.

Even as she ran through the litany of reasons for Reid’s reserve, her eyes blurred with moisture. He wouldn’t keep something like

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that from her, would he? He'd promised to be truthful ever since she found out Will was alive.

Still stunned and numb, she gathered her coffee and beignet and stumbled toward her car. She hurried for her SUV and let Parker into the backseat before she headed straight for the marina.

They'd already decided to go out with Alfie Smith, a local shrimper, but Reid needed to tell her the truth.

Her radio sprang to life with the dispatcher's voice. "Chief, there's a fire fatality. Augusta spoke to the vic before she died after a threatening call." She gave the address.

"On my way." Talking to Reid would have to wait.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

TWO

The Bon Secour River flowed sluggishly off to the left side of the yard as Reid and Will Dixon headed to their SUV. Reid waved away a horde of mosquitoes buzzing his head. The bull alligator Will had named Brutus roared somewhere off to their right.

Reid caught a glimpse of his reflection in the rearview mirror as he slid behind the wheel for a fishing trip with Will. Short black hairs were beginning to fill in the smoothness on Reid's head. He actually was sporting a thatch.

He touched it, and his son caught the gesture. "Takes getting used to. Why are you growing it out anyway?"

Will wasn't a kid who liked change, especially when it came to his dad, who had been the one steady support in his fifteen years.

Reid rolled down his window to breathe in the scent of early morning dew and newly mown grass. He started the car and pulled out of the drive while he thought about his answer. "I shaved it the day after we left the compound. I wanted to be a new person, the dad you needed. I wasn't proud of my past and wanted to make a fresh start. It's time to move beyond the guilt and shame."

Will was sprouting like crazy, nearly Reid's height now, and his muscles had filled out in the past two months. It would take a while for Reid's hair growth to match his boy's shaggy black mane.

“What did you have to be ashamed of, Dad? Your parents were the ones who took you into the cult. It wasn’t your choice.”

A complex question that had no easy answers. “I think back at how gullible I was and I’m ashamed, but I also deserted everything my dad worked for, and I’m not proud of that either.”

“But he killed your mom when you were ten.”

“No one ever said our emotions were easy.”

Will looked up from perusing his phone. “I got a text from Mom. She said to go fishing without her. She’s at a crime scene.”

Reid pulled into a parking spot by the Pelican Harbor marina. The first beams of daylight lit the bobbing boats with golden rays. Only a couple of months ago he’d owned one of the boats docked at a slip, but it had burned after an explosion meant to kill Jane. By the time the insurance came through, Lauren was skulking around demanding money, and he hadn’t dared spend a penny more than he had to.

He stepped out into the aroma of salt air mixed with freshly made beignets and lifted a hand in greeting to Alfie Smith, an old shrimper who had offered to take them out on his trawler today. Alfie was out on the pier fiddling with his boat. They’d thought to have a fun adventure on Jane’s day off, but plans for a law enforcement officer in a small town often ended up changed at the last minute.

“Cool, Alfie brought Isaac with him. Grandpa got a new drone, and I thought I’d see if Isaac wanted to come fly it with me.” Will slammed the truck door behind him. “Do you see Megan?”

Jane’s best friend and office dispatcher, Olivia Davis, had a pretty daughter a year younger than Will, and the two were as tight as clamshells. Alfie’s assistant, Isaac, was a handsome young man, and Reid would have thought Will wouldn’t want to share Megan’s attention.

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Reid waved to the girl cutting through an alley toward them. “Here she comes.” He reached back inside the truck to grab the half bun of a sandwich he’d kept for the gulls.

The sun lit Megan’s brown ponytail with gold, and her smile was bright as she spotted Will. He walked over to meet her, but they didn’t touch. Reid grinned at the yearning on Will’s face. He knew the feeling well himself. A new relationship was as fragile as sea foam and just as beautiful.

He tossed bread crumbs to the gulls who squawked and hopped after them. “How’s your mom?”

Olivia had ALS, and her condition varied from day to day. Jane had hoped the disease was Lyme or something else, but those other tests had come back negative.

“She worked today. Did you hear about the fire?”

Will shook his head. “What fire?”

“Just out of town. I think there’s a fatality.”

“That’s probably where Mom is then.”

They were all part of the coconut telephone. One little snippet of information built on another until the whole town knew everyone else’s business. At least partly.

Reid dusted the crumbs from his fingers. “Do you know who died?”

“No, but it was at Gail Briscoe’s house.”

“I know that name,” Reid said. “She’s the one who found Nicole Pearson’s body.”

Had it only been a little over two months ago? It felt like an eternity since he’d come here to Pelican Harbor and made himself known to Jane. Since Will had met his mother. Since Reid had realized his feelings for Jane had never died.

Life would never be the same again.

“I think Alfie has *Seacow* ready to go out.” He led the way out to the old trawler.

Alfie had plied these waters over sixty years on his old boat, and the vessel looked its age in the same way the old man did with weathering from the constant exposure to sun and water. The hull boasted a fresh coat of paint, though the masts still creaked with age.

But it was a seaworthy vessel and a common sight in these waters. Everyone knew Alfie was the greatest shrimper ever to set sail from this port.

Reid clapped the old man on the shoulder. “Thanks for letting us tag along, Alfie.”

Alfie wore his long pants tucked into boots that used to be white. “It’s not going to be a picnic, son. I’ll expect you to work those muscles. You sure you’re up to it?”

He nodded. “I’m thirty-five, not a hundred. My ankle is healing, and I can work without injuring it more. It will be good for me.”

Alfie usually went out at night, but he’d made an exception for his passengers. He fixed his rheumy blue eyes on Reid, then motioned for them to come aboard. Once they were on deck, he stepped to the beam and loosened *Seacow* from her slip. She glided out into the bay’s smooth water.

A curl of smoke to the north as they exited the mouth of the river caught his attention. “I didn’t think camping was allowed there.” The small island was a wildlife habitat.

“Some folks got permission,” Alfie said. “Way I heard it, some survivalist group is staying out there.”

Reid’s breath caught in his lungs. “Know who they are?”

Alfie shrugged his shrunken shoulders. “Nope.”

It couldn’t be Liberty’s Children, could it? Reid wouldn’t put it past Gabriel to bring his hate to Reid’s doorstep. He had to find out.

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Jane loved the little town under her protection. She drove along Oyster Bay Road past its quaint French Quarter–style buildings with lacy black railings. Apartments like hers were above the shops lining the brick sidewalks. Colorful flowers swayed in the hot breeze, and magnolia trees provided shade here and there in green spaces.

Once she hit the edge of town, she saw the smoke in the distance and headed that way. She parked behind her detective’s car and got out by a crape myrtle tree, blooming with profuse pink blossoms.

As she neared the smoldering ruins of a house, the stench of fire and smoke burned Jane’s lungs, and she coughed into the crook of her arm. The sun blazed down, turning the dew on the roof to mist. The heat from the fire tightened the skin on her face. She felt older than thirty this morning.

Her detective, Augusta Richards, exited the building, and Jane hurried to join her.

“What do we have, Augusta?”

Augusta had been part of the department a month, and she was married with two school-age kids. Augusta’s husband opened a sporting goods store downtown after they’d moved here from Mobile. The family had all taken to small-town life with gusto. Her tall, lanky figure was as placid as her soft brown eyes that missed nothing. Jane thanked God for her every day.

Augusta pulled off the respirator she wore. “Two bodies, Chief.” She reeked of smoke fumes.

“*Two* bodies?” Jane looked toward the low country shotgun house. She’d never been inside this one, but all those houses were

the same—one room opened to the next and the next, right to the back of the house.

“We’ve got a dead firefighter as well as the owner, Gail Briscoe. An anonymous caller summoned the firefighters. They’d retrieved Gail’s body, then one of the firefighters rushed back inside without a word.”

“Who was it?”

“Finn Presley.”

Jane winced. Everyone liked Finn. About thirty and divorced, the young fireman could often be found at the hospital with his yellow Labs visiting the elderly and children. His loss would be felt by the whole town.

“Any idea who called it in?”

“Said he was a passerby and hadn’t seen anything. Just reporting the fire. I guess he didn’t want to get delayed with questions.”

“She’d been getting threatening calls, right?”

Augusta nodded. “And she had another one this morning. I talked to her right after it came through. This morning the caller said his usual, ‘I know what you did.’”

“What does that mean?”

“Gail claimed she didn’t know, but she was in such a panic, I suspect she just didn’t want to tell me.”

“I don’t like it. This could have been a homicide.”

“I think so too.”

Jane studied the house. A large V-shaped hole marked where the fire had been the hottest, and tendrils of smoke rose into the sky. The wind carried the strong stench of burned plastics, carpet, and any number of other items in the house. It was a smell not easily mistaken for any other kind of fire.

Movement caught her attention as two firemen exited with a

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gurney between them. The black body bag was a stark reminder of the tragedy.

Jane averted her gaze to gather her composure. “Finn?”

“Yes. Gail’s body is already en route to the morgue.”

They fell silent as the men loaded the body into the back of the ambulance. It pulled away silent and dark, with no urgency. No fast arrival at the hospital could save the young man.

The fire chief, Wayne Gardner, approached them. Jane jerked her head at the departing ambulance. “How’d he die?”

“A burning rafter fell on him. It broke his back, and he died instantly, as near as we can tell. Thank God.”

The crash of more falling timbers made Jane jump and take a step back. The crushing weight of two untimely deaths pressed down on her. This was her town and these were her people. Telling the loved ones was always hard.

Jane reached for her detective’s discarded respirator. “I’m going in.”

The fire chief stopped her. “It’s not safe, Chief. Overhead beams are still coming down. One barely missed me. The inside is still smoldering in places. I can’t allow anyone else to go inside until the fire is totally out. You’ll have to wait until tomorrow to investigate.”

“A top arson investigator will be arriving in the morning from Mobile,” Augusta said.

Jane had been so used to doing everything on her own that she was still getting used to having quality help. “You’re good, Augusta.”

“Thank you, Chief. I didn’t want to take the chance of missing something important.”

“Signs of arson?”

“Burn patterns and an incendiary fluid of some kind. Smelled like kerosene to me, but the investigator will know for sure.”

Jane nodded. "Anything else?"

"Tire tracks in the dirt road to the house. Luckily, we'd had some rain before the fire, so we should be able to get good casts. Could be Gail's vehicle, but could also be the arsonist's."

"Do we have next-of-kin information?"

Augusta shook her head. "Jackson's working on it."

Jackson Brown was Jane's other new hire, an eager young black man just out of the academy. "I'll head to the office and see what he's found out."

Augusta put her hand on Jane's forearm. "It's your day off, Chief. Let us do our job. When we have more information, I'll call you. You work too much. Take advantage of your awesome officers." She flashed a wide smile.

Jane glanced at her watch. If she hurried, she might catch the boat yet. After seeing the devastation here, she wanted to look at her son and revel in being with him. But being with Will meant facing what Lauren had told her.

Was she ready to hear that Reid had lied to her—again?

THREE

Reid planted his feet on the boat rocking in the waves and shooed away a gull trying to land on his head. He turned to watch a pod of dolphins begging for fish just off the starboard side. Dolphins often followed shrimp boats since any catch other than shrimp had to be thrown overboard. They knew how to find a free meal.

“Hold the boat,” Will called, holding up his phone. “Mom is coming after all. Can we go get her?”

Reid squinted through the bright sun bouncing off the brilliant blue water and stared toward shore. “What’s her ETA?”

Will pointed at a small figure jogging down the boardwalk in the distance. “There she is.”

Alfie spun the wheel and the trawler banked. “Won’t take but a minute to pick her up. Have her wait at the end of the dock. You can get her in the dinghy.”

The boat reversed course back to the marina, and Jane’s figure grew closer. Reid’s pulse kicked when he recognized her wind-tousled light-brown hair. It had grown out a bit, just like his, and now brushed the collar of her shirt. She wasn’t in uniform, though she’d been called to a scene. She wore white shorts and a red tank top that showed off her tanned skin and stood with her head high. He’d always loved her I-can-do-it attitude. People said she resembled

Reese Witherspoon, but he didn't think anyone could be as beautiful as Jane.

"I'll get her," Will said.

Reid helped him lower the inflated dinghy and watched as he rowed toward shore. Parker gave a happy bark when he caught Will's scent, and the golden retriever leaped aboard the dinghy when it reached the dock. Jane followed, and Will rowed them back to the trawler.

Smiling, Reid moved to the rail and reached out to help her aboard. His smile faded when she ignored his extended hand and clambered onto the boat without assistance. She didn't look at him and didn't smile. It must have been a bad murder scene. But if it was only work, why was she acting so cold?

She brushed past him and even the smile she sent Will's way was tight. "Sorry I was so late. Augusta is taking over since it's my day off. I feel guilty leaving it all to her though."

"That's why you hired her," Reid said.

He frowned when she still didn't acknowledge him. Her stiff back indicated anger or displeasure with him, but he couldn't think of anything he'd done.

Alfie waved to her. "Bout missed us, Janey-girl."

Pete, the pelican Jane had rescued as a fledgling, flapped down to perch on the boat's railing. If he knew Jane, she had some fish in the small cooler she carried. Sure enough, she opened it and tossed Pete some fish.

Reid grabbed the halyards and hoisted his sail. The wind filled the canvas, and the old vessel creaked as it plied the waves out on Bon Secour Bay. The scent of the sea lifted on the breeze. No one spoke as they tended to their duties guiding the old boat out to the shrimping grounds, but Reid kept stealing glances at Jane's

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set face. The gold flecks in her hazel eyes seemed to spark with fury, and dread curled in his belly. What could have happened to make her so aloof? She hadn't even cracked a genuine smile Will's direction.

"Drop the nets," Alfie shouted.

Isaac and Will tossed out the shrimp nets, and they sank into the blue waters. Megan hovered nearby, and her gaze never left Will's broad shoulders.

Will turned and approached Jane. "You okay, Mom?"

The answering grimace could only be called a smile by someone who didn't know her. "Fine, honey. Just a lot on my mind."

Will gave her a doubtful glance, then shrugged. "Wanna swim with us?"

"I didn't bring my suit. You kids go ahead."

Jane turned away and walked to the bow and stared off into the horizon. Will lifted his brows at Reid and jerked his chin her direction.

The kid was throwing him to the sharks. Reid nodded, and the boy turned away to jump off the stern with Parker, Isaac, and Megan. Reid made his way to where Jane stood and waited until she noticed his presence.

When she gave no sign that she wanted to talk, he nearly retreated, but he squared his shoulders and stepped closer. "I can see you're upset, Jane. Want to talk? Was the murder scene bad?"

His gut told him her demeanor had nothing to do with the murder scene and everything to do with him.

Her knuckles went white with her grip on the railing. She turned her head and narrowed her eyes on him. "Are you still married to Lauren?"

He held her disdainful gaze. "I don't know. It's something the

court will have to decide. Scott thinks a case could be made either way, but no one has tested the Nevada law.”

“And how long have you known this?”

He flinched. “A couple of weeks. Scott isn’t sure what to do, and I was waiting for more direction from him before I talked to you about it. I didn’t want to worry you if he was able to find out a clear ruling.”

“You should have told me right away.”

“Maybe so. I thought I was doing the right thing for you. Filing for divorce for abandonment seemed a waste of time when I’d already had her declared legally dead.”

“But she had a year to contest that death ruling, and now everything is up in the air,” Jane said.

How did she know all this? Did Scott tell her? “Scott doesn’t think I should run the risk of going before the court with this. He says it would cost more than paying her off.”

She winced. “Where does that leave you if you pay her and she drops the lawsuit?”

“I don’t know. To assure my status, I might have to file for divorce.”

“Which she might contest and ask for even more money.”

The horrible thought had kept him up at night, but he didn’t look away and gave a short nod. “Lauren is unpredictable. Scott wants to tie any settlement to a binding agreement so she will not contest it again.”

“But your marital status would be very ambiguous.”

“It could be. Scott says the whole thing is a mess and could go either way. What do you want me to do?”

Her chin came up, and she tucked strands of hair behind her ears. “It’s not my decision, Reid. The whole situation is more than

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I can wrap my head around. You let me find this out from Lauren instead of telling me yourself.”

“You spoke to Lauren? When?”

“This morning. She asked me to stay away from you and said I should give the two of you space to work out your marriage.” Her voice wobbled, and she turned away as if to hide the pain in her eyes.

Reid set his hand on her forearm. “I wouldn’t stay with her for any amount of money. She abandoned Will. She hurt him. The pain she caused me isn’t nearly as important as the way she destroyed Will’s confidence. Would you step back away from him and let her have your spot?” He saw her recoil. “And your reaction is exactly how I feel. Don’t let her do this to us, Jane.”

She still wouldn’t look at him. “I’ll have to think about it.”

Jane’s eyes burned after talking to Reid. She didn’t know how to process the reality that Reid might still be married, but for now, she planned to stay far away from him until she sorted out her feelings.

The kids, glistening like playful seals, emerged from their dip in the water with the pod of dolphins. Pete fluttered down to perch on a rail, and several other pelicans dove to the water and came up with wriggling fish.

Will shot her several anxious glances as she sat in the bow. She snatched up her phone with something akin to relief when Augusta called.

“You notify next of kin yet?” Jane asked.

“Jackson did. I’m set to interview Gail’s ex-husband in about two hours.”



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Conventional wisdom indicated the murderer was generally known to the victim. “Anything from the coroner?”

“Nothing yet, but I still suspect foul play. We’ll know more after the autopsy.”

Jane stared at the shoreline. They were only about half a mile out. “I think I’ll go along on that interview.”

“I can handle it, Chief.”

“I know you can.” Jane shot a glance Reid’s way. “I’ll be there in an hour.”

“If you insist.”

The tightness in Augusta’s words gave Jane pause, but only for a moment. Her hair still stank of smoke, and she wouldn’t be able to loosen the muscles in her shoulders until she had answers to at least something she could control. The situation here was impossible. She ended the call and went to tell Alfie she needed to put ashore.

“Hold your horses.” The old man blinked faded blue eyes and gave a shrug. “Got binoculars on you?”

“No, should I?”

“Yer man didn’t tell you about them survivalist types camping over yonder?” He waved a wrinkled hand toward smoke rising from the treetops on a small, unnamed island filled with impenetrable forest.

“He’s not my man.” She turned and shaded her eyes with her hand to peer through the sunshine at the location. “Survivalists? Any idea who they are?”

“Coconut telegraph hasn’t sussed it out yet. Their boat’s called *Westwind*. That’s all I know.”

The smoke seemed ominous after the fire, especially when she caught a whiff of it, but her nerves were playing tricks on her. This



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group was unlikely to have anything to do with Liberty's Children or even the fire this morning.

She lowered her hand. "Have any of them been to town yet?"
"Ain't seen anyone but tourists."

Jane glanced at her watch. "We've got time to stop by and see what's going on. I can make a friendly official call and make sure they are legally allowed to be there." The location was outside her jurisdiction, but the campers were unlikely to know that.

The Liberty's Children cult was an offshoot from Mount Sinai, a survivalist group Jane and her father had fled when she was a teenager. She and Reid had confronted the group a few weeks ago and learned the leader hated her mother. And Reid. She had to know for sure if there was any connection with that curl of smoke to the dangerous group.

Alfie gave the order to haul up the nets, which dripped water and little else other than a bit of trash and debris onto the deck. In minutes they were underway to the island.

Jane had never set foot on the island, and she didn't know many people who had. First of all, access was difficult. There was no pier and no protected bay to find anchorage. The people there would have needed to use rowboats to ferry themselves and their belongings ashore, and even then, landing was tricky. A small spot without vegetation existed on the eastern side of the island, and she trained Alfie's binoculars on it.

"See anything?"

Her gut clenched at Reid's deep voice. His voice always reached in and held her in a spot she hadn't known existed until he'd come back into her life. His tanned, muscular arm brushed hers, and she moved away just a bit.

She swallowed and nodded. "Looks like they landed there." She

handed him the binoculars and pointed it out. "There are marks in the sand and mud. And you can see several inflatable boats through the bushes farther up."

"I see them." He lowered the binoculars. "You're suspicious it could be Liberty's Children?"

"Aren't you? Gabriel knows where you are now. And where I am. He could have come after us or sent a group to be a thorn in our sides."

"For what purpose?"

"I don't know. The hatred he showed toward my mother had me wondering what she'd done to him. What if he thinks I can lead him to her?"

Reid raised a brow. "You're stretching."

"Am I? I'm not so sure."

Isaac lowered the anchor, and she moved toward the inflatable rowboat.

Reid followed her. "I'll come with you."

"I can handle it alone."

"While you *can*, the question is, should you? If you really think these people could be part of Liberty's Children, they might be dangerous."

"Then the kids need you to stay here and protect them."

His expression sobered, and his mouth twisted. "Fine." He bent down and helped her get the craft over the side of the old shrimping vessel.

She clambered down toward the whitecaps rolling atop the blue water. The sea spray hit her in the face, and she was wet by the time she hopped into the dinghy. The tide helped her as she rowed toward shore, and the bottom scraped sand more quickly than she'd

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expected. The sea soaked her legs to the knees when she climbed over the side and hauled the craft to the shore.

Though careful to watch for snakes, she forced her way through the marsh toward the sound of voices. Her feet sank into the soft, wet ground and made sucking sounds when she pulled them free. A marsh was never her favorite place to be. Mosquitoes buzzed her head, and she waved them away. She reached drier ground where briars tore at her clothing. Water oak trees reared into the blue sky, and she found a newly trodden path to the clearing.

She didn't have to see any people to realize she'd been right. Gabriel's voice carried to her ears on the wind, and she had to hide her dismay before she stepped into the space filled with tents and camp stools.

Gabriel spotted her the moment she stepped out of the shadows. A slow smile stretched across his face. "It's the pretty little police-woman, Button. Didn't take you long to come looking for me. I didn't think it would."

She hated that old nickname from the cult, and he probably knew it. His face was a map of intent, and Jane wasn't sure she wanted to know his plan. In his forties, he was built like a tank, and she would have trouble fighting him. But whatever it was, it involved her family.

FOUR

Gabriel had an agenda.

The scent of smoke from the wood fire added to Jane's unease, but she lifted her chin and stepped closer to him. "This is a protected area. Who gave you permission to camp here?"

His balding blond hair was a little longer than it had been a few weeks ago, but it framed hard eyes that contrasted with the soft curls around his ears. Ten other men were with him—no women that Jane saw, unless there were some out of the campsite.

One of the men seemed familiar, and she could tell by his expression he recognized her too. He must have been a member of Mount Sinai.

Gabriel grabbed a sausage from the fire and bit into it. Juices ran down his face and dripped to the red dirt, but he didn't seem to notice.

Jane gave him a minute before she repeated her question.

Gabriel swallowed the mouthful of food. "You didn't think you could drop a bombshell and disappear, did you? You had to know we'd come looking for you."

"I don't know what you're talking about. What bombshell?"

"Your mom. You didn't know she'd left, did you? You were with

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her those last three days, and I would have thought she'd have talked to you about what she did."

"What last three days? What she did? I have no idea what you're talking about." Jane narrowed her eyes. "You made me believe she was dead. You knew all along she was alive. Why did you lie?"

He tipped his head to one side, and his cold blue eyes swept over her. "I said she was in hell. There's a difference, don't you think?"

"I don't have time to decipher your cryptic comments. Why are you here?"

He stepped closer, and she gritted her teeth and made herself stand still despite the sweaty stench of his skin and the menace in his eyes. He had to weigh three times what she did, and she fought the urge to order him to back off. Showing fear would be an aphrodisiac to a man like him.

When she didn't recoil, a grin spread across his face. "I like you, Chief. Little thing like you ought to be screaming and running for the boat, but you're standing here like a she-bear defending her cubs." His hand gestured to the barren area. "This place isn't much to defend."

"I don't let vermin scare me. What do you want? It can't be coincidence that you're here."

"I want you to call your mom and tell her to come here and face me."

"Even if I agreed to do that, why would she listen? She's never contacted me."

"Because she has something I want. And she won't want you involved."

She was done playing games and backed up a step. "Then tell her yourself. She doesn't care anything about me."

"Where'd she put the stuff? You have to know."



“What stuff? You’re not making any sense. I wasn’t with her all that much. She was always with Moses helping to manage the camp.”

Gabriel’s hands clenched. “You’re just playing dumb. I’ve gone over and over what happened, and those three days were the only time she was unaccounted for. You were with her. Where’d she take you?”

Jane shook her head. “I never spent three days away with her. You’ve got your facts wrong.”

“Lies. Always lies.” His face reddened. “I’ll show you.” He stalked off to a red tent and ducked inside, then returned moments later with several pictures in his hand. He thrust them at her. “That’s you right there. Driving off in the Jeep with your mother. You didn’t come back for three days. Now tell me another bald-faced lie.”

Jane took the pictures and leafed through them. She was clearly pregnant and looking at the vegetation and the skiff of snow. The pictures were likely taken about a month before Will was born. A month before the attack on the compound when she fled with her father, believing her son was dead.

A month before her life changed forever.

She had no memory of a day like the one in the photo though. Her mother had always busy, and Jane had often longed for even an undisturbed afternoon with her. Something that had never happened. The top picture showed her face turned toward her mother and the camera. Jane winced at her own expression of pure joy.

How could she forget something that would have been so important to her? She spied a duffel bag in the back of the topless Jeep, so they did appear to be going somewhere.

She clutched the pictures. “I’ll keep these.”

“Those are mine.”



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“I don’t have many pictures of my mom, and they’re mine now.”

His eyes narrowed, but he didn’t make a move to take them back. “So where did you put the stuff?”

“I have no idea. I don’t remember anything like this. Maybe someone altered the photo and made it look like we’d left together. We didn’t.”

“I took these photos myself. I watched you leave, and I saw you come back.” His gaze went shifty.

He was hiding something. Gabriel wouldn’t reveal anything unless he was ready.

He poked a finger at the top picture. “The picture in the rain with the top up is the day the two of you came back. These are authentic, and you’re just stalling.”

Jane couldn’t process this information with his eyes boring into her. She would have her forensic tech, Nora Craft, analyze them. Gabriel wasn’t the trustworthy sort, and Jane *knew* she’d never gone away with her mother for three days. Which meant these pictures were fake.

“You never answered my question about who gave you permission to camp here,” she said.

He folded meaty arms over his chest. “Out of your jurisdiction, Chief. I don’t answer to you.”

She shrugged. “Fine. I’ll make a few calls and find out if you’re here illegally. If you are, you can expect a visit from the authorities. So get packed up and ready to leave.” His smirk told her he had permission from someone.

When she turned to retrace her footsteps, he called after her, “This isn’t over, Jane Hardy. You’ll tell me what I want to know. One way or another.”

Her throat tightened at the menace in his words, but she stalked

back to the inflatable craft without giving him the satisfaction of seeing her unease. He had no power here. This was her turf now.

Terns and gulls swooped overhead as Reid and the kids helped Alfie throw fish from the net overboard. The birds vied with dolphins and pelicans for the discarded catch, and Reid straightened when he saw Jane approaching in the inflatable boat.

Her eyes were narrowed and her mouth was pinched when she climbed aboard. It must not have been a good visit.

“Who was there?” he asked.

Her hazel eyes were stormy, and she began to haul up the dinghy. “Gabriel and several other men.”

His pulse kicked up, and he grabbed the rope to help her. “He had to have followed us here.”

“He did.” Jane went past him to speak to Alfie.

The wind snatched most of her words away, but the way she gestured to the shore indicated she was in a hurry to get back. Alfie barked out orders to the boys, and the old shrimper turned his trawler toward land.

Reid followed her to the bow of the boat where she stood tapping out a message on her phone. When she didn’t look at him, he dove in anyway. “Did he say why he’s here?”

She lowered her phone and glanced his way. “He says my mother hid something. He called it ‘stuff,’ so I have no idea what he means. Items belonging to the cult? Money?” She shrugged. “He wants me to tell her to come here and face him. Like she’d listen to me anyway. He’s delusional. You were there for a while after Dad and I left. Did you hear any scuttlebutt about Mom stealing something?”

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He shook his head. “But you have to remember, so many people died the day of the police raid. My dad would have known, but he was one of the first ones killed. I wandered over to Liberty’s Children but didn’t know all that many people.”

“I had to ask.”

The boat slowed, and Reid went to help the boys dock the boat into its slip. It was nearly lunchtime, and Pelican Harbor residents milled the grassy areas and picnic table with sacks of food and cups of sweet tea. A vendor sold raw and grilled oysters from a food truck, and the aroma of beignets wafted from another vendor on the other side of the street.

Jane stepped onto the dock. “Have Will take care of Parker.” She hurried toward her SUV. She slammed her door and accelerated away in her vehicle.

Will joined him with Parker at his side. “What’s up with Mom?”

“I think she had to go to the crime scene again. She wants you to take care of Parker for her.”

The boy had been through a lot in the past couple of months and, at fifteen, was nearly a man now, but Reid didn’t want to hurt him with the knowledge of how Lauren was trying to destroy them all.

“I think it’s more than the murder.” Will glanced over at Isaac and Megan, who waved him over. “We’re going for ice cream. Wanna join us?”

Reid recognized the reluctance in the invitation and grinned. “I’ve got some stuff to do, but have fun.”

He stepped off the boat rocking in the waves and walked through the shimmering heat toward his attorney’s office. Without an appointment, he didn’t know if Scott could see him—or if he was even in on a Saturday—but Lauren’s new attack merited alarm.

The brick sidewalks buzzed with activity, and he nodded to



several acquaintances who were shopping or eating on busy Oyster Bay Road. He spared a glance at Jane's French Quarter-style apartment above Petit Charms. He and Will had played dominoes with her there over pizza on Tuesday. After the day's events, it seemed like an eternity ago.

The door to Scott's office opened when he pulled on it. The air-conditioning was a relief from the humidity, and Scott's receptionist smiled when she saw him. "Going to hit ninety-five today, Reid. I don't have you down for an appointment though."

"Sorry. I'm surprised you're open on a Saturday, but I took a chance."

"He's taking off a few days next week so we scheduled a few clients for today."

She was in her forties and always wore a smile, but he didn't know her name. He looked past her to Scott's closed door. "Is there any chance I could talk to Scott for a few minutes? It's important."

"It depends on how long his current client takes. I might be able to squeeze you in for fifteen minutes." She gestured to the bank of chairs. "Have a seat."

He dropped into a chair and watched the news flashing across the television screen on the wall, though he didn't have enough of an attention span to name what new disaster was playing out. News these days was a constant play on people's fears, and he seldom watched it.

Scott's door opened, and Reid stood as a man dressed in a gray suit walked out. The guy smiled and nodded at the receptionist, then exited the office.

She lifted the phone and spoke too softly for Reid to hear before she gave him a nod. "Scott has about twenty minutes before his next appointment."



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“I appreciate it.” Reid hustled back to Scott’s office and closed the door behind him. “Sorry to bust in on you this way.”

“Not a problem.”

Scott Foster always reminded him of a woodpecker with his fading reddish-brown hair and thin neck. He had been Charles Hardy’s best friend for years, and Reid had found him very calming and knowledgeable.

Reid dropped into a chair in front of the desk. “Lauren tracked down Jane this morning. She’s claiming we’re still married.”

Scott pursed his thin lips. “I got the papers today, but I haven’t had a chance to read them yet. Her attorney hinted there might be a big surprise in the lawsuit she’d filed. And I warned you we might not prevail in court.”

“How do we make sure I’m not tied to her? I don’t trust her to take any money I give her and leave me alone in the future.”

“Getting her to sign paperwork promising not to sue for more money won’t necessarily ensure that she won’t ignore it and sue you anyway. I’m afraid the only way to be certain you’re not married is to file for divorce.”

Reid slumped in his seat. “That’s not what I wanted to hear.”

Scott tapped his pen against a pad of paper. “I’m sorry, but I don’t believe there’s any other solid way to handle this, Reid. The Nevada law isn’t clear. She seems to want to test it.”

“Wouldn’t she have a right to more money if I divorce her?”

“She deserted you and Will and hadn’t been heard from in almost eight years. I think it’s likely an Alabama judge would take that into consideration. For a divorce, we wouldn’t have to go to Nevada and see how it all turns out.”

Jane wouldn’t like a divorce proceeding any more than Reid

did. “What about Will? She legally adopted him. Can she sue for visitation even though his real mother is here?”

“It’s a crazy, mixed-up mess, but yes, it’s possible. Do I think the judge would lean her way? No. Will is a teenager, and any judge is going to take his preferences into consideration. I think that’s a meaningless threat. The property and money issues are the only things you have to deal with. And honestly, that’s all she’s interested in. If she sued to see Will, it would only be to annoy you.”

Reid exhaled a long sigh. “Can we file for divorce and invalidate the suit she’s filing for money?”

“I think I can get that dismissed since it will be dealt with in the divorce.”

Reid stood. “I guess I have to do it then.”

“I’ll draw up the papers. Stop by at the end of the week to sign them. I’ll be back in the office on Thursday. My assistant will get them done before then.”

“I’ll do that.”

But the thought left him feeling dirty and stained. He’d tried to do right by Will, and this would drag his son into court too.

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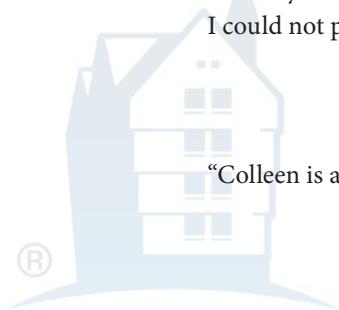
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Colleen Coble is a *USA TODAY* bestselling author and RITA finalist best known for her coastal romantic suspense novels, including *The Inn at Ocean's Edge*, *Twilight at Blueberry Barrens*, and the Lavender Tides, Sunset Cove, Hope Beach, and Rock Harbor series.

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