

# A STRANGER'S GAME by Colleen Coble

## EXCERPT

### 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 iuvat.* "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.