

I THINK
I WAS
MURDERED

COLLEEN COBLE
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THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

I Think I Was Murdered

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Coble, Colleen, author. | Acker, Rick, 1966- author.

Title: I think I was murdered / Colleen Coble, Rick Acker.

Description: Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2024. | Summary: “A grieving young widow. The AI program that allows her to continue to ‘talk’ to him. And a message she never expected: ‘I think I was murdered.’”—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024018870 (print) | LCCN 2024018871 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780840712578 (paperback) | ISBN 9780840712622 (library binding) |

ISBN 9780840712608 (epub) | ISBN 9780840712615

Subjects: LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction) | Christian fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3553.O2285 I2 2024 (print) | LCC PS3553.O2285 (ebook) |

DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20240429

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024018870>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024018871>

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

For our amazing team at HarperCollins Christian Publishing, who came alongside us in huge ways to get this book to market faster than usual. Special thanks to editor and publisher Amanda Bostic, who caught our vision immediately and gave the project wings.

PROLOGUE



IN 2009 SATOSHI NAKAMOTO LAID AN EGG. Jason Foster found it two weeks ago, and he'd been running for his life ever since.

Jason took his eyes off the dark, narrow road for a second and glanced at the Satoshi egg, which lay on the leather passenger seat of his Bentley Continental GT. It didn't look like much: a dusty, discolored plastic Easter egg in a baggie. But it was one of a kind—the first Satoshi egg that had ever been found, and the USB drive inside had treasure seekers salivating. His job as a structural engineer had uncovered the egg in a place no one else could look.

He had hunted the fabled Satoshi eggs for over a decade. They were the stuff of Silicon Valley legend, and he hadn't even been sure they existed. Now that he finally had one, he couldn't wait to get rid of it.

A brief gleam in his rearview mirror yanked his attention back to the road and spiked his pulse. A second later, the road curved and the light vanished. Were those headlights? Was someone following him? Only one other person knew about his trip to North Haven, and they would be waiting for him there.

The gleam reappeared and he got a better look at it. Definitely headlights. But there was no reason to panic. Why should he expect to be the only driver on the road, even at this hour? All-night truckers sometimes took this route, especially if they were picking up logs at one of the surviving timber mills. Or maybe someone was driving to work for the graveyard shift at a gas station or a roadside diner. There were dozens of perfectly plausible possibilities. Still, he pushed down the accelerator a little farther.

He went over the top of a hill and the landscape hid the lights again. Redwoods loomed out of the mist on the right side of the two-lane road, like pillars holding up the unseen sky. On the left the Pacific crashed against the base of a low cliff. Patches of fog drifted in from Humboldt Bay, suddenly cutting visibility to near zero at random intervals.

The headlights reappeared as the other car crested the hill. And they were closer now. Jason pressed the accelerator down as far as he dared. The powerful engine responded and the car leaped forward.

Jason's tires whined as he struggled to stay in his lane. The Bentley's superb steering and suspension kept him from losing control and flying off the road, but only barely. Sweat trickled down his forehead and he breathed through gritted teeth. He flicked a glance at the rearview mirror again. Somehow the headlights were still getting closer. Whoever was behind the wheel of the other car must be a professional driver or incredibly reckless.

The road started a long climb. The Pacific fell away and enormous trees flanked the road on both sides. He'd just entered the Cathedral, a craggy stand of old-growth redwoods

a few miles from North Haven. He relaxed just a fraction. In ten minutes, he'd be in town. He focused on the road's hairpin turns and switchbacks, trying to ignore the glimpses of headlights that flashed between the huge ancient trunks.

The Pulpit—the massive granite outcrop in the heart of the Cathedral—reared in front of him, and he knew he had one more treacherous turn at its top. He slowed to take it—and a silver sports car roared by, passing him on the inside of the turn.

Jason yanked the wheel to avoid a crash, but the other car moved in front of him and slammed on the brakes. He swerved to avoid it.

He managed to slip past the other car, but there wasn't enough room for his Bentley on the narrow shoulder. The right wheels slipped off the side with a *thunk*. The car's undercarriage ground over the rock for a few feet. Then, with agonizing slowness, the car tipped into the abyss.

Jason was weightless. The night world revolved outside his window—stars, trees, rock, stars, trees, rock. The Satoshi egg floated in front of him, drifting across the passenger compartment of the car.

Regret spun through his head—his beautiful Katrina needed him, but he was unable to stop his descent. And then the tumbled granite of the forest floor reached up and smashed him like a giant's fist.

CHAPTER 1



THE SECOND WORST DAY OF KATRINA Foster's life began on a beautiful September morning with the highly anticipated first coffee from Palo Alto Coffee House. Hot cup in hand, she got in her blue Tesla and drove toward her office at Talk, Inc., an up-and-coming tech company with an innovative AI app. Coffee was a necessity to face the barrage of legal questions she often fielded on Mondays.

She was within sight of the building when she took the first sip of her matcha and shuddered. Had the new barista used skim milk instead of almond milk? It was truly terrible. She set it in the drink holder.

A text dinged on her phone, and she fumbled in her purse. It dinged a second time before she managed to close her fingers around the phone. The message was from her mother.

Bestemor has had a heart attack and is critical. Come home now.

Katrina's breath squeezed from her chest. Her grandmother meant everything to her. Her beloved *bestemor* was her rock, her mentor, and so much more. Hands shaking, she punched in, *On my way.*

A second message came through, this one from her best friend and Talk's chief technology officer, Liv Tompkins. *I can't find David and the bank isn't returning my calls. I need you here now.* The elusive CEO who was Liv's boyfriend had vanished three days ago.

The messages reflected Katrina's past year in a nutshell. Both the grandmother she adored and the company she'd poured everything into had begun an inexorable slide downhill. She'd tried without success to be in two places at once, but she'd been utterly helpless to change either situation. Just a year ago she was a rising star in Talk, Inc., the AI chatbot start-up everyone was talking about. She was married to the best man in the world, and they'd been living the life of their dreams for three wonderful years. Her life had slowly spiraled out of control starting with Jason's death in a car accident just over a year ago, and most days she felt like she was drowning.

She parked and opened the Talk app. Jason's smiling face appeared with the text *Hi, honey, how's it going?*

Her hands trembled as she texted him. *Terrible. Bestemor's dying and so is Talk. I can't fix it, Jason. What do I do?*

She knew a chatbot imitating her husband couldn't advise her, but somehow it always helped. Relying on it wasn't healthy, but it was all she had right now. Every day she blessed Liv for talking Katrina into letting her upload all Jason's social media messages and texts so they could try out the bot. She told herself it was only because the bot needed testing before it hit the market, but little by little she depended on it more and more. The AI app filled one chink in the mortar holding her sanity together.

His reply came. *Trust yourself, Katrina. You're stronger and smarter than you know. Take it one step at a time and do that*

one thing in front of you. I know you can do it. You're my superhero.

The weird thing was the words streaming from the bot always sounded like Jason. In her mind she could see his warm brown eyes and his tender smile. She could almost catch the scent of his patchouli soap and Tom Ford cologne. When she ended a session with the bot, she felt as if she'd been in his presence, as if his arms had surrounded her. It was a little spooky sometimes but such a comfort.

Thanks, she typed back. *That's good advice.*

She'd try to put out whatever fire Liv was battling, then head to North Haven. Her decision made, she hurried toward the building looming ahead in the bright blue California sky. As she neared, she spotted Talk's employees milling around the doors. Some were on their phones, some were crying, and others were taking pictures. Had there been a shooting? A fire? Possibilities swarmed her thoughts.

Katrina spotted her law intern, Clare. "What's going on?"

Clare turned a tearstained face toward her. "The FBI has taken over Talk! The media is here." She grabbed Katrina's arm.

The FBI? Katrina wanted to run herself. This was the beginning of the end. Something catastrophic had to have triggered the FBI to step in. Was that why the CEO was nowhere to be found? Liv must be going out of her mind. They'd be lucky if they had an engineer left by evening. It was the end of any venture capital money, and Talk, Inc. was doomed.

She turned at the sound of Liv's voice and saw her struggling to hold on to a laptop as an FBI agent tried to tug it away from her. Katrina rushed to help. "What's going on here? I'd like to see your warrant. I'm general counsel for Talk."

He eyed her. “You’re Katrina Foster? We’ve been looking for you.”

“I am. What’s this all about?” He handed her the warrant. As she read it, her dreams went up in smoke as acrid as a trash fire. The FBI had authority to seize anything related to the finances of either Talk or its CEO, David Liang. The warrant also mentioned Talk’s chief financial officer, David’s cousin John—who Katrina realized was also nowhere to be seen.

She looked at the laptop in Liv’s hands. It was David’s. “I’m sorry, Liv. They have a warrant for that. You’re technically obstructing justice by not giving it to them.”

Liv reluctantly released her grip on the machine. The agent nodded his thanks and walked away with it.

Katrina tugged Liv away from the melee. It was her job to make sure the FBI didn’t overstep the four corners of the warrant, but Liv needed some comfort and Katrina needed information. “There’s nothing we can do, Liv. You still can’t reach David?”

Liv shook her head, and fresh tears slid down her cheeks. Her windblown dark hair and helpless manner were out of character for her. As chief technology officer she was usually a whirlwind of activity and determination. She towered over Katrina’s five-foot-five height by five inches, but she seemed lost in the face of this unexpected blow.

Katrina slipped her arms around Liv and held her in a tight hug. “We shouldn’t be so surprised. Things haven’t been good, Liv, but we’ll land on our feet.” Liv mumbled something incoherent. “What was that?”

Liv pulled away. “I’m pregnant, Katrina. It’s David’s baby.” Her expression crumpled again. “He left me here to face all of this alone.”

A baby. The thought of a new life when everything seemed so dark brought tears to Katrina's eyes. "Aw, Liv. I'm so sorry!" She hugged her tighter. "But you're not alone—you have me." Their casual friendship had begun when Katrina first started at Talk five years ago, but it had deepened when Jason died. Liv had walked beside her through that dark valley, and Katrina would be forever grateful. "We'll get through this together. Maybe he'll answer your calls."

Liv shook her head. "I—I installed a tracking app on his phone the other night. Yesterday he was at the airport, and then he disappeared off the app. I think he took a plane home to Shanghai."

"And left us all to handle the fallout. That snake." Katrina spotted an FBI agent motioning to her. "We'll talk more later. I have to oversee the search, and I need to get home to North Haven."

"Is it your grandmother?"

"She's had another heart attack and is critical. I hope I make it in time." Katrina walked over to the FBI agents. She couldn't let herself see Liv's sympathy or she'd never get through the hard hours ahead.

Four hours later, she escorted the FBI out of the building and headed for her Tesla. She took a swig of her terrible—and now cold—coffee. Another message came through from her mother.

Bestemor is gone, Katrina. I'm so sorry you didn't make it in time.

"No!" Katrina pounded the steering wheel with her hands. "I can't lose Bestemor too." She crossed her arms over her stomach and sobbed.



Seb Wallace surveyed The Beacon and checked his watch. He needed to hit the road, but he couldn't leave quite yet. A restaurant during dinner rush was like the ocean: you could never turn your back on it. Especially if you owned the place.

By eight thirty there was no longer a line at reception. Muted conversation echoed from The Beacon's vaulted ceiling, which Seb kept when he converted the old lighthouse into a world-class restaurant. He'd preserved the redwood flooring laid a century and a half ago and the Victorian light-keeper's house. He'd also restored the beacon, which guided the way to North Haven's snug harbor on dark and foggy nights. Oceangoing yachts lined the piers closest to The Beacon, which was a popular dinner spot with the seafaring set. Seb had wanted to create a unique atmosphere to go with his unique menu—and he'd succeeded, at least according to the reviews. Michelin gave The Beacon a rare three-star rating, praising the “authentic gold rush–era ambience” and the “eclectic menu drawn from at least a dozen countries scattered over four continents.”

Seb slipped through the swinging double doors into the kitchen, a room of white tile, stainless steel, and constant activity. He wove his way among the hurrying staff, checking for potential problems as he went. He saw none. He made his way to the chef de cuisine, Thor Thorsen, an enormous Norwegian who absolutely fit his name. He stood at a strategic spot near the office, monitoring the room with glacial-blue eyes.

Seb looked up at Thor, who stood at least five inches taller than Seb's five feet eleven inches. "*Alt bra?*"

Thor nodded and gave a thumbs-up without taking his gaze off the busy room.

Reassured, Seb went to his final stop at the back of the kitchen, his sushi chef, Kenji Hayashi. Kenji saw him coming and pulled out a bento box containing a salmon sashimi meal. He also set out chopsticks and a small plate with samples of each item from the box.

Seb picked up the chopsticks and tasted each item from the plate while Kenji watched expectantly. "*Mmm! Oishii!*"

Kenji smiled and gave a sharp little bow at the compliment. Following Seb's lead, he responded in Japanese. "The salmon we received today was particularly good."

"And you are always particularly good." Seb slipped the bento box into a specially designed cooler to keep it fresh for delivery. "Thank you."

Kenji's smile broadened. "You're welcome. I hope he enjoys it."

"I'm sure he will," Seb lied.

Seb left through the back door and got into his Range Rover, the vehicle he always took when he headed into the woods. The driving could be treacherous, and parts of the route he would take tonight were little more than logging roads with some gravel dumped in the ruts. He set the cooler on the passenger seat, buckled himself in, and drove out into the night.

He stopped briefly as he passed through North Haven's downtown. Old-fashioned streetlamps cast a warm light on the log exterior of Bestemor's. Norwegian and American flags hung over the red double-door entrance with *Velkommen!*

painted in rosemaling across both doors. Matching red gingerbread shutters flanked the darkened windows.

He couldn't see inside, but he didn't need to. He knew every detail, down to the little sign that hung in the office of the late owner, Frida Berg: "I'm called Bestemor because I'm way too cool to be called Grandmother." The sign had been a gift from Frida's self-centered granddaughter, Katrina, and the old woman had loved it.

The best memories from Seb's worst years all came from Frida and Bestemor's. He'd spent every minute he could there from the day she hired him as a busboy when he turned sixteen until he left home on his eighteenth birthday. She took him under her wing and gave him a start in the restaurant business, setting him on the path that led him to where he was today. And when things got especially unbearable at home, she even let him stay in one of the little apartments over the restaurant. He hoped whoever inherited the place would love it as much as he did.

The forest wasn't a safe place these days, so he checked to make sure his gun was in the glove box. Then he put the SUV back in Drive and headed into the woods. Rows of redwoods lined the road. These weren't millennium-old giants like the stands in the Cathedral, but even thirty-year-old trees were more than tall enough to block out the sky and give him the feeling that he was driving along the bottom of a sheer-walled canyon.

The skin on the back of his neck crawled and he had to force himself not to hold the steering wheel in a death grip. He was a city boy by choice, and he never went into the forest voluntarily. Especially this forest—too many ghosts and monsters lurked among the trees.

A narrow gap in the trees to his left marked the “road” he had to take. He turned into it and was instantly grateful for the Range Rover’s sturdy suspension. He bumped along the twisty track for five bone-jarring miles, keeping his speed in single digits the whole time. Finally, he reached his destination. He put the SUV in Park, grabbed the cooler, took a deep breath, and got out.

A buzzing fluorescent light lit the entrance to the broken-down old trailer Seb used to call home. Inside lived the broken-down old man he still called Dad.

Seb frowned at the buzzing light. He made a mental note to contact the caretaker about that. He resisted the temptation to delay his visit by pulling out his satellite phone to send a text now. Besides, he wanted to get the meal to his father while it was still fresh.

He marched up to the rickety door and knocked. No response. He banged harder. Still nothing.

Unease stirred his already-sour stomach. He pounded on the door again. “Dad! It’s Seb!”

He stood still for a moment, listening. Only night noises reached his ears.

His heart pounded against his ribs. Had it finally happened? Seb had urged his father to move into an assisted-living facility ever since he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s two years ago, but the old man refused to leave his remaining scrap of land. Had his stubbornness killed him?

Seb tried the door. Locked. He set the cooler outside the door and scrambled around the trailer, searching for an open window. He found one on the far side. He punched out the screen and pulled himself inside. “Dad!”

A sharp snore and muttered curse came from the bedroom.

Seb heaved a sigh of relief. "I brought dinner, Dad. Salmon sashimi, like you asked."

"Took you long enough."

"Yeah, I had to take care of paying customers first. But it's fresh and it's free."

Seb unlocked the front door and got the cooler while his father got out of bed and shambled into the tiny kitchen/dining room. Age and addiction had made him look decades older than his sixty years, even before the Parkinson's. He was a shell of the nimble, broad-shouldered lumberjack Seb remembered from his childhood.

Seb set the bento box on the little table, along with a matching set of ebony chopsticks. His father ignored the sticks and pulled a dirty fork from the sink. He poked at the sashimi. "This is raw."

"Yes. It's called sashimi. You requested it."

"Huh. I saw 'salmon' on your menu and figured it'd be cooked at least." He picked up a slice and eyed it suspiciously. "Wonder how these would taste deep fried."

Seb was profoundly grateful that he hadn't inherited his father's taste buds. "You mean like salmon McNuggets?"

"Yeah. What's that called?"

"The technical term is *abomination*. Dad, if you're not sure what something on the menu is, ask before you order it."

Dad grunted and put a morsel of fish in his mouth. "Not as bad as I thought. Say, I hear old Frida Berg died."

Seb nodded. He hadn't cried in years, but ever since he'd heard the news, his eyes had been suspiciously blurry.

"Can't say I'll miss her."

Seb clamped down on rising anger. “I will.”

“Yeah, you might feel different if she’d stolen away your only son and sent him flying all over the world for twelve years while you was stuck alone in the woods.”

Seb stood and grabbed the cooler. It had been a mistake to come. “That’s not what happened! I left because I couldn’t stand it here. Frida just helped me find a restaurant job in Oslo. And she’s the one who talked me into coming back when you got your diagnosis.”

One time he’d vowed never to step inside this place again. Then Frida had quoted the verse in Exodus about honoring his father and mother, and his faith had prodded him to do his duty. On days like today, why did he bother?

His father looked up at him with bloodshot brown eyes. “Well, I remember what I remember. No need to get all angry about it.”

Seb took a deep breath and sat back down. Dad was right. They’d had this argument before, and his father refused to listen. He cherished his grudges and never willingly let them go.

His father shoveled in the last bite of salmon and swallowed. “Maybe you can get Bestemor’s on the cheap now that Frida’s gone. You can get great deals at estate sales.”

Seb winced at his father’s crass comment, but he had a point. Bestemor’s served homey Norwegian breakfast and lunch food, with a big helping of *hygge*. It was the perfect complement to The Beacon’s upscale epicurean menu. Maybe he should look into buying it.