

ADVANCE PRAISE

“In *Crude Ambition*, Patricia Hunt Holmes shows she knows Texas in the way Grisham knows Mississippi—politics, environment, strong men and strong women, egos, oil, arrogance, influence and hunger for power. I don’t think anyone could have nailed it better.”

—Bill Sarpalius, former US Congressman
and author of *The Grand Duke of Boys’ Ranch*

“I just finished *Crude Ambition*, and it’s a winner. Well researched and compellingly written by a true raconteur. A Texas story at its best.”

—former Texas Senator Don Adams

“A lively feminist thriller—set in the Texas oil and gas world.”

—Elizabeth Gregory, PhD, director of Women’s Studies
and professor of English, University of Houston

“*Crude Ambition* is the story of ambitious people in Texas, some of whom are crude, and some are good people who are ambitious for the right reasons. The plot takes us into a high-end law firm in Houston, a ranch in the Texas Hill Country, a fancy beach house in Galveston, and a company where the new wealth in fracking is an incentive to do almost anything. These interlocking places are the stage where stories of violence, betrayal, revenge, and loss play out—as well as generosity, love, and ultimately justice. The legal issues raised are eye-opening.”

—Lois Zamora, professor of English and
Comparative Literature, University of Houston

“After leaving the Texas Hill Country to fulfill her dreams, Carolyn Page faces numerous crises of conscience in both her professional and personal lives, as she excels and works tirelessly to become a partner in a prestigious Houston law firm. In her second novel, *Crude Ambition*, Patricia Hunt Holmes weaves a great story of the good and evil that exists in the booming Texas oil industry. Patricia has developed a rich cast of characters to deliver a riveting story that is sure to please.”

—David Rohlfing, author of the Detective Sasha Frank Mystery Series, *Deliberate Duplicity* and *Cold Consequences*

“*Crude Ambition* is a great read. It is an authentic look at big law in Houston and the Texas oil business. Patricia Hunt Holmes weaves a story of ambition, greed, romance, and revenge that kept me turning the pages until all the just desserts were served.”

—Marc Grossberg, JD, author of *The Best People: A Tale of Trials and Errors*

a novel

CRUDE
AMBITION

PATRICIA HUNT HOLMES



RIVER GROVE
BOOKS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

This book is dedicated to my two daughters,
who prove that by working hard at what they love,
young women can be happy and successful in
both their professional and family lives.

“I’ve come to believe that each of us has a personal calling that’s as unique as a fingerprint—and that the best way to succeed is to discover what you love and then find a way to offer it as a service to others, working hard and also allowing the energy of the universe to lead you.”

—Oprah Winfrey

“You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still come out of it.”

—Maya Angelou

“Ambition is a dream with a V8 engine.”

—Elvis Presley

“**W**here is Laura?” Carolyn asked again, this time shouting. Despite the tremble in her voice, instincts told her she needed to be firm to get through to the men standing in front of her. It was two a.m., and Paul and Trey were barefoot and had fresh sand on their legs and feet. They were also her bosses. Under normal circumstances, she would never use such a peremptory tone with men in their position. They had the power to cut her career short right then and there. But it was clear that they were drunk and seemed confused and upset. And Laura was missing.

Like the beach house itself, the living area was enormous. The house belonged to Paul Robinson’s father, who was a successful, independent oil man. He used it primarily to entertain clients and friends while Paul’s mother, who disliked the salt and sand, stayed in their River Oaks home or spent summer months in Aspen. The architecture of the house was contemporary, with lots of windows and decks, but the interior décor was over-the-top “Go Texas,” complete with cowhide rugs and a stuffed deer trophy over the mantle. The east wall of the living room had a giant window looking out on the Gulf of Mexico. During the day it provided a spectacular view of the beach and water. Now, clouds covered the moon and only the small white lights on the oil tankers patiently waiting out at sea to enter the Houston Ship Channel pierced the darkness. Carolyn couldn’t see Laura anywhere.

She recognized Peter Kaufman, who she knew to be a managing

partner at one of the good midsize public accounting firms. She didn't think he had been at the party the day before. She was surprised to see him now, sunk in a big leather club chair, looking down at his glasses, which he was wiping with a white handkerchief. He didn't look at her. Beyond Peter, another man was standing with his back to Carolyn, looking out the window. He was very tall, dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved, white cotton shirt. He had a lit cigar in his hand, and the smoke from it gave off a distasteful smell. She didn't recognize him, so she ignored him for now.

"Laura couldn't have come downstairs without going through this room," Carolyn said. "Where is she?" She was looking directly at Paul this time. It was clear that he and Trey had recently been outside. "Did she go out on the beach with you?"

"No!" Paul and Trey both protested.

Carolyn gritted her teeth. Until ten minutes ago, she had been sleeping upstairs in the guest bedroom nearest the stairs. The sound of loud agitated male voices woke her. She looked at the bed next to her own to see if the noise had awakened Laura, the summer intern she had brought to the party at the beach house the previous day. But Laura's bed was empty, so Carolyn went downstairs to look for her.

She was wide-awake now, alarmed at the vehement tone of Paul and Trey's responses. With reluctance, Paul pointed to the dining room, which was around the corner. Carolyn walked over to it. In the middle was the big oak table, which had been filled with food and drinks during the day. It was almost bare now, the white tablecloth half on and half off. Two Corona bottles were turned on their side, the beer and lime slices spilling out into a sticky mess. More beer bottles were broken on the terracotta tile floor, and a tray of tortilla chips lay upside down among them, chips scattered everywhere. The room smelled like beer.

Carolyn slowly walked around the table to the opposite side, where the tablecloth was draped toward the floor. Laura lay there facedown,

blood matted in her blonde hair, her left arm in a twisted position. She was wearing just her blouse. Her panties and capris were crumpled in a ball a few feet away. She was not moving.

“Oh my God!” Carolyn gasped, sinking to her knees beside Laura.

“What happened?” she yelled back to the men in the other room. *Something very wrong has happened here, she thought. And these guys are useless. Keep your wits about you, Carolyn.*

Still no answer. “Have you called 911 yet?” Carolyn asked, turning to where Paul now stood. His posture slumped.

“No!” he replied. “We can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

“They would call the police.” Paul stumbled and grabbed onto the table. As he did, the rest of the tablecloth fell to the floor, causing the remaining bottles to crash to the Saltillo tile.

“*That’s* what you’re worried about?” Carolyn choked out. “How about this girl? She’s bleeding. Maybe she’s dead.”

Trey groaned.

Carolyn stooped down to get a closer look. She put her fingers on a vein in Laura’s neck to see if she could find a pulse. *Thank God, she thought. She’s alive.*

“My father will kill me if he finds out about this. Not to mention the firm. All of us could get in trouble, maybe fired. You too, Carolyn. Think of that,” Paul said in a rush. He had a reputation for being cool and in control. But clearly he was panicking.

“All I know is that Laura needs medical attention right now. If you aren’t going to get it for her, I’ll take her to a hospital myself,” Carolyn said, regaining her confidence. “Assuming she is still breathing when we get there.”

Paul went back into the living room and sank down on a couch, unable to steady himself on his feet any longer.

“And what if the police stop you and give you a blood alcohol test, Carolyn? You might get arrested,” Paul argued.

"I don't *believe* you all," Carolyn said. "What were you going to do? Drop her body in the bay?"

"Well, that's one idea," Paul murmured.

Carolyn looked at him in disgust.

"I was just joking," he said quickly, looking away. "I know. It's not a joking matter. This is terrible, terrible . . ."

Trey walked unsteadily into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of Ozarka off of the counter, knocking over an open Bayer aspirin bottle, which fell on the floor and scattered pills everywhere.

Carolyn gently rolled Laura over, being careful with her bent left arm, and touched the young woman's face. Having grown up on a ranch, she was accustomed to seeing injured animals and people. She had treated sprains, cuts, and bone breaks on ranch hands before. But this was different. This was a young woman for whom she was responsible. Whatever had happened, it didn't look accidental. She guessed that Laura's arm was broken, and there was a bruise forming on her cheek. She was relieved to see that Laura was breathing, even though she was unconscious.

"Who's going to help carry her to my car?" Carolyn asked Trey and Paul. She scanned the room. When she got to the tall man in the jeans, she asked, "Who is that?"

"Just a friend of ours from UT," Paul said. "He and Peter were in the neighborhood and dropped by."

"In this neighborhood? On the west end of the island? At two in the morning?" Carolyn's voice was cold.

"It doesn't matter," Paul mumbled. Then he followed Trey into the kitchen.

"Maybe Carolyn is right, Paul. Maybe we should call 911," Trey said, shifting from one foot to another.

"No, this is my house and we can't do that," Paul said with finality in his voice.

"I'll help get her to the car, Carolyn," Trey said as he walked toward

the dining room. "I am so sorry, so very sorry. I'm sure nobody meant to hurt her."

"Shut up, Trey," Paul barked.

"Really?" Carolyn said sarcastically, as she struggled to put Laura's panties and capris on her unresponsive body. She wanted to ask how they had come off, but then again she didn't really want to know the answer. *I can't believe this is happening*, she thought, automatically snatching her purse and Laura's from where they had left them earlier in the day.

Trey lifted Laura under her shoulders with her head resting against his chest occasionally lolling forward. Carolyn carried her legs. Laura wasn't heavy, but they were trying not to move her arm more than necessary. Trey backed out of the door, which had been left open when he and Paul came in from the beach. There weren't any lights on in the neighboring houses and no moonlight. It was dark, and the sand between the house and driveway was soft underfoot, so they moved slowly so as not to trip. A party was apparently still going on in a house at the other end of the development because they could hear faint rock music.

After Carolyn and Trey carefully placed the unconscious girl into the back seat of Carolyn's BMW 3, Paul followed them outside and roughly grabbed Carolyn's arm. "Take her to the ER at UTMB. My brother, Brian, is a resident. I'll call him and let him know you're coming."

Paul started to stumble back to the house, then stopped. He turned around. "And Carolyn, tell them that she was really drunk and just fell."

• • •

There were no other cars on the two-lane beach road at 2:30 a.m. on a Sunday morning in early August. There weren't any streetlights, and it was pitch black until Carolyn drove up onto the seawall. At that point, she began to hear the incoming tide roaring and crashing against the rocks. To her left were condos and stores, which were all dark now.

She could feel the tightness in her neck as she grasped the steering wheel of her car. Her feet hurt, and she realized she hadn't put on shoes before she left the house. As she drove, she talked to the unconscious girl, telling Laura that they were on their way to get help. She didn't know what she would say to the doctors. *Why were Laura's clothes half off? Why did Peter and that other man show up after midnight? Who was he, anyway?*

Less than twenty-four hours ago, Carolyn and Laura had made the forty-five-mile drive from downtown Houston to Galveston Island. Carolyn was a second-year associate at Edwards and Harrison, one of the oldest and largest law firms in Houston. Laura was a rising third-year law student at the University of Pennsylvania, one week into a 2001 summer internship at the firm. The recruiting office had assigned Carolyn to be Laura's associate sponsor.

They were on their way to a party at the beach house on Galveston in the exclusive enclave of homes known as Pirate's Beach. But this was no recruiting event scheduled by the firm; it was a private party. Carolyn was surprised and flattered when Paul's secretary called her with the invitation for Laura and her. She knew Paul was a firm superstar, but she had never worked with him, or even had a conversation with him of any substantial length.

Laura had been excited about going to the event. On the drive south, past the University of Houston with its distinctive, architecturally Greek-looking school buildings, she asked Carolyn lots of questions about the host, who else would be there, and how she should act. She was enthusiastic about the clerkship in general and carried on a lively conversation, asking all the right questions about how the associate program operated, whether women were mentored, and the chances of making partner. Carolyn liked Laura immediately. *She's done her homework and is ambitious. That's good.*

For the next several minutes of their drive, Laura quietly stared out the window at the many strip centers, shabby older apartment

complexes, and billboards between the Loop 610 Intersection and Beltway 8, the two main highways looping around the city, many of which had signs in Spanish. It was a heavily Hispanic and poorer area of town.

“Why did you decide to take a clerkship in Houston?” Carolyn asked her, after they passed the intersection with Beltway 8 that separated the dense urban area of the city from the more residential and predominantly white suburbs to the south. “You’re a long way from Philadelphia. Do you have family or friends here?”

“No,” Laura replied. “I just decided to choose a city in another part of the country that feels like it has . . . possibilities. I’m really interested in your oil and gas practice. The business journals I read say that energy is only going to grow as an industry and there will be a great need for lawyers.”

“You’re brave to come so far from home,” Carolyn said. “With your grades you could have had an internship with any of the Wall Street firms. Of course, they don’t do energy work.”

Laura laughed. “I worked at a Wall Street firm in a corporate practice the first half of the summer. I liked the work, but very few people ever make partner. Besides, this is the first opportunity I’ve had in my life to get away from the Northeast and try something new and exciting. I’m from a really small town in New Jersey. It’s the kind of place where nobody leaves, and everyone knows everybody else’s business. Life is predictable—women are expected to get married and have babies. I wanted something more, to be in a place where every day you learn something new or meet someone new. When the firm interviewed me on campus, I liked the people and saw it as a chance to spread my wings. Does that sound crazy?”

“It sounds familiar,” Carolyn smiled. “I grew up on a ranch in South Texas where the only excitement is the annual county fair. Our land was outside a small town, and I dreamed of moving to Houston or Dallas, places where important things were happening. Now I look at

the downtown Houston skyline as I drive in to work every morning and I feel like Dorothy looking at the Emerald City. It's beautiful and exciting. My ambition is to have a successful legal career and play a significant role in the city someday."

"That's exactly how I feel!" Laura exclaimed.

"Look to your left," Carolyn said. "NASA is just down that road. Beyond that is the Kemah Boardwalk and Clear Lake, which leads into Galveston Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. One day I'll take you down there and you can watch a continuous stream of cargo ships and tankers from all over the world in the Houston Ship Channel, carrying oil, cars, and everything you can imagine to the Port of Houston. It's the second-busiest port in the country. Hundreds of refineries and chemical plants line the channel. It's not just the oil wells in Texas that makes it the energy capital of the country—it's also the international commerce." As she spoke, Carolyn thought that Laura looked happy.

She's come to the right place, Carolyn thought. "It sounds like we're a lot alike," she said. "I love the firm. I think you will too."

After passing through miles of wetlands as they approached the coast, Carolyn drove up onto the wide causeway that connected Galveston Island to the mainland. There was a beautiful view of the island and the boats in the bay. They turned off the freeway at 61st Street and eventually onto the two-lane beach road that was the only artery running the length of West Beach. To the left was the Gulf of Mexico, and to the right they saw mostly pasture until they arrived at Pirate's Beach. The Robinsons' house was one of the largest on the front row just beyond the dunes. The party was already underway when they arrived. Carolyn could hear laughter and smell mesquite smoke as they walked up the driveway.

Laura was petite and pretty, with a quick and engaging smile. She mixed well at the party—attended mostly by young partners, senior associates and their spouses, and a sprinkling of summer interns—and seemed excited to learn more about Texas, Houston, and the

firm. Carolyn tried to introduce Laura to their host, but Paul was in charge and busy and she never got the chance. She did point him out to Laura at one point, when the two women were relaxing, standing on the deck, looking in through the large panes of glass at the activity inside the house.

“He’s handsome,” Laura said. At the time, Carolyn thought nothing of it. Everyone said that Paul was handsome, as well as being an outstanding lawyer and business developer. Trey Jorgenson, another young partner in the oil and gas group, approached them and asked if he could bring them another drink. Trey was tall and blonde with blue eyes, betraying his Scandinavian ancestry. Carolyn introduced Laura to him.

“How are you liking the firm so far?” he asked.

“Everyone’s been so kind, and it feels like an exciting place to work,” Laura answered.

“Great! Where’d you go to law school?”

Trey was running through the usual litany of questions firm lawyers asked any recruit, so Carolyn took the opportunity to excuse herself and go to the powder room, leaving them to chat. When she returned, Trey and Laura were sitting together on a bench and seemed engaged in a lively conversation, which only ended when one of the caterers approached Trey and asked him a question. Trey excused himself, and Laura made the comment that Trey was “incredibly charming.”

Everyone was having a good time drinking beer, listening to a small band, and eating boiled shrimp and barbecue. Two young men cooked the meat on a grill outside on one corner of the deck, as a caterer steamed the shrimp and served drinks. Carolyn lost track of the time.

At about nine p.m., Paul suggested to the few remaining guests that they had probably had too much to drink for them to drive back to Houston. He encouraged them to find one of the many guest rooms in the house and leave in the morning.

Carolyn realized she had indeed had more to drink than usual and

was feeling a bit tipsy. She told Laura that it would be best if they stayed the night—I-45 was always a busy road, and there were a lot of drunk drivers making the return trip to Houston on a Saturday night. Carolyn could tell from the way Laura took a few steps backward and looked at the floor that she was hesitant about staying. But Carolyn assured her that all the men there were gentlemen, and they would be perfectly safe.

“Don’t worry,” she had said. “I promise to take care of you.”

Now, driving an unconscious and battered Laura to the hospital in the dark, Carolyn remembered that conversation and grimaced.

2

Approaching the looming campus of the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, on the populous east end of the island, Carolyn searched frantically for the emergency room. Spotting it, she parked her car in a fire zone and ran into the building. The emergency department was as bright as day, bustling with activity. Friends and relatives of patients, some crying, some praying, others looking tired and worried, filled three rows of folding chairs on the right side of the large noisy waiting room. A voice from a loudspeaker broke in, paging a doctor to report to a patient's room. Both a medical school and a teaching hospital, UTMB was also the Level One Trauma Center for a large area of East and Southeast Texas. It was always busy, but Saturday night was rush hour.

Responding to her frantic cry for help, nurses followed Carolyn back outside. They carefully lifted Laura out of the car and laid her on a gurney for the trip to an exam room. A businesslike Black woman in a nurse's uniform led Carolyn to a small windowless office marked "Triage," where she asked her a series of questions.

"What is your name? Are you related to the patient?"

"Carolyn Page. No, we're colleagues. I mean we work together. And she's a friend."

"Okay, friends," the nurse spoke calmly, trying to put Carolyn at ease. "And what is the patient's name?"

"Laura Petrillo."

“Where was the young lady when she suffered her injuries?” the woman asked.

“We were staying at a friend’s house on Pirate’s Beach,” Carolyn replied.

“At what time did the injuries occur?”

“We turned out the lights in our room around ten. When I woke up at two a.m. I saw that she wasn’t in her bed. I went downstairs to look for her and found her lying on the floor, unconscious and bleeding.”

Something finally exploded within Carolyn, and tears rolled down her cheeks. It took a lot to unnerve her—hardened as she’d been by life on a cattle ranch—but the events of the past two hours suddenly took their toll. She sobbed for several minutes from sheer emotional exhaustion. The nurse silently handed her tissues from a box on her desk.

When Carolyn got herself under control, the woman continued. “Do you know what caused her head injury or how long she had been lying there?”

“No. I know she went to sleep right after we went to bed because she was breathing heavily. But I don’t know why or when she got up. I saw a bottle of aspirin on the counter in the kitchen. Maybe she got up to get some.”

“Had she been drinking alcohol or using drugs before she went to bed?”

“We had all been drinking during the day,” Carolyn admitted. “But no drugs.”

“Was anyone else in the room where you found her?” the nurse asked.

“The homeowner’s son and another lawyer were there. And a couple of other people,” she said.

“Did they say whether she was awake at any point?”

“No, they didn’t. And I guess I didn’t ask,” Carolyn replied.

The nurse got up from her chair and walked to the door to see if Laura was still waiting for an examination room. Not seeing her

gurney in the hall, she told Carolyn, "I think someone is looking at her now. Just a couple more questions.

"Do you know if she has any chronic health issues like epilepsy or seizures?"

"Not that I know of, but I've only known her for one week. She's from New Jersey and goes to law school at the University of Pennsylvania. She's interning at our law firm. She seemed healthy and happy yesterday. Will she be all right?"

The nurse closed her notebook and stood up. "That's all I need for now. You can wait in the lobby. Our staff will take good care of your friend and someone will page you when they are ready to talk to you."

As Carolyn walked back into the lobby, she was feeling unsteady. She saw a coffee machine and moved automatically toward it. She needed something to help her stay awake. *Poor Laura*, she worried. *Please God, let her be okay.* Then she wondered, *What in the hell did happen to her? Damn those guys!*

Carolyn looked toward the entrance. Two Galveston Police officers were standing inside, talking.

She shuddered. *I should report to them what happened*, she told herself. *It's the right thing to do.*

• • •

Carolyn was about to head toward the policemen when she heard her name over the loudspeaker. Hesitating, she turned around and hurried to the large double doors that led back into the examination rooms. A dark-haired young man in a white jacket stepped in front of her, blocking her progress.

"Are you Carolyn Page?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," Carolyn said anxiously, looking up at him. She assumed this was the doctor who had examined Laura. "Will Laura be all right?"

"I haven't seen her yet," he replied. "I'm Brian Robinson, Paul's

younger brother. Paul called me as soon as you left the house and asked me to take care of you. I'm an orthopedic surgery resident. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you arrived. I was with a patient upstairs and just received his message."

She'd forgotten that Paul told her that he would call his brother and alert him that they were coming. Brian strongly resembled Paul and he appeared calm and serious. She began to breathe more slowly.

"I'll stay with you if you don't mind," Brian said. "My shift's over. And Paul is very concerned about Laura."

Carolyn grimaced, remembering Paul's lack of concern back at the beach house. "I'm sure he is," she mumbled.

On the other side of the big doors, patients lying on gurneys filled the hallway, looking especially ill under the harsh fluorescent lighting. They were lined up against the olive-green walls of the hall. There was an anti-septic smell. Doctors, nurses, and aides moved around quickly as if in an unspoken and well-choreographed dance. The apparent efficiency of the operation, even with so many patients to attend to, impressed Carolyn.

Brian led Carolyn to a curtained area near the end of the hall where Laura was lying in a hospital bed, a wide bandage circling her head and her left arm in a sling. A blue bruise had formed on her right cheek. A nurse was inserting an IV into her arm. There was another patient in a bed in the same area, but she was also unconscious. A young Hispanic man Carolyn assumed was her husband was standing beside her holding her hand and quietly praying. They both wore wedding rings.

Carolyn sucked in her breath. She felt queasy and lightheaded all of a sudden. She whispered to Brian, "How serious do you think this is?"

But all Brian said was "Hmm," as he crossed his arms in front of him.

"Did she tell either of you what happened to her?" Brian asked, looking at Carolyn and the nurse.

"The patient has been unconscious since she arrived," the nurse replied. "You can stay here. The doctor who examined her will be in shortly."

“She was unconscious when I found her,” Carolyn said.

Brian pulled out the only chair in the room for Carolyn to sit down. “My brother told me that she was pretty drunk and was dancing by herself on the dining table before she fell off and hit the floor.” He looked directly at Carolyn for a response.

Carolyn was wondering what her next move should be. *I should call Laura’s parents, she thought. But all I know is that she grew up in New Jersey and is a student at Penn. The office would have her school address. But it’s early Sunday morning. No one will be there.*

Carolyn turned to Brian. “I’m sorry. What did you ask me?”

“She must have been really drunk to get in this condition?” Brian said.

Carolyn felt he was prompting her. She didn’t like that. “No. She wasn’t. We talked for a while when we were getting ready for bed. I was the one who thought I shouldn’t be driving back to Houston and decided to spend the night in one of the guest rooms, going back in the morning. We shared a room with two twin beds. I promised her it was a safe situation. I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Hmm,” Brian said again.

“Seriously, Brian,” Carolyn said, “it isn’t helping me to understand Laura’s situation if you just keep mumbling. Is that a medical diagnosis or a brother’s obfuscation?”

Brian’s eyebrows shot up and he looked amused, which had not been Carolyn’s intent. Then he regained his serious face. “Sorry,” he said. “It’s a bad habit doctors have of reserving judgment until they examine all the evidence.”

Carolyn was about to apologize herself for her sharpness, but just then Laura let out a moan and her eyelashes flickered. She shook her head and slowly opened her eyes.

Carolyn moved quickly to her side. “Laura, it’s me, Carolyn. I brought you to the hospital.”

The girl didn’t respond. She looked around the room, obviously

disoriented. When her eyes fell on Brian, her whole body jerked and she let out a strange, animal sound before she turned away from him.

“Laura,” Carolyn said, “what happened to you?”

Laura moaned, but Carolyn couldn’t understand her. A tear seemed to form and run down her cheek, and then she lost consciousness again.

Brian put his hand on Carolyn’s shoulder and gently pulled her away. “It’s not a good idea to push patients who are in shock to answer questions about an accident when they are still traumatized. Confusion is one of the symptoms of trauma. It’s better to allow the initial shock to wear off before questioning them. Otherwise, they can become wedded to a story they dreamed or imagined, and which may not be true.”

Carolyn felt annoyed. *He’s patronizing me*, she thought. And now she wasn’t sure she trusted him. Reaching over to hold Laura’s hand, she leaned in to whisper, “Sleep now. You and I will sort things out tomorrow.” Then she turned to Brian and frowned.

The attending physician entered the room. Dr. Art Jennings was sixty-five, had worked the emergency room at UTMB for thirty years, and, in that time, he had seen every gunshot wound, stabbing victim, burn victim, overdosed teenager, and other trauma imaginable. So a young woman with a broken arm, bruised face, and a head injury was not at the top of his list of worst cases. He looked at Carolyn and asked her if she was the patient’s relative.

“I work with her and brought her here,” Carolyn answered.

Dr. Jennings’s tone was clinical. “We’ll admit her and keep her under observation for twenty-four hours to make sure the head injury isn’t worse than it looks. She has a fractured arm, probably from falling on it. But the rest of her injuries are nothing that time won’t heal. We’ll put her arm in a soft cast and sling for now.”

Turning to Brian, Dr. Jennings asked suddenly, “What are you doing here, Dr. Robinson?”

“Miss Page is a colleague of my brother,” Brian said. “They’re both

lawyers with Edwards and Harrison in Houston. Paul called and alerted me that they would be arriving and asked me to help them in any way I could.”

“Edwards and Harrison,” Dr. Jennings said, his tone softening. “I’m not a big fan of lawyers in general, but that’s a fine firm.” Turning to Carolyn and smiling now, he asked, “Do you know Tommy Lawler? We grew up together out in Abilene.”

“Yes, I do,” Carolyn said. Edwards and Harrison was one of the most prestigious firms in Texas. After working at the firm for two years, she was used to strangers asking her if she knew a friend who worked there. She appreciated that instant prestige was one of the unspoken benefits of her job.

“We’ll keep the patient overnight, and you can call tomorrow and see when she will be discharged. Go get some sleep, yourself, young lady. And drive carefully. You look very tired.”

Dr. Jennings checked the sling on Laura’s arm before saying good night and leaving the room. Carolyn got up and absently placed Laura’s purse under the sheet.

“Why don’t I drive you back to Dad’s house?” Brian offered. “You shouldn’t be driving after all that’s happened. Besides, you don’t have any shoes.”

Carolyn didn’t want to go anywhere near the beach house. “No, that’s all right,” she said. *I’ve had enough of these Robinson boys for one night, shoes or no shoes*, she thought.

“You really shouldn’t be alone. You could be in shock yourself. Why don’t you stay at my apartment tonight. It’s close to the hospital and I have two bedrooms.” Brian lightly put his hand on her arm and seemed to be sincerely concerned for her, but he was still Paul’s brother and Carolyn felt unsure of his motives.

“Thanks, but I need to be alone. I have some processing to do.”

Carolyn sat down again. “Look, I know you’re trying to be helpful. But there’s something that’s bothering me.” She asked herself if she

could trust him, and then took a breath and said, "It's the condition in which I found Laura that I haven't told anyone—at least not yet."

"Don't complicate this, Carolyn. You did the right thing. You brought this poor girl to where professionals could address her injuries. But whatever you think you saw—telling people about this whole thing might have repercussions that could adversely affect Laura, everyone who was at the house . . . even *you*."

"Such as?" Carolyn asked. Now she was on high alert.

Brian sighed. "Do you really want to draw attention to the fact that you and Laura were spending the night at Paul's when his wife wasn't there? You know . . . I'd think twice about spreading the details of this night around. Laura will recover and everyone will forget about it in a week."

"But we didn't do anything wrong," Carolyn protested.

"I'm sure you didn't," Brian said, sounding sincere, "but the old men running the firm sometimes make assumptions. I grew up around those old goats. Consider your reputations. One thing I've learned in my residency is not to do anything rash or fueled by emotion. Just think about it overnight and then decide what to do in the morning."

Carolyn tried to stand and walk away, but Brian put his hand on her elbow. "Please let me take you home, or wherever you want to go," he said. "After all, I feel kind of responsible since Laura's injuries happened at my family's house."

Brian looked sincerely concerned, and Carolyn was more tired than she had ever been. She thought for a minute that it would be nice to let someone else—someone with experience in all of this—take control. But she felt confused by the events of the night and didn't know whether to trust him. She gently removed his hand and said, "Good night, Brian. Thank you."

"I wish you would let me take care of you," Brian said.

Carolyn managed a slight smile before turning toward the door. *I wonder*, she thought, *what that would be like?*

3

It was a short drive along Harborside Drive to Carolyn's destination. On her right, brightly lit jack-up rigs waiting to move offshore to drill for oil were docked across the channel in the Port of Galveston. On her left, some of the nineteenth-century warehouses that once held cotton, rice, and other agricultural products in the city's heyday sat abandoned. When she approached the old downtown area known as the Strand, all of the tourist shops and restaurants were dark. The only places showing signs of life at that hour were some seedy all-night sailors' bars. Tinny music from an old jukebox was the only sound breaking the silence.

The night desk clerk at the historic Tremont Hotel seemed unfazed that a barefoot, tired-looking young woman in rumpled clothes would lay an American Express credit card on the counter, and at six a.m. Carolyn went straight to her room, tore off her clothes, and crawled into the antique bed without even turning on any lights. She reached for the alarm clock to set a wake-up time but was too tired to figure out how it worked. She picked up her mobile phone, but the battery was dead. She decided she would wake up on her own in a few hours, hung the Do Not Disturb sign on the door, and took the telephone off the hook.

It was one in the afternoon when bright sunlight around the edges of the window shades and the noise of groups of tourists on the street woke her. "Damn it!" she said out loud. She had intended to return to the hospital in the morning, and now half the day was gone.

She pulled herself out of bed and went to the small bathroom, where she took a hot shower. She felt grimy inside and out. She didn't want to put on her clothes from yesterday, but she had no choice. She considered going to one of the tourist shops nearby and buying something clean to wear, but she didn't know if they would let her in without shoes and, more importantly, she wanted to get to the hospital as soon as possible. She remembered she had a pair of old flip-flops in the trunk of her car. They would have to do for now.

Back at UTMB, the hospital was quiet, a completely different atmosphere than the chaos of Saturday night. A young Black woman at the reception desk smiled when she approached. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"Yes," Carolyn replied. "I'm here to see Laura Petrillo. Can you tell me where she is?"

"Are you family?" the woman asked.

"I'm Carolyn Page. I brought her in here last night. She doesn't have any family in Texas."

The woman hesitated. "You know, under HIPPA, we can only release that information to family members."

"Please," Carolyn pleaded. "There is no one else in the entire state who can take care of her."

The woman looked around to see if anyone else was in the vicinity. Then she scrolled through a list of patient names and rooms. She looked at Carolyn and whispered, "She's in Room 322."

"Thanks," Carolyn replied, hurrying toward the elevator. When she reached Room 322, the door was open. A Mexican woman was changing the sheets on the bed, and a dustpan and broom indicated that she was preparing the room for the next patient.

"I am looking for Laura Petrillo," Carolyn said to her. "Have they moved her?"

"I think she's gone, senora," the woman replied.

"Gone! Gone where?" That's impossible," Carolyn cried. "She had a head trauma just this morning. She couldn't have been discharged yet!"

"I don't know anything. You check with the nurses down the hall," the woman said, returning to her task.

For the second time in twenty-four hours, Carolyn felt totally unnerved. *How could Laura be gone? And if that is true, where is she?*

An older white woman sat at the nurse station. She was flipping through some papers.

"Excuse me," Carolyn said. "I came to see Laura Petrillo, but she's not in her room. Can you tell me where she is?"

"Are you a relative?" the nurse asked.

"Yes, her sister," Carolyn lied.

The woman took off her glasses and put the papers down. "When the nurse went to her room after lunch to take her vitals, the patient was not in her room. The nurse checked the bathroom and then the rest of the floor. She couldn't find her, so she called Security and they did a search of the hospital. There was no trace of her. Her purse and her clothes are gone, indicating she meant to leave. If you ask me, she's gone for good."

"But I was told she was in Room 322 downstairs," Carolyn protested.

"Sometimes it takes a while for occupancy information to reach all areas of the hospital," the nurse said. "We think she's only been gone for an hour or so, and Security just completed their search."

"But doesn't she have to be discharged?" Carolyn asked.

"Yes. But sometimes we get people who partied too hard and either can't or don't want to pay their bill. Some skip out so their parents or husband or whoever doesn't know they were here. It happens. Galveston is a resort town, you know."

"Is Dr. Robinson on duty?" Carolyn asked the nurse. She hoped Brian might know what happened to Laura.

The nurse consulted her records. "No, this is his day off."

"How about Dr. Jennings? Is he here?" Carolyn asked.

"He's gone too."

"Can I have their phone numbers?" Carolyn asked.

"I can't give out doctors' personal information," she replied in a cool voice.

Not knowing what else to do and completely frustrated, Carolyn left. It was ninety-eight degrees outside and her car was like an oven. She turned on the motor and turned the air conditioner on max, but she didn't go anywhere for a while, instead trying to make sense of the past day. *Laura had her purse, so she could have taken a cab*, Carolyn thought. *But if she was confused and didn't know where she was, she might be wandering around on foot.*

Carolyn pulled out of the parking lot and began to drive slowly up and down the streets surrounding the hospital complex. The area on the northwest part of the island was known as the Victorian District. Before the catastrophic hurricane of 1900, which devastated the island with a fifteen-foot storm surge and claimed almost 8,000 lives, Galveston was the busiest port city on the Gulf Coast, more prosperous than New Orleans. Wealthy merchants, shipping magnates, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and others built grand Victorian-style homes with turrets and gingerbread trim. Some had survived and even been restored. Carolyn drove up and down the narrow streets for an hour, but there was no sign of Laura.

What now? She asked herself. Laura had been badly injured. *Could she really have walked out of the hospital on her own? Could someone have abducted her? Surely not. No one knew where she was—except Brian.* Not for the first time, Carolyn asked herself how she could have allowed this to happen. In any case, she didn't know what else to do except to go home.

• • •

Once on Interstate 45, Carolyn's mind returned to the scene at the beach house. After she crossed the Causeway, the land on either side of the mainland was low-lying marshland for much of the way. She felt exhausted, but there wasn't much to distract her. One by one, she considered what she knew or had heard about the men who were there

Sunday morning. Most of what she knew about Paul and Trey had come from listening to gossip from her friend Cynthia Connor, who also worked at the firm. Cynthia and Carolyn had been in the same class of summer interns and first-year lawyers. Although they came from different backgrounds, they quickly bonded. Cynthia had gone to Harvard and stayed for law school, graduating with distinction. She was a tax whiz and worked in the employee benefits group. She also seemed to have her pulse on firm gossip and loved to share it with Carolyn, off the record, of course.

Although she was Brian's age, Cynthia knew Paul from having grown up near the Robinsons in River Oaks. Since the subdivision was developed in the 1920s for the elite families of the day, River Oaks, consisting of over a thousand acres just west of downtown along Buffalo Bayou, had been the center of Houston high society. Many of the houses were designed by famous architects and sat on broad, wooded lots. Southern-style white or brick-columned mansions mixed with large Tudor-style homes, many of which surrounded the meandering green edges of the River Oaks Country Club Golf Course. Azalea bushes were everywhere and bloomed spectacularly in March, drawing crowds of people who waited in line for hours to tour the featured homes and gardens of the wealthy.

Oak tree-shaded River Oaks Boulevard was known as the only street in the world with a country club at both ends. Lamar High School, a remarkable art deco campus where all the early residents sent their children, sat on the south end. The gothic stone structures of St. John's Preparatory School, erected in the late 1940s and one of the two best college preparatory schools in Houston, was located just across the street.

Exclusive, stately River Oaks Country Club presided on a rise at the north end of the boulevard, surrounded by ancient oaks and well-tended beds of flowers that bloomed year-round. The original club opened in 1926, but the current clubhouse was built in the 1950s in the style of a

white antebellum mansion, complete with columns and a distinguished, ageless black-uniformed doorman to open the door and greet members and guests. Generations of residents passed down their membership, and the waiting list for new members stretched into the years. The club's ballrooms had seen fabulous weddings, galas, and charity extravaganzas. Many important business deals were made in the bar, grill, or on the golf course, where caddies carried the bags of the privileged.

Both the Connor family and the Robinson family were longtime members of River Oaks. Paul, Brian, their older brother William, and Cynthia all grew up at the club and had attended the same social and holiday events. As children, all of them were members of the swim team, which competed with other private clubs. Paul was the Junior Club tennis champion several years running, and Men's Club champion until shortly before he was up for partner and gave up tennis for work.

Cynthia's father insisted that his only child should learn to play golf, and she fell in love with the game. It suited her competitive nature. She was Women's Junior Club champion and captain of the golf team at St. John's School until she left Houston to go to Harvard. Later she made her debut at the club, despite her protestations that feminists didn't make debuts. Her parents insisted that was what young ladies did and she complied because she loved them.

Cynthia and the Robinson boys all went to Teddy Bear House for preschool and St. John's School for elementary and high school. William, Brian, and Cynthia were honor students. Paul earned Bs not because he wasn't as bright; he just had athletic interests and knew that, with his social acumen, he did well enough. All of the Robinson boys went to summer camp at Teton Valley Ranch Camp in Wyoming, where they rode horses in the national forest and mixed with the sons of the upper class from across the country. Their father told them the national contacts they made there would serve them later in life. Cynthia attended summer camp at Waldemar in the Texas Hill Country, the most exclusive camp for young Texas girls.

Paul was tall, with dark brown hair and brown eyes. He was undeniably handsome. Years of competition-level tennis had given him an athlete's body, and his many medals contributed to his abundant self-confidence. The partners at Edwards and Harrison saw their younger selves in him and loved him. The male associates wanted to be like him.

Paul and his brothers came from old money, which in Houston mostly meant the oil patch. Their grandfather, Jacob Robinson, had been a wildcatter who came to Texas from Tennessee in the early years of the twentieth century with only a few dollars in his pocket and a sheriff trailing him. With a combination of raw intelligence, bluster, and a little chicanery, he had managed to find one of the earliest oil fields in East Texas and amassed a fortune before he died. R. A. Edwards, one of the named partners in the firm, had met Paul's grandfather early on in his time in Texas and invested in one of his first wells, which turned out to be a gusher. As the Robinson Oil Company prospered and grew, Edwards and Harrison did all of its legal work and grew with it.

The family company was still a client of the firm. Paul couldn't work on any of the family's business because of the firm's conflict-of-interest rules. But Paul's daddy made sure that his friends who were also in the oil and gas business directed legal work to his son. As a midlevel associate, he was already considered a rainmaker. So his tendency to take off periods of time in order to entertain clients on the golf course, a deep-sea fishing expedition in the Gulf, or a duck hunting trip at the St. James Bay Hunt Club in Rockport were encouraged as business-development time. He made partner early and everyone expected he would be elected to the management committee one day, maybe even become managing partner. He was married to Ashley Hunt, a popular young woman he had grown up with in River Oaks. Cynthia had made it clear to Carolyn that she was very fond of Ashley, saying that in marrying her, Paul had married up.

At Texas A&M, his father's alma mater, Paul majored in petroleum

engineering and drinking at the Dixie Chicken. William, the Robinsons' oldest son, was being groomed to take over the family oil company, so Paul decided to go to law school. Like any smart son of River Oaks royalty, he attended the University of Texas law school, where an ambitious young Texan went before seeking a job in one of the elite law firms in Houston or Dallas. Paul could have had his pick of firms when he graduated, but the family wanted him to work for the family law firm. He agreed, correctly calculating that his chances for rising to managing partner status was probably best at Edwards and Harrison. In Paul's mind, managing partner of a major law firm was roughly equal to the positions of power that his grandfather and father had occupied, and that his older brother soon would.

Carolyn thought about all that Cynthia had told her about the Robinsons as she drove. It was a typical Sunday afternoon and many weekend visitors to Galveston Island were on the road. Traffic was heavy and moving slowly. Carolyn felt herself getting sleepy. She pulled into the parking lot for the McDonalds in Dickinson and went in to use the bathroom and get a cup of coffee and a homestyle burger.

Fifteen minutes later, she was back in her car on the highway, and continuing her mental inventory of the night's participants. Cynthia had told her that Trey came from a middle-class family. His father was a high school teacher and coach at Lamar High School, the public high school where Trey was a student in the International Baccalaureate Program. His mother was an elementary school teacher and active in the Methodist church. They lived in a modest, original two-story brick home in West University, a separate municipality developed in the 1930s for middle-class families, soon surrounded by the city of Houston. During the past several decades, most of the original houses had been replaced with new construction and the neighborhood residents had changed from middle-class to upwardly mobile high-earning professionals. It was a status symbol to live in West University now.

Trey and Paul had met at Texas A&M, where they were in the same

company in the Corps of Cadets. They both studied hard, but also partied hard, and loved dominoes, playing forty-two late into the night at times. They went on to law school at UT together, and Trey lived in the nice four-bedroom house close to campus that Paul's father bought in Austin for his son. Cynthia told Carolyn that Trey was a good guy. "He's pretty much Paul's easygoing wing man," she said, laughing. He was tall, fair, smart, and attractive. Growing up, he participated in the Methodist Youth Organization and became an Eagle Scout.

When Carolyn approached the intersection of Loop 610 South and I-45, traffic slowed to a crawl. It was hot and progress frustratingly slow. Nevertheless, Carolyn continued her thoughts, turning to Peter Kaufman. He'd been the late arrival to the house. She knew that he was a managing director at the midsize accounting firm, Kaufman Stone. Cynthia said that word on the street was that his father was a tyrant who Peter could never satisfy. Carolyn had worked with Peter's associates on a couple of real estate transactions where his firm was also involved. She had the impression Peter worked on a lot of Paul's deals and that they were old friends, although they seemed very different from each other. Peter struck Carolyn as reserved, almost dorky. He was not unattractive, but he was one of the only men she knew who wore tortoise rim glasses and a bow tie.

Paul and Trey had always been cordial to Carolyn, but she was not part of their working group. No women attorneys worked on their deals. Reflecting now, she wasn't sure why she had been invited to the beach party. At the time, she'd felt honored. Now, she had the uncomfortable feeling that perhaps it had something to do with her being Laura's mentor. Laura was very attractive after all.

Then Carolyn remembered the other man who had been in the room when she'd come downstairs. *Paul said that he was a friend from UT. It's strange that he and Peter arrived in the middle of the night.*

Carolyn realized that she was drifting mentally and that she needed to pay attention to the road, particularly as she neared

downtown. She put her thoughts behind her and concentrated on getting to Allen Parkway.

Her apartment was in a new midrise development, the Riata, where a lot of young professionals lived. It was close to downtown, and River Oaks Shopping Center was nearby. Everything she needed to live, her entire world, was within three miles of her apartment, maximizing the time she could be at work. As she entered, she noticed that the red light on her answering machine was blinking on and off.

“You have five messages,” the mechanical voice said.

“Five?” Carolyn wondered. That was unusual. She pushed play.

The first two messages were from Paul, asking her to call him. The next message was from Brian, wanting her to call him to make sure she’d arrived home safely.

The fourth message was from Paul again, asking her to “give him a call so we can get our stories straight.” He sounded desperate.

The last message was from Cynthia, telling her that Paul had called her asking if she knew where Carolyn was. “Are you okay?” she asked. “Why is Paul Robinson looking for you?”

The machine shut off and Carolyn pulled the plug out of the electric socket so that no more calls could be recorded. She took the phone receiver off the hook. Then she walked into the kitchen and took three Tylenols and turned out the lights before sinking down on the couch. “Damn! Damn! Damn! I can’t deal with any more of this,” she said out loud.

She stretched out on the couch, pulled a faux fur throw over herself, and closed her eyes. The last thing she thought before her exhausted body slipped into sleep was, *What in the hell is going to happen at the firm tomorrow when the shit hits the fan?*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patricia Hunt Holmes spent 30 years as a public finance attorney with a large international law firm, specializing in nonprofit healthcare finance and rural electric cooperative finance. Consistently listed in Best Lawyers in America, Texas Super Lawyers, and Top Lawyers in Houston, she was a frequent speaker at national public finance and healthcare conferences. Patricia has also served on the faculty of the University of Missouri-Columbia, University of Tennessee, and University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. She has written and published in the fields of intellectual history and law.

In addition to her legal career, Patricia has been a member and board member of several social service organizations throughout Houston, including the United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast Women's Initiative, Dress for Success Houston, the University of Houston Women's Studies Program, University of Houston Law Review Board of Directors, is a trustee of the Houston Grand Opera, and Houston Justice for Our Neighbors.

Searching for Pilar, published on April 10, 2018, was her first fiction novel. The story centers around Houstonians of all stations helping a young stranger from Mexico rescue his sister from the horrific world of sex trafficking in Houston's glitzy Galleria-area men's clubs and barrio cantinas. Her purpose in writing this book was to make others aware of the extent of these horrifying crimes in Houston and to inspire empathy in her readers for these overlooked girls.

Since the publication of *Searching for Pilar* in April of 2018, Pat has been a frequent speaker at forums, including two universities, the Junior League, YMCA, United Way Women's Initiative, and numerous book clubs in Houston, Dallas and New Jersey. In 2019, the Portuguese Confraria do Vinho do Porto honored her for her work in fostering awareness about international sex trafficking. *Searching for Pilar* has been #1 on Amazon in Urban Fiction and #2 in Suspense. Both BookBub and Amazon have featured the book.

Crude Ambition is a story that takes place at the other end of Houston's society. It is the story of two idealistic and ambitious young women who aspire to be successful lawyers but have to overcome physical and emotional challenges in their climb to the top of their profession. It is also a story about four ambitious male friends who are determined to succeed in the powerful professional arenas of big law and oil. Will their brotherhood help or hinder them? What will they do to succeed?

Patricia grew up in Egg Harbor City, New Jersey but has lived in Houston for over 40 years. She has two daughters, Hillary and Ashley, who have successful careers as an attorney and a geologist, and three adorable grandsons. She is an avid golfer and traveler.

Patricia holds a BA in English and history, an MA in history, and a PhD in Russian and South Asian history with honors, all from the University of Missouri-Columbia. She received her J.D. from the University of Houston Law Center and was an editor on the *Houston Law Review*.