

RIPTIDE

Eric E. Wright

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RIPTIDE

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Harbourlight Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2014

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-301-8

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-300-1

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those who struggle with the fallout of divorce in a manner consistent with the standards of Scripture and the grace of God. May God enable them rise above pain and trauma. It is also dedicated to their friends who seek to comfort and support them and also to the innocent victims of divorce, the children.

I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to the Revision online critiquing group, the Warkworth Writers' Group and the Brighton Writers' Group for their invaluable and very encouraging input.

The books, *Shrimp* by Jack and Anne Rudloe and *An Unreasonable Woman* by Diane Wilson have contributed greatly to my understanding of shrimping and appreciation for those who quest for pink gold.

I am grateful to M. Jamie West and Nicola Martinez of the Pelican Book Group for applying their editing skills to the story. They helped immensely in improving the manuscript.

I'm thankful for my agent, Les Stobbe's belief in the value of my scribbling.

I'm awed by the love of Mary Helen, my bride of fifty-two years, and God's grace has led us through the years.

Praise

"Riptide's twists and turns kept my emotions on high alert! Great read!" Brenda J Wood, author and speaker.

"Riptide draws the reader immediately into the exotic world of St. Simons Island where Ashlyn Forsyth is dumped by her husband into his secret life involving high level criminals, FBI, and Russian mafia. This suspense driven plot engages the reader's mind and heart as we follow Ashlyn's unwitting adventure towards a new life." Pat Calder, author.

"Riptide engages the reader as we see Ashlyn develop her relationships with her daughter, the people she meets on St Simons Island and Remy. She ends up a stronger character after all her adventures—and there are many of those. The pace is fast." Felicity Sidnell, writer

1

Craig and I were standing in the congregation at First Baptist Church on St. Simons Island, Georgia, singing when he stopped and handed me a sealed envelope.

“What’s this?” I whispered as I turned to him, but he was already striding up the aisle towards the exit.

My stomach knotted, the bulky envelope growing heavy in my hand. I stared at it, unthinking, and then glanced at the heavy oak doors. Craig was gone.

Forcing my mind to focus on something other than the confusion and dread swimming through my head, I realized that the music had stopped and I was the only one standing. With a flush creeping up my neck, I grabbed my purse and fled. Fortunately, this wasn’t our home congregation in New York where everyone knew us.

Outside, I caught sight of Craig getting into a silver sedan. I peered at the driver. A woman. Marlee, one of the investment advisors in his firm? What was she doing here?

Marlee stared at me over her shoulder, grimaced, and then hit the gas. The wheels kicked up gravel as she accelerated out of the parking lot.

I stared after them with my mouth open until the fluttering clouds of Spanish moss hanging from the ancient oaks hid them from view.

I gazed at the envelope, and then jammed it in my

purse. No need to read it—yet. Instinct told me what it contained.

Sorry, Ashlyn, but this is not working. I've tried, but I just don't love you anymore. I want a divorce. Blah, blah, blah.

Our attempt to recover what we'd lost by spending two weeks on romantic St. Simons Island had failed. Was this it, then? Twenty-one years and two kids meant nothing? How would I explain to Tiffany and Tyler?

Something black and terrible began to gnaw at my insides as I searched the parking lot for our car. Tears coursed down my face. At least he left the car.

I fumbled in my purse for the keys, opened the door, and jumped in. Skidding out of the parking lot, I drove with one hand and pounded the dashboard with the other. The arrogant brute. A dear-John letter during a church service. Real macho. Well, two could play at that game. If he thought I'd just roll over and play dead, he was sadly mistaken. I'd make him regret this day.

Gritting my teeth and swiping at the tears I couldn't quell, I drove without thought while rage ricocheted inside me. When I ran out of road, I screeched to a halt, slammed the door and set off down the beach. Oblivious of cruising terns and diving pelicans, I walked aimlessly on the hard sand kicking every shell I saw, imagining it was Craig's vaunted manhood.

In spite of my attempts to avoid softer patches, the heels of my Sunday pumps sank into the sand, and I tumbled backwards. For a few minutes I lay there, not caring about the effect

ocean water would have on my best dress. Then I sat up, slipped off my pumps and stared at them.

Aren't heels archaic anyway; as archaic as marriage? As outmoded as promises—'til death do us part, for better or worse, in sickness and in health? Is that what I am, prehistoric? The model Christian wife; gentle, obedient, faithful? Well if I get my hands on him again, I'll show him how gentle I am—and how faithful.

Tears began to stream down my face anew. I thought of all the advice I'd given clients in my family therapy practice. Just be patient with one another. Hah. Forgive one another. Double hah. Not so easy now to spout glib clichés about being forgiving.

As I sat there in the damp sand feeding my rage, the scrape of a beach chair on a deck made me aware of how strange I must appear from the cottages fronting the ocean. Grasping my shoes in one hand, I leapt to my feet and set off barefoot down the beach.

I must have walked for miles, oblivious to my surroundings until I found myself on a wooden pier staring at the water swirling at my feet. How had my life come to this? The face that stared up at me looked otherworldly, a phantom with red-rimmed brown eyes, wild fawn-colored hair, and a brooding mouth. I reached up to touch the mole on my left cheek—to see if it was really pulsating or just a trick of light. I shivered.

“Are you all right, ma'am?” The shout woke me from my brooding.

I became aware of the reek of fish and the shrieks of seagulls wheeling overhead. I frowned as other sounds pierced my consciousness: the creak of ropes, the scrape of metal, the lapping of waves. I turned towards the voice. “What?”

Two piercing, sapphire eyes set in a leathery face looked down on me from the deck of a shrimp boat.

My mouth fell open. What was I doing here?

"Please ma'am, move back from the edge of the dock. It's dangerous with the tide coming in so strongly."

I stared at my bare feet. They curled over the very edge of the dock. I swayed. A hand reached out and grabbed my arm, pulling me back from the brink.

I turned towards the man who had jumped down on the dock to keep me from falling.

"I'm sorry. I was distracted...thank you."

The man who held my arm in his massive, calloused hand had bushy brows and a stubbly, creased face. He wore a captain's hat perched on sun-bleached hair. My nose wrinkled at the pungent odor of fish that wafted from his boat.

He dropped my arm and moved back a step. "I thought you'd fall. The water here in the sound is treacherous."

I reached up and patted my windblown hair. "My mind was on some...some bad news."

He cocked his head to one side and squinted at me. "Are you sure you'll be all right? I can drive you back to your hotel."

"No, no, I'm fine." I grimaced. "Although I must be a sight."

He crossed his muscled arms over his faded gingham shirt. "A sight? You are that; right perty."

I looked down, and then turned away and headed back up the pier as a flush began to creep up my neck for the second time that day.

Riptide

2

Back at the beach house I tossed my ruined patent leather shoes onto the porch and collapsed into a lounge chair. My head throbbed. I should've eaten something, but I couldn't bear the thought of food.

My purse hid incendiary cargo—Craig's letter. But instead of opening the purse and extracting the letter, I reached down to finger a broken toenail. My feet were a mess. My barefoot ramble along the beach had left them stinging from scratches and cuts where I'd stepped on shells and caught a sliver from the dock. So much for the expensive pedicure I'd had in high hopes of weaving together the tattered strands of our marriage.

Three days of effort, that's all he'd given it before taking off with that tart in her silver Lexus. And I'd thought Marlee was not only one of his business partners, but a friend. A couple of years earlier, we had even been close. She babysat my kids; we had girls' nights out. Craig and I had included her in our family barbecues.

I felt the rage build up within. Looking back, I could see that they'd been too chummy, sharing private glances when they thought I wasn't looking. How could she?

Was I overreacting? But what other reason could she have for being here on the island—

waiting to pick up Craig—unless they were having an affair?

I'd trusted her, loved her as a Christian sister, and she'd stabbed me in the back. Stolen Craig. Or was Craig responsible? Had it all started the time he drove her home when her car broke down? I'd been right to worry about his wandering eyes.

I opened my purse, took out the bulky envelope, and tore it open. A legal document, a note, and some hundred-dollar bills held together with a paper clip fell into my lap. I tossed the money aside. Did he think he could buy me off? The legal document, as I'd feared, was notice that he was filing for divorce. I tossed it after the money and turned to the handwritten note.

Ashlyn,

Our marriage is just not working out. No matter how often we've tried, it remains a shell. Spending more time talking—arguing—isn't going to help. This holiday has only made it clearer. Except for the kids we have little in common anymore.

Don't bring up the Bible and talk about an eternal covenant and all that stuff. I'm sure God doesn't expect me to keep on living a lie.

I don't blame you. We're just not in love anymore. It happens all the time, so please accept it. You don't love me either, or you wouldn't freeze me out.

I've applied for a divorce. Please don't contest it. And please understand that I never wanted to hurt you. You've been a great mother to Tiffany and Tyler. Blame me if you like, but I just can't continue with the kind of armed truce we've negotiated over the last five or six years. The kids are independent now and very resilient. They'll get over it.

I've enclosed \$700 to cover any bills I may have

forgotten. The beach house is paid for until the end of September. Oh, and Tiffany's tuition is paid through the end of next term. I've sent a money order for Tyler to pick up when he gets to Melbourne.

I'm dropping out of sight for a while so you won't be able to contact me.

Craig

I threw the note after the money and bit my lip in an attempt to smother the storm rising within. Not even a *Dear Ashlyn* or *Love, Craig*. This was the work of a cool-headed financial consultant, cutting his losses. The creep must have been planning his exit for some time; never meant to use our time at the beach to sort things out. No wonder people gave him money to invest. How could I have been so blind, so naïve?

My lips trembled. I was determined not to cry again. But despite my efforts to swallow my grief, tears gushed down my face as I remembered some of the good times we'd had.

A couple walking hand in hand on the beach road glanced my way. I fled into the beach house where I slipped off my dress and tossed it over a chair. In the bathroom, I washed my face with water as cold as I could stand. Taking a deep breath, I collapsed onto the toilet seat and looked around.

Craig's toothbrush was gone along with his toiletries. His robe no longer hung on the hook behind the door. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of something under the sink. I reached down and picked up a small fragment of hard plastic.

Someone had cut up a credit card. All I could make out were the first two letters of a name, a

“C” and an “r”. Craig? Why would he cut up one of his cards?

I marched into the bedroom and flung open the closet door. Empty hangers mocked me. His bureau drawer was also empty. I scanned the room. Gone were his cell phone, his travel alarm, the book on offshore investments he'd been reading, his briefcase, and suitcase.

All that remained of him was an indentation on the bed-sheets and the mug in which I'd brought him his morning coffee.

So cold and calculating! Blast! He must have arranged for Marlee to pick up everything while we were in church.

Craig, I hate you! And Marlee, I despise you.

I stared at my image in the full-length mirror. Red circles rimmed my eyes. My shoulder length brown hair looked mousy and dull. Even sucking in my breath I couldn't hide the thickening waist and the slight bulge of my tummy. Nothing could disguise the stretch marks from two pregnancies.

I picked up the mug he'd left and hurled it at the mirror. It bounced twice and rolled intact under the bed while the mirror shattered into a thousand silvered pieces. How ironic. He had waltzed away to start a new life while I was left to pick up the pieces.

I stood there looking at the scattered fragments and thinking how useless mirrors were to reflect what I'd actually contributed to this marriage. Thousands of rides to and from school, ten thousand meals prepared, a hundred thousand dishes washed.

With a sigh, I avoided the shards of mirror on the floor, pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, and ran a hand through my hair. Then, slamming the bedroom

door, I went into the kitchen to put on the kettle for a cup of tea.

While the kettle was coming to a boil, I rummaged in the cupboards for teabags and something to eat. Crackers. A can of soup. Another of spaghetti sauce. And no tea bags. But there was a box of chocolates.

I grabbed the box, turned off the element under the kettle, and strode into the living room. Flopping on the sofa, I opened the box. Chocolate truffles, almond nougats, and coconut clusters stared up at me seductively. With a deep sigh, I closed the box and set it on the floor beside me.

How many times had I welcomed distraught women into my office and prayed with them about bingeing on chocolate, or wine, or shopping? Now it was my turn.

Ashlyn Forsyth, the esteemed family counselor, needed counsel; the dedicated Christian savoring a corrosive rage, plotting revenge.

I forced myself to stop acting like a jilted teenager. To grow up. To remind myself that I'd seen this coming for a couple of years.

One thing was clear, I wouldn't be going back to my practice for some time. How could I face more marital sob-stories and spout more platitudes. I'd have to get my secretary to cancel all my appointments—give her some time off.

What about the kids? No need to call Tiffany yet. Break it to her slowly. Let her enjoy the first few weeks of her new term. Tyler, hiking in the outback, wouldn't call in for a week or so. That left me a couple of weeks to figure out what to do with the wreckage of my life.

I got up and wandered around the living room; gazed out the picture window at the turquoise ocean and the cloudless sky. A couple of terns wheeled and dived for fish. Why couldn't the sea reflect the storm within?

My stomach rumbled. I frowned. How could I be hungry when my world had shifted on its axis? True, I hadn't eaten since the night before; we'd slept too late to grab some breakfast before dashing off to church.

I wouldn't give Craig the satisfaction of turning me into another middle-aged excuse for a woman. I'd attend to the basics. Take it one step at a time. Get some food. Read a good book. Go for a long walk. Life would go on—eventually.

In the bathroom I brushed my hair and dashed on some fresh makeup. Then I grabbed my purse and headed out the door. As I turned to lock up, I noticed the divorce papers and money I'd tossed on the veranda.

I tucked the money into my purse and threw the divorce papers inside the cottage.

With a grim smile I tore Craig's note into tiny pieces and tossed them into the air. Littering? So what.

In the village, I parked in front of the Shrimpboat Café, where I could be fairly sure not to run into any of the Sunday church crowd. Inside, I paused and glanced around. Four tough looking men occupied a table to the left of the door. A net decorated a wall to the right. On every other free space hung a requisite, but bewildering array of fishing paraphernalia.

A chunky blonde with weary eyes and too much make-up smiled. "Lots'a choice, darlin'. Pick yuhself a table."

I selected a table off to the right in a corner.

The waitress passed me a menu. "Tea?"

"Uh, no, do you have coffee?"

"Do we have coffee? Darlin', you came to the right place."

She left to fetch coffee, while I turned to the menu. The original prices had been covered with white-out and new prices written in.

Having settled on the shrimp dish with hush puppies, fries, and coleslaw, I set down the menu and glanced around in an attempt to distract my mind. The café-style checkered curtains that framed the lower half of the front windows looked clean, but faded. Beyond the four men, a couple with two children occupied another table. The boy tried to stuff a fist-full of fries in his mouth. His sister laughed. A decade ago, that could have been us.

Lottie Jane, according to her nametag, set down a mug of coffee and some creamers on the table. "What'll it be, darlin'?"

I gave her my order and sat back to see if her promise of a good cup of coffee was just whistlin' Dixie. I'd learned from Craig to enjoy bold coffee and turn down the insipid stuff.

How long before thoughts of Craig would quit popping up in my mind? I sat back sipping the coffee and trying to purge him from my thoughts.

The tinkle of the bell over the door interrupted my reverie. Three men entered wearing stained jeans and heavy work-shirts open half-way down their chests. Two of them wore baseball caps advertising some obscure product. The third sported a weathered captain's cap at a jaunty angle. It was the burly

shrimper who'd grabbed my arm to keep me from falling off the pier.

I quickly picked up the menu and pretended to peruse the meal selection.

Lottie Jane arrived with a huge platter of food. "So, what's the verdict?"

Stunned by the quantity of food in front of me, I stuttered. "Pardon?"

"The coffee...thinking of switching to tea?"

"No, the coffee is wonderful. The best I've tasted since leaving home."

She folded her arms. "Our customers think so. None of that dishwater those other guys serve."

I tried to smile, but only succeeded in grimacing.

"Just visiting?"

"Ah, yeah."

"So where're yuh from?"

I speared a shrimp with my fork. "Uh, New York."

"I can still hear a Carolina drawl. Good, them Yankees haven't gobbled yuh up yet. Well, enjoy the food, dearie. I'll be back with more coffee."

The food definitely outdid the décor. It was delicious, but I quickly lost my appetite.

Lottie Jane returned to fill my cup for the third time. "Not hungry, honey?"

"There's enough there for a—a sea captain. It's just that I'm not used to so much. But the food is delicious. My compliments to your cook. I'll certainly be back."

She smiled. "I'll tell Claude. He'll be pleased."

I handed her my credit card.

A few minutes later she returned with the card. "I'm sorry dearie, but this card is coming back invalid."

"What? That can't be."

"I tried three times."

I frowned as I passed her another card. "OK, put it on my other card."

My gaze followed her as she returned to the cash register. After several tries she turned towards me and shook her head.

I felt a bead of sweat trickle down my back. This couldn't be happening. I grabbed some bills from my wallet, seeing the bundle of bills he'd left me beside it. I tossed a couple of bucks on the table and strode to the cash register. After retrieving my now useless card and paying cash, I hastened from the café.

The Southern benediction, "Y'all come back now," followed me out the door.

Had he cancelled our cards and taken out new ones without my knowledge?

I couldn't imagine Craig stooping so low.

3

I drove to the beach house in a daze. When I stopped, I found I'd been gripping the steering wheel so tight that it took me a few minutes of wiggling my fingers to restore feeling.

I sat there in the car taking deep breaths and trying to stuff down the panic rising within. This couldn't be happening: far from home with no plastic to pay the bills. How could both of my credit cards be invalid at the same time? I'd just used them on the trip down from New York. Fluke?

No, more like a deliberate act of my callous husband. Ex-husband? But would he be so vindictive? My mind went to the morning's scenario, and I shook my head. Scheming and devious, yes, but I couldn't see him as actually malicious...or could I? The piece I'd found in the bathroom showed he'd cut up at least one of his own cards.

Opening my purse, I took out the bundle of bills he'd clipped together. I flipped through them. Yes, \$700, as he'd said. He must have known I'd be in trouble, and left me some cash to tide me over. *How thoughtful!* Was that what I was worth, \$700, the price of a worn-out car, an old clunker that didn't actually run? I pounded the steering wheel with my fists until a sharp pain in my right hand made me stop.

Well, my friend Julie was right; I was too gullible. Dumb. My trust in Craig had blinded me to reality.

Swiping at the tears that began to well up, I