

A  
STRANGER'S  
GAME

COLLEEN COBLE



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*A Stranger's Game*

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*For Lori Leonard*  
*Thank you so much for your help researching*  
*the hotel—you're wonderful!*



# CHAPTER 1

**VICTORIA BERGSTROM ALMOST FORGOT TO** breathe at the beauty of Georgia's Jekyll Island. Standing at the railing, she watched the sunset gild the undulating tidal grass with gold and orange and continue to paint its spectacular hues on sand and sea as the boat made its way along the Intracoastal Waterway to the wharf. The Golden Isles was an apt name this time of day especially. Her gaze landed on the hotel, and her chest compressed.

Then again, maybe dread stole her oxygen instead.

The garrulous captain gestured toward The Wharf restaurant, perched at the end of the wooden walkway. "There she is. It's a much prettier approach this direction instead of coming over the bridge. I still can't believe those people blocked the bridge."

Torie had planned to drive, but protesters advocating for the abolishment of the Federal Reserve had filled every inch of the bridge over the causeway to the island, and she hadn't wanted to be stuck in traffic for hours. She shook her head. Did the protesters really believe marching would

accomplish their goal? And besides, the Fed helped to protect against bank runs and depressions. It seemed insane to protest about it.

The boat docked, and she grabbed her carry-on bag to disembark. The rest of her luggage would be delivered tomorrow once she knew where she was staying. “Thanks for the ride, Captain.”

He tipped his hat. “You’re welcome, Miss Torie.”

Her heels clattered on the wooden planks past the restaurant and a storefront for boating excursions, and onto the sidewalk onshore. Time slipped past in a shimmering haze as she crossed Riverview Drive, avoiding the ever-constant bikers, and approached the Jekyll Island Club Resort hotel.

It had been eighteen years since she’d run and played along this water. Eighteen years since she’d smelled the river and listened to a bull alligator roar at Horton Pond. Eighteen years since she’d seen stiletto-tipped palmetto groves and moss-draped oak trees. The narrator on a passing tram droned on about the history of this place she’d once loved so much.

There it was.

The hotel that lived both in her dreams and her nightmares.

The tower in the left corner rose above the four-story structure, and the large wraparound porch beckoned visitors with thoughts of sweet tea and laughter with friends. She paused to tuck her white blouse into her navy skirt before she mounted the steps to the outdoor receptionist box guarding the doorway inside. It was unmanned at the moment, so she stepped into the hotel lobby. The scents

of sandalwood and pine took her back to her childhood in an instant, and she swallowed past the constriction in her throat.

*Audentes fortuna juvat.* “Fortune favors the bold,” the Roman poet Virgil had said, and though being here brought out all her insecurities, Torie had to find her courage.

Little had changed through the years other than fresh paint and attentive maintenance. The ornate Victorian moldings gleamed with a gentle glow of wax, and the wood floors were as beautiful as ever. She had never wanted to step foot in this lobby again, yet here she was.

Torie raised her head with a confidence she didn't feel and approached the resort's front desk. “Torie Berg. I'm your new IT specialist.”

The alias flowed smoothly off her lips. She'd used it on her last assignment, and it was close enough to her real name to feel natural.

“Welcome to Jekyll Island Club Resort,” the young woman said.

The blonde looked to be about Torie's age of twenty-eight and wore an engagement ring. Her open, friendly expression was perfect for the check-in desk.

“Marianne,” a familiar voice said behind Torie.

Torie froze and didn't turn. While she didn't think the older woman would recognize her, she couldn't take the chance. The click of high heels went past her to the left, and she caught a glimpse of Genevieve Hallston's lavender blouse, her signature color.

“Come to my office, please,” Genevieve said to the housekeeper she'd hailed.

The stricken look on the middle-aged woman's face said it all. Genevieve was on a tear about something, and it took all of Torie's resolve not to intervene. She'd been sliced by the older woman's razor-sharp tongue enough to know it wouldn't be a pleasant conversation.

But she had to remember her mission. If anyone recognized her, her cover would be blown and all of her plans would be in ruins.

Torie forced a smile and focused on the desk clerk again. "I was told there were rooms or cottages for employees?" The cottages had been added since she was a child, but she'd seen pictures.

The young woman nodded and handed over a key card. "You're in Stingray Cottage, Ms. Berg." She traced a path on the map in her hand and showed Torie the way to a cottage along Riverview Drive she could find with her eyes closed.

"Thank you. I believe I can find it. What's your name? I'm sure I'll be seeing you."

"It's Bella Hansen. I look forward to getting to know you." Her gaze went over Torie's shoulder, and she gave a reflexive smile to someone behind Torie.

Torie thanked her again and grabbed the handle of her suitcase. The wheels rolled smoothly over the floors, and she exited to follow the path around the pool and the entertainment area with its game tables and exercise room. Palm trees swayed in the breeze overhead, and the groundskeeper had done a great job with the banks of brightly blooming flowers and greenery lining the walk. She recognized Rozanne geraniums, hydrangeas, cosmos, baby's breath, and zinnias. There wasn't much she would

change in the landscaping arrangements. It was perfect in every way.

She'd asked her dad to arrange for her to have the Stingray Cottage where Lisbeth had stayed. When she rounded the corner, she caught a whiff of artisan pizza baking in the wood-fired oven, and the aroma transported her back to her ten-year-old self. They'd had pizza every Friday night.

With a Herculean effort she moved past the temptation toward her cottage. Funny how things seemed smaller than she remembered. Perspective, she supposed.

She couldn't wait another minute to get her toes in the sea of her childhood, so she unlocked the door and put her bag inside. A bike had been left for her convenience, and she changed into shorts and a tee before she mounted it and set off for St. Andrews Beach, a four-mile trip. The ride would blow away the memories trying to surface.



The cedar trees around St. Andrews Beach had been perfect for hide-and-seek when Torie was a little girl, and they'd grown in eighteen years. Dead trees that had once been part of the maritime forest lay toppled on the perfect beach just past the two-story viewing platform, and she caught a glimpse of sand and blue water melding into the twilight sky.

She kicked off her shoes and carried them as she walked along the wet sand. A thousand memories vied for space in her thoughts. The wind teased strands of hair from her coronet of braids, and she inhaled the aroma of

salt and sea, a heady combination that made her feel as if she could actually accomplish the task before her.

“Hailey!”

She turned toward the frantic sound of the male voice. A man in his midthirties stood in front of a forest of oak and cedar trees. His light-brown hair fell across his forehead above clear green eyes. He was taller than most, even topping her six-foot height, and she estimated him to be six four.

There was no missing the sheer terror on his face. She dropped her shoes and ran toward him. “Can I help?”

“My daughter.” He raked his hand through his hair. “She’s missing. She’s eight.”

“How long?”

His gaze continued to scan the beach and water. “Couple minutes. I had a woman check the bathroom, and Hailey’s not in there.”

“Does she have a favorite place to go?”

His expression cleared and he nodded. “Of course. The turtle nest! She probably didn’t wait for me.”

He still seemed panicked even after such a reasonable explanation, but she chalked it up to an overly protective father. “I’ll be glad to help you find her.”

He set off at a fast clip, and she followed across the soft sand. It was none of her business, really, but she had to make sure the little girl was all right. His long legs ate up the distance, but she had no trouble keeping up.

The Sea Islands of Georgia were known for loggerhead turtle nesting sites, and residents made huge efforts to protect them. The thought of seeing a nest after all these years made her pick up the pace. They went up a

dune and down the other side near a clump of sea grass, and she spotted a young girl on her knees.

“There she is. Thank you, Lord.” He stopped a few feet away. “Hailey, you scared me to death. You know better than to run off.”

The girl didn’t take her gaze from the turtle nest containing dozens of squirming black hatchlings. “They aren’t getting out, Dad. I think we need to scoop some sand away.”

“Yeah.” The man squatted beside her and brushed the sand away.

The sea turtle “boil” was always mesmerizing to Torie. All those squirming black flippers held her in place. The hatchlings began to squirm out of the hole and their flippers scissored back and forth to propel them across the sand toward the sea.

The girl stood and walked beside the babies. “There are seagulls around. Pelicans too. I got here just in time to save the babies.”

A lot of nests were logged and checked daily, but Torie found no glimpse of yellow rope or signs here, which wasn’t too surprising. In good years Jekyll Island would have six hundred nests, and if the mother had come ashore just before a rain, her tracks would have been washed away.

Torie moved closer and shooed away a pelican. The last time she’d seen this sight she’d been with her best friend Lisbeth. Lisbeth had worn the same mesmerized expression as was on Hailey’s face. It had been a perfect day of sun and sand, togetherness and giggling.

And it would never come again.

She bit her lip and exhaled. These trips back through

memory lane weren't helping. She had to focus on the task at hand.

The man turned back to face her. "Thanks for your help. I'm sorry to bother you."

"I'm glad she's okay." She extended her hand. "Torie Berg."

His big hand closed around hers. "Joe Abbott. Vacationing?"

She shook her head. "Just moved here. I'll be working in IT at the Club Hotel."

"You'll like it here."

"Daddy trains sea lions to keep bad guys away," Hailey said.

Torie already liked the little girl. "How interesting. I've heard of the military using dolphins for defense, but I didn't know about sea lions." Hailey stepped close to Torie, close enough for Torie to smell the fresh scent of her shampoo.

"Simon is really cool," Hailey said. "He's Daddy's favorite, but he's not fully trained yet."

Joe fixed his daughter with a stern look. "It's a good thing I'm not a spy or something. Hailey would give away all the secrets."

What was bugging him? Torie moved away a few feet. A couple more minutes and she could mount her bike and get out of here.

## CHAPTER 2

JOE WASN'T USED TO BEING AT NEARLY EYE level with a woman. She was what—six or six one? And she didn't slouch as if ashamed of her height. The way she wore her long hair in a kind of braided crown was unusual too. The sea breeze had teased a few dark-brown strands loose, and they blew across her face with its planes and angles. She wasn't beautiful in the conventional sense but striking like an intriguing painting, especially with the fading sun casting shadows across her face. Her arresting features would draw the attention of men and women alike.

Her gaze remained on the hatchlings still making for the water with every ounce of their strength. They moved fast for such small creatures.

He wanted a little more information about Ms. Berg. “So, Ms. Berg, you just got here today?”

She smiled and nodded. “Call me Torie. I dropped my shoes and ran when I heard the panic in your voice.” Her gaze tracked the baby turtles still struggling toward the waves.

He and Hailey followed her. Not many people would get involved so quickly. It wasn't like he'd shouted for help. "You must be intuitive."

Those deep-brown eyes went guarded. "People have mentioned that before, but I don't know about that. How long have you lived here, Joe?"

"Three years. Since Hailey was five."

"Does your wife work for the Navy too?"

"She's dead." He let her know with a clipped tone that he didn't welcome any questions about his wife.

He squatted in the sand and watched the hatchlings leave their distinctive tracks through the sand as they headed for the haven of the Atlantic Ocean. "Jekyll Island's history is interesting. During World War II after the millionaires vacated the place to stay safe, the Coast Guard patrolled here in case of an attack by a submarine or U-boat. A guardsman saw turtle tracks and roused the caretaker to tell him an enemy tank was ashore. It was only a loggerhead laying eggs. I'll bet the residents had a good laugh about that."

She smiled, and her gaze went back to his daughter. "Hailey seems smitten with them. Has she always loved them?"

"From the first moment she saw a clutch of eggs."

"I've been watching the news ever since I knew I was coming here, and I saw a hotel employee died a few days ago."

Strange comment out of the blue. "Yeah, a drowning."

"Lisbeth Nelson?"

He nodded. "She was a nice lady and kind to Hailey."

Why had he admitted that? It wasn't relevant, and he wasn't in the habit of engaging in idle gossip.

She brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. "I heard there was some question over whether it was an accidental drowning or murder."

He raised his brows. "Who would have told you something like that? I found her on the beach with seaweed in her hair. The police are waiting on the autopsy to come back, but the cause of death doesn't seem to be in question. I have to say, your interest seems a little macabre."

She looked down, and the sunset gilded her hair. "Just trying to figure things out in my new home."

Why did she seem so interested in the drowning of a stranger? Did she know the Nelson woman? He opened his mouth to ask, but Hailey stood and waved her hands.

"Get away, gulls!" she shouted.

Four gulls were dive-bombing the hatchlings, and Joe leaped forward as one had a turtle in its beak. He grabbed the bird by the wing, and it dropped the hatchling, then gave an indignant squawk before it flew away. The other gulls kept circling, and Torie went into the fray with waving hands too.

The little turtle flailed around on its back, and Joe gestured to his daughter. "Want to get that one on its way again?"

Hailey nodded and gently turned the little creature right side up. It began its determined movement to the water again. And more turtles kept on coming out of the nest. He estimated the clutch had been around fifty eggs, and another twenty still needed to reach the water. He

and Torie lined the path and shouted at the gulls and terns as the little procession marched on.

When the last turtle reached the waves, he exhaled and smiled. "I don't think we lost a single one."

"We didn't, Dad. I was watching. I'm glad I found them in time. There were a lot of birds out here. The turtles should have waited until they went to sleep."

He put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her. "What do you say we get some fudge to celebrate? Care to join us, Torie?"

Her brown eyes flickered, and she bit her lip. "I wish I could, but it will take a while to bike back. I smelled the fudge as I went past. What's your favorite, Hailey?"

"Peanut butter and chocolate. Or maybe rocky road. And the butter pecan is good, but I like anything with chocolate."

"A girl after my own heart," Torie said. "Maybe I'll come find you when I get back." She looked around. "Now where did I drop my shoes?"

"I'll help you find 'em, and you can ride with us back to the hotel. I can put your bike in the back of my truck," Joe said.

Why was she questioning what had happened to Lisbeth when she'd just arrived?



If Torie had hoped to grill Joe in a subtle way, it wasn't going to happen easily. Hailey was at that age where she talked constantly.

Hailey slurped her chocolate shake while sitting on a

bench under a wash of dim light from the streetlamp. “Did you know loggerheads lay their eggs on the same beach where they hatched? They are migratory, so they swim over three thousand miles to get back to their site. I wonder if the hatchlings we saw just now were boys or girls? The temperature of the nest determines the gender. And we’re not supposed to use bright lights because it can disorient them.”

Which explained why the lights all over the island were so dim. Torie nibbled on her chocolate peanut butter fudge and listened to the child ramble on. She was a cute kid with red hair in a ponytail that swung with the girl’s constant motion. Her green eyes held a world of interest and enthusiasm.

Torie must have looked as dazed as she felt because Joe grinned. “In case you’re wondering, she never shuts up. Except when she’s sleeping. The rest of the time, the mouth is engaged.”

Hailey wrinkled her nose. “Dad, that’s mean. You didn’t listen very well to the sermon last week. ‘Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.’”

He tugged on her ponytail. “Oh yeah? Well, what about, ‘Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another?’”

They were quoting Bible verses to each other? Who did that? Certainly not her father or any of her friends’ families, even though she attended church every Sunday. The affection between them was interesting though. Maybe it was because they had only each other.

Silence settled between them as they ate their treats. Guests strolled the path to the shops and the hotel, and Torie closed her eyes a moment to breathe in the aroma of the resort: suntan lotion, ocean, freshly mown grass, lavender, and Russian sage—all blended with the sweet scent of myriad fudge flavors. She could almost hear Lisbeth's voice calling for her to hurry to the beach with her. Or asking if they could please have two flavors of fudge this time.

Torie's eyes stung, and she opened them to stare down at the treat in her hand. It had suddenly lost its allure.

"You okay?" Joe asked.

"Fine." She opened her mouth to blurt out her questions about Lisbeth's death when she heard Genevieve's voice calling to Joe.

"It's Miss Genevieve!" Hailey bolted from her chair and raced to intercept Torie's aunt.

"There's my favorite girl." The older woman embraced the child, hugging her around the waist.

Torie turned her face away from Genevieve. Was that actually affection in her aunt's voice? Growing up, all Torie had heard from her starchy voice were criticism and orders. Aunt Genevieve had no children of her own. She'd always said the hotel was the only child she needed, and Torie had always understood she was to stay out of the way and not draw attention to herself.

Her mother had tried to protect her, but Lily Bergstrom's gentle voice and manner was no match for the juggernaut named Genevieve. When Dad was around, his sister-in-law backed off, but he was often gone visiting other hotel properties.

While her aunt's attention was on the little girl, Torie rose to her feet. "I have to go. Catch you later, Joe." Her pulse pounded in her neck as she hurried off.

Her aunt's voice carried on the sea breeze. "Who was that young lady rushing off?"

"Torie Berg," Joe said. "She's working at the hotel in the IT department."

"I hadn't realized we'd hired someone. I will have to meet her. She should have introduced herself when she arrived."

Torie rounded a cottage far enough away to catch her breath and let her heart rate resume its normal rhythm. Surely her aunt wouldn't recognize her after all this time. Torie's hair had darkened from its corn silk color to dark brown, and she was pale-skinned now, too, not the tanned urchin running around the property the way she'd done when she was a child.

It would be impossible to work at the hotel and evade the attention of Genevieve Hallston, who micromanaged the resort down to how many tea lights to order. Her aunt's reputation meant everything to her, and Torie was under no illusions that an IT employee would go unnoticed. Her aunt attended to every detail of the guests' wants, and Torie didn't expect the job to be easy.

But she wasn't ready to face her aunt just yet. She had to be able to mask her heartache. Right now things felt too raw.

With her heartbeat finally at a normal rhythm, she hurried to her cottage. Her luggage was just as she'd left it inside. She shut and locked the door, then rolled it out of the way. Leaning against the closed door, she exhaled. She

was finally alone and didn't have to manage every word, every expression. This was already harder than she'd ever dreamed it would be.

She panned her gaze around the cottage, and she began to walk through it. Medium-tone wood floors gleamed in the light from the lamps. The coastal vibe of the comfortable sand-colored furniture and pale-aqua walls made her feel at home. The perfect touches of beach décor on glass-topped tables and shelves made her wonder if her aunt had decorated this place. Either that or the designer had followed Aunt Genevieve's explicit instructions.

The living room opened into a dollhouse kitchen. The white cabinets looked new, and she ran her hand along the smooth surface of the pale-gray quartz countertop. She'd be very comfortable here. At least she'd have this sanctuary for escape. She'd have to order in groceries. There was nothing in the house to eat, and though she wasn't hungry, she would be by morning.

She went back to her luggage and unzipped the outer pocket of her suitcase to pull out her laptop. When she'd gotten on the plane in Phoenix, there'd been no details online of her friend's funeral service yet.

No matter what the danger, she couldn't miss the opportunity to say good-bye to Lisbeth.

Torie sank onto the comfortable sofa and checked the local news.

There it was. The service was later than she expected—not until next weekend on Sunday morning. Ten days away, probably to allow for the autopsy, but it was still not nearly enough time to prepare her heart for what she had

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to do. She'd be there though. Didn't cop shows mention the killer often showed up at the funeral of his victim? Torie planned to sit in the back and examine every person who came through the door. The hard part would be ignoring her father, who was flying in later tonight. She could only hope he didn't let her identity slip.

She was going to bring Lisbeth's killer to justice no matter what it took.