The Lost Daughter

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Extract

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Corinne

Chapter One

Raleigh, North Carolina

She couldn't concentrate on making love. No matter how tenderly or passionately or intimately Ken touched her, her mind was miles away. It was a little after five on Tuesday afternoon, the time they protected from meetings or dinner with friends or anything else that might interfere with their getting together, and usually Corinne relished the lovemaking with her fiancé. Today, though, she wanted to fast-forward to the pillow talk. She had so much to say.

Ken rolled off her with a sigh, and she saw him smile in the late-afternoon light as he rested his hand on her stomach. Did that mean something? Smiling with his hand on her belly? She hoped so but didn't dare ask him. Not yet. Ken loved the afterglow—the slow untangling of their limbs and the gradual return to reality—so she would have to be patient. She stroked her fingers through his thick, ash-blond hair as she waited for his breathing to settle down. Their baby was going to beautiful, no doubt about it.

"Mmm," Ken purred as he nuzzled her shoulder. Thin bands of

light slipped into the room through the blinds, leaving luminous stripes on the sheet over his legs. "I love you, Cor."

"I love you, too." She wrapped her arm around him, trying to sense if he was alert enough to listen to her. "I did something amazing today," she began. "*Two* somethings, actually."

"What did you do?" He sounded interested, if not quite awake.

"First, I took the 540 to work."

His head darted up from his pillow. "You *did?*"

"Uh-huh."

"How was it?"

"Excellent." She'd had sweaty palms the whole time, but she'd managed. For the past few years, she'd taught fourth grade in a school eight miles from their house, and she'd never once had the courage to take the expressway to get there. She'd stuck to the tiny back roads, curling her way through residential neighborhoods, dodging cars as they backed out of driveways. "It took me about ten minutes to get to work," she said. "It usually takes me forty."

"I'm proud of you," he said. "I know how hard that must have been to do."

"And then I did another amazing thing," she said.

"I haven't forgotten. Two things, you said. What other amazing thing did you do?"

"I went on the field trip to the museum with my class, instead of staying at school like I'd planned."

"Now you're scaring me," he teased. "Are you on some new drug or something?"

"Am I remarkable or what?" she asked.

"You are definitely the most remarkable woman I know." He leaned over to kiss her. "You're my brave, beautiful, red-haired girl."

She'd walked inside the museum as though she did it every day of the week, and she bet no one knew that her heart was pounding and her throat felt as though it was tightening around her windpipe. She guarded her phobias carefully. She could never let any of her students' parents—or worse, her fellow teachers—know.

"Maybe you're trying to do too much too fast," Ken said.

She shook her head. "I'm on a roll," she said. "Tomorrow, I plan to step into the elevator at the doctor's office. Just step into it," she added hastily. "I'll take the stairs. But stepping into it will be a first step. So to speak. Then maybe next week, I'll take it up a floor." She shuddered at the thought of the elevator doors closing behind her, locking her in a cubicle not much bigger than a coffin.

"Pretty soon you won't need me anymore."

"I'm always going to need you." She wondered how serious he was with that statement. It was true that she needed Ken in ways most people didn't need a partner. He was the driver anytime they traveled more than a few miles from home. He was her rescuer when she'd have a panic attack in the supermarket, standing in the middle of an aisle with a full cart of groceries. He was the one holding on to her arm as he guided her through the mall or the Concert Hall or wherever they happened to be when her heart started pounding. "I would just like to not need you that way. And I *have* to do this, Ken. I want that job."

She'd been offered a position that would start the following September, training teachers in Wake County to use a reading curriculum in which she'd become expert. That meant driving. A *lot* of driving. There would be six-lane highways to travel and bridges to cross and elevators she would have no choice but to ride. Sep-

tember was nearly a year away, and she was determined to have her fears mastered by then.

"Kenny." She pulled closer to him, nervous about the topic she was about to broach. "There's something else we really need to talk about."

His muscles tightened ever so slightly beneath her hands.

"The pregnancy," he said.

She hated when he called it *the pregnancy.* She guessed she'd misread his smile earlier. "About the baby," she said. "Right."

He let out a sigh. "Cor, I've thought about it and I just don't think it's the right time. Especially with you starting a new job next year. How much stress do you need?"

"It would work out," she said. "The baby's due in late May. I'd take the end of the year off and have the summer to get used to being a mom and find day care and everything." She smoothed her hand over her stomach. Was it her imagination or was there already a slight slope to her belly? "We've been together so long," she continued. "It just doesn't make sense for me to have an abortion when I'm almost twenty-seven and you're thirty-eight and we can afford to have a child." She didn't say what else she was thinking: *Of course, we'd have to get married. Finally.* They'd been engaged and living together for four years, and if her pregnancy forced them to set a date, that was fine with her.

He gave her shoulders a squeeze, then sat up. "Let's talk about it later, okay?" he said.

"When?" she asked. "We can't keep putting this off."

"Later tonight," he promised.

She followed his gaze to the phone on the night table. The message light was blinking. He picked up the receiver and punched

in their voice-mail code, then listened. "Three messages," he said, hitting another button on the phone. The light in the room had grown dim, but she was still able to see him roll his eyes as he listened to the first message.

"Your mother," he said. "She says it's urgent."

"I'm sure." Corinne managed a laugh. Now that Dru had spilled the news of her pregnancy to their parents, she'd probably be getting urgent calls every day. Her mother had already e-mailed her to tell her that redheads were more prone to hemorrhaging after delivery. *Thanks a heap, Mom.* She hadn't bothered to reply. She hadn't spoken with her mother more than a few times in the past three years.

"There's one from Dru, too," Ken said. "She says to call her the minute you get the message."

That was more worrisome. An urgent message from her mother was easy to ignore. From her sister, less so. "I hope there's not anything wrong," she said, sitting up.

"They would have called you on your cell if it was so important," he said, still holding the phone to his ear.

"True." She got out of bed and pulled on her short green robe, then picked up her phone from the dresser and turned it on. "Except, I didn't have my cell on today because of the field trip, so—"

"What the—" Ken frowned as he listened to another message. "What the hell are you talking about?" He shouted into the phone. Glancing at his watch, he walked across the room to turn on the television.

"What's going on?" Corinne watched him click through the channels until he reached WIGH, the Raleigh station for which he was a reporter.

"That was a message from Darren," he said, as he punched another phone number into the receiver. "He's kicking me off the Gleason story."

"What?" She was incredulous. "Why?"

"He said it was for obvious reasons, like I should know what the hell he's talking about." He looked at his watch again and she knew he was waiting for the six-o'clock news. "Come on, come *on,"* he said to the television or the phone—or maybe both. "Give me Darren!" he yelled into the receiver. "Well, where is he?" He hung up and started dialing again.

"They can't pull you off that story," she said. "That would be so unfair after all the work you've done on it." The Gleason story was his baby. He'd even attracted national attention for it. People were talking about him being a candidate for the Rosedale Award.

"Darren said, 'Did you know about this?' like I've been keeping something from him." Ken ran his fingers through his hair. "Oh, don't give me your damn voice mail," he said into the phone. "Dammit." She felt his impatience as he waited to leave a message. "What the hell do you mean, I'm off the Gleason story?" he shouted. "Call me!"

He tossed the receiver onto the bed, then pounded the top of the television with his fist as though he could make the news come on sooner through force. "I don't believe this," he said. "When I left the courthouse today, the jury hadn't sentenced him yet and they were supposed to reconvene tomorrow. Maybe I heard it wrong. Maybe I missed the sentencing. Damn!"

Corinne looked down at the cell phone in her hand as she cycled through the list of callers. "I have five messages, all from my parents' house," she said. Something *was* wrong. "I'd better call—"

"Shh," Ken said, turning up the volume as the brassy theme music introduced the news, and anchorman Paul Provost appeared on the screen.

"Good evening, Triangle," Paul said, referring to the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area. "Just hours before Timothy Gleason was to be sentenced for the 1977 murder of Genevieve Russell and her unborn child, a shocking revelation shed doubt on his guilt."

"What?" Ken stared at the TV.

Footage of a small arts-and-crafts-style bungalow filled the screen. The roof looked wet from a recent rain, and the trees were lush, the leaves just starting to turn.

"Is that…?" Corinne pressed her hand to her mouth. She knew exactly how the air smelled in the small front yard of the house. It would be thick and sweet with the damp arrival of autumn. "Oh, my God."

Through the front door, a middle-aged woman limped onto the porch. She looked small and tired. And she looked scared.

"What the hell is going on?" Ken said.

Corinne stood next to him, clutching his arm, as her mother cleared her throat.

"Timothy Gleason is not guilty of murdering Genevieve Russell," she said. "And I can prove it because I was there."

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