

ACCLAIM FOR COLLEEN COBLE

“Colleen Coble is my go-to author for the best romantic suspense today. *Three Missing Days* is now my favorite in the series, and I adored the other two. A stay-up-all-night page turning story!”

—Carrie Stuart Parks, bestselling and award-winning author of *Relative Silence*

“You can’t go wrong with a Colleen Coble novel. She always brings readers great characters and edgy, intense story lines.”

—BestInSuspense.com on *Two Reasons to Run*

“Colleen Coble’s latest has it all: characters to root for, a sinister villain, and a story that just won’t stop.”

—Siri Mitchell, author of *State of Lies*, on *Two Reasons to Run*

“Colleen Coble’s superpower is transporting her readers into beautiful settings in vivid detail. *Two Reasons to Run* is no exception. Add to that the suspense that keeps you wanting to know more, and characters that pull at your heart. These are the ingredients of a fun read!”

—Terri Blackstock, bestselling author of *If I Run*, *If I’m Found*, and *If I Live*

“This is a romantic suspense novel that will be a surprise when the last page reveals all of the secrets.”

—*The Parkersburg News and Sentinel* on *One Little Lie*

“There are just enough threads left dangling at the end of this well-crafted romantic suspense to leave fans hungrily awaiting the next installment.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *One Little Lie*

“Colleen Coble once again proves she is at the pinnacle of Christian romantic suspense. Filled with characters you’ll come to love, faith lost and found, and scenes that will have you holding your breath, Jane Hardy’s

story deftly follows the complex and tangled web that can be woven by one little lie.”

—Lisa Wingate, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author
of *Before We Were Yours*, on *One Little Lie*

“Colleen Coble always raises the notch on romantic suspense, and *One Little Lie* is my favorite yet! The story took me on a wild and wonderful ride.”

—DiAnn Mills, bestselling author

“Coble’s latest, *One Little Lie*, is a powerful read . . . one of her absolute best. I stayed up way too late finishing this book because I literally couldn’t go to sleep without knowing what happened. This is a must read! Highly recommend!”

—Robin Carroll, bestselling author of the Darkwater Inn saga

“I always look forward to Colleen Coble’s new releases. *One Little Lie* is One Phenomenal Read. I don’t know how she does it, but she just keeps getting better. Be sure to have plenty of time to flip the pages in this one because you won’t want to put it down. I devoured it! Thank you, Colleen, for more hours of edge-of-the-seat entertainment. I’m already looking forward to the next one!”

—Lynette Eason, award-winning and bestselling
author of the Blue Justice series

“In *One Little Lie* the repercussions of one lie skid through the town of Pelican Harbor, creating ripples of chaos and suspense. Who will survive the questions? *One Little Lie* is the latest page-turner from Colleen Coble. Set on the Gulf coast of Alabama, Jane Hardy is the new police chief who is fighting to clear her father. Reid Dixon has secrets of his own as he follows Jane around town for a documentary. Together they must face their secrets and decide when a secret becomes a lie. And when does it become too much to forgive?”

—Cara Putman, bestselling and award-winning author

“Coble wows with this suspense-filled inspirational . . . With startling twists and endearing characters, Coble’s engrossing story explores the tragedy, betrayal, and redemption of faithful people all searching to reclaim their sense of identity.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Strands of Truth*

“Just when I think Colleen Coble’s stories can’t get any better, she proves me wrong. In *Strands of Truth*, I couldn’t turn the pages fast enough. The characterization of Ridge and Harper and their relationship pulled me immediately into the story. Fast-paced, with so many unexpected twists and turns, I read this book in one sitting. Coble has pushed the bar higher than I’d imagined. This book is one not to be missed. Highly recommend!”

—Robin Carroll, bestselling author of the *Darkwater Inn* series

“Free-dive into a romantic suspense that will leave you breathless and craving for more.”

—DiAnn Mills, bestselling author, on *Strands of Truth*

“Colleen Coble’s latest book, *Strands of Truth*, grips you on page one with a heart-pounding opening and doesn’t let go until the last satisfying word. I love her skill in pulling the reader in with believable, likable characters, interesting locations, and a mystery just waiting to be untangled. Highly recommended.”

—Carrie Stuart Parks, author of *Fragments of Fear*

“It’s in her blood! Colleen Coble once again shows her suspense prowess with a thriller as intricate and beautiful as a strand of DNA. *Strands of Truth* dives into an unusual profession involving mollusks and shell beds that weaves a unique, silky thread throughout the story. So fascinating I couldn’t stop reading!”

—Ronie Kendig, bestselling author of
the *Tox Files* series

“Once again, Colleen Coble delivers an intriguing, suspenseful tale in *Strands of Truth*. The mystery and tension mount toward an explosive and satisfying finish. Well done.”

—Creston Mapes, bestselling author

“*Secrets at Cedar Cabin* is filled with twists and turns that will keep readers turning the pages as they plunge into the horrific world of sex trafficking where they come face-to-face with evil. Colleen Coble delivers a fast-paced story with a strong, lovable ensemble cast and a sweet, heaping helping of romance.”

—Kelly Irvin, author of *Tell Her No Lies*

“Coble . . . weaves a suspense-filled romance set during the Revolutionary War. Coble’s fine historical novel introduces a strong heroine—both in faith and character—that will appeal deeply to readers.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *Freedom’s Light*

“This follow-up to *The View from Rainshadow Bay* features delightful characters and an evocative, atmospheric setting. Ideal for fans of romantic suspense and authors Dani Pettrey, Dee Henderson, and Brandilyn Collins.”

—*Library Journal* on *The House at Saltwater Point*

“*The View from Rainshadow Bay* opens with a heart-pounding, run-for-your-life chase. This book will stay with you for a long time, long after you flip to the last page.”

—*RT Book Reviews*, 4 stars

“Set on Washington State’s Olympic Peninsula, this first volume of Coble’s new suspense series is a tensely plotted and harrowing tale of murder, corporate greed, and family secrets. Devotees of Dani Pettrey, Brenda Novak, and Allison Brennan will find a new favorite here.”

—*Library Journal* on *The View from Rainshadow Bay*

“Coble (*Twilight at Blueberry Barrens*) keeps the tension tight and the action moving in this gripping tale, the first in her Lavender Tides series set in the Pacific Northwest.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *The View from Rainshadow Bay*

“Filled with the suspense for which Coble is known, the novel is rich in detail with a healthy dose of romance, allowing readers to bask in the beauty of Washington State’s lavender fields, lush forests, and jagged coastline.”

—*BookPage* on *The View from Rainshadow Bay*

“Prepare to stay up all night with Colleen Coble. Coble’s beautiful, emotional prose coupled with her keen sense of pacing, escalating danger, and very real characters place her firmly at the top of the suspense genre. I could not put this book down.”

—Allison Brennan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Shattered*, on *The View from Rainshadow Bay*

“Colleen is a master storyteller.”

—Karen Kingsbury, bestselling author



THREE MISSING DAYS

ALSO BY COLLEEN COBLE

PELICAN HARBOR NOVELS

One Little Lie
Two Reasons to Run
Three Missing Days

LAVENDER TIDES NOVELS

The View from Rainshadow Bay
Leaving Lavender Tides Novella
The House at Saltwater Point
Secrets at Cedar Cabin

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Into the Deep
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Freedom's Light
Alaska Twilight
Fire Dancer
Where Shadows Meet (formerly
titled *Anathema*)
Butterfly Palace
Because You're Mine

THREE MISSING DAYS

THE PELICAN HARBOR SERIES

COLLEEN
COBLE



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Three Missing Days

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*For my cousin Mike Fordyce
Thanks for all the help with nuclear material—you rock!*



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.

THREE MISSING DAYS

“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.

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.

THREE MISSING DAYS

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.

THREE MISSING DAYS

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?