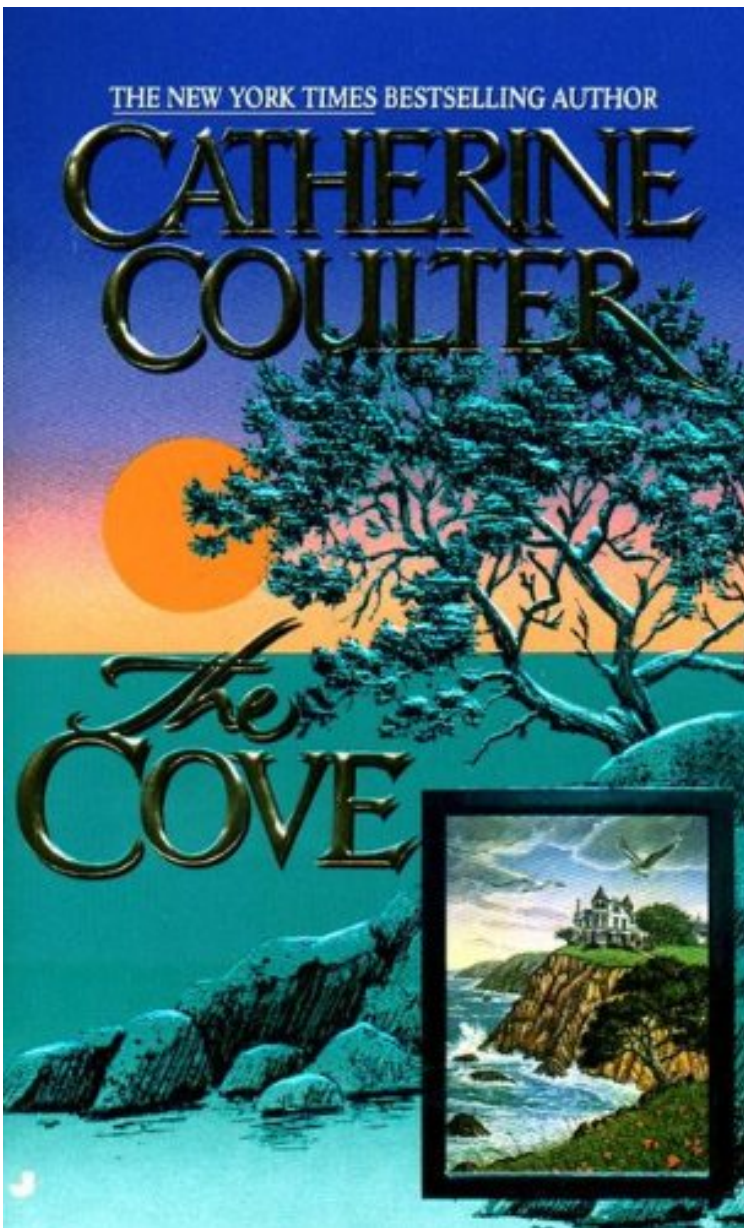


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The Cove



Par Catherine Coulter
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Description : Description du produitThe daughter of a murdered high-powered lawyer seeks sanctuary in a quaint little town, only to learn she can't escape her past--or FBI Special Agent Dillon Savich.

Prsentation de l'diteurIn this "fast-paced" (Publishers Weekly) page-turner, the daughter of a murdered high-powered lawyer seeks sanctuary in a quaint little town, only to learn she can't escape her past-or FBI Special Agent Dillon Savich.In this "fast-paced" (Publishers Weekly) page-turner, the daughter of a murdered high-powered lawyer seeks sanctuary in a quaint little town, only to learn she can't escape her past-or FBI Special Agent Dillon Savich. .comCatherine Coulter has written a truly suspenseful romance in this story of Sally

Brainerd, hiding in a small town from the enemies who killed her father, and FBI agent James Quinlan, who believes she's the key to the murder he's trying to solve. Sally thinks she'll be safe in The Cove--but will she?

ExtraitSOMEONE WAS WATCHING her. She tugged on the blackwig, flattening it against her ears, and quickly put on anothercoat of deep-red lipstick, holding the mirror up so she could see behind her. The young

Marine saw her face in the mirror and grinned at her. She jumped as if she'd been shot. Just stopit. Hes

harmless, hes just flirting. He couldn't be more than eighteen, his head all shaved, his cheeks as smooth as hers. She tilted the mirror to see more. The woman sitting beside him was reading a Dick Francis novel. In the seat behind them a young couple were leaning into each other, asleep. The seat in front of her was empty. The

Greyhound driver was whistling Eric Clapton's Tears in Heaven, a song that always twisted up her insides.

The only one who seemed to notice her was that young Marine, who'd gotten on at the last stop in Portland.

He was probably going home to see his eighteen-year-old girlfriend. He wasn't after her, surely, but someone was. She wouldn't be fooled again. They'd taught her so much. No, she'd never be fooled again. She put the mirror back into her purse and fastened the flap. She stared at her fingers, at the white line where the wedding ring had been until three days ago. She'd tried to pull it off for the past six months but hadn't managed to do it. She had been too out of it even to fasten the Velcro on her sneakers when they allowed her sneakers much less

work off a tight ring. Soon, she thought, soon she would be safe. Her mother would be safe too. Oh, God, Noelle sobbing in the middle of the night when she didn't know anyone could hear her. But without her there, they couldn't do a thing to Noelle. Odd how she rarely thought of Noelle as her mother anymore, not like she had ten years before, when Noelle had listened to all her teenage problems, taken her shopping, driven her to

her soccer games. So much they'd done together. Before. Yes, before that night when she'd seen her father slam his fist into her mother's chest and she'd heard the cracking of at least two ribs. She'd run in, screaming at him to leave her mother alone, and jumped on his back. He was so surprised, so shocked, that he didn't strike her. He shook her off, turned, and shouted down at her, Mind your own business, Susan! This doesn't concern you. She stared at him, all the fear and hatred she felt for him at that moment clear on her face. Doesn't concern

me? She's my mother, you bastard. Don't you dare hit her again! He looked calm, but she wasn't fooled; she saw the pulse pounding madly in his neck. It was her fault, Susan. Mind your own damned business. Do you

hear me? It was her fault. He took a step toward her mother, his fist raised. She picked up the Waterford carafe off his desk, yelling, Touch her and I'll bash your head in. He was panting now, turning swiftly to face her again, no more calm expression to fool her. His face was distorted with rage. Bitch! Damned interfering

little bitch! I'll make you pay for this, Susan. No one goes against me, particularly a spoiled little girl who's never done anything in her life except spend her father's money. He didn't hit Noelle again. He looked at both of them with naked fury, then strode out of the house, slamming the door behind him. Yeah, right, she said and

very carefully and slowly set the Waterford carafe down before she dropped it. She wanted to call an ambulance but her mother wouldn't allow it. You can't, she said, her voice as cracked as her ribs. You can't,

Sally. Your father would be ruined, if anyone believed us. I can't allow that to happen. He deserves to be ruined, Sally said, but she obeyed. She was only sixteen years old, home for the weekend from her private girls school in Laurelberg, Virginia. Why wouldn't they be believed? No, dearest, her mother whispered, the pain bowing her in on herself. No. Get me that blue bottle of pills in the medicine cabinet. Hurry, Sally. The

blue bottle. As she watched her mother swallow three of the pills, groaning as she did so, she realized the pills were there because her father had struck her mother before. Deep down, Sally had known it. She hated herself

because she'd never asked, never said a word. That night her mother became Noelle, and the next week Sally

left her girls school and moved back to her parents home in Washington, D.C., in hopes of protecting her mother. She read everything she could find on abuse not that it helped. That was ten years ago, though sometimes it seemed like last week. Noelle had stayed with her husband, refusing to seek counseling, refusing

to read any of the books Sally brought her. It made no sense to Sally, but she'd stayed as close as possible, until she'd met Scott Brainerd at the Whistler exhibition at the National Gallery of Art and married him two months later. She didn't want to think about Scott or about her father now. Despite her vigilance, she knew her

father had hit Noelle whenever she happened to be gone from the house. She'd seen the bruises her mother had tried to hide from her, seen her walking carefully, like an old woman. Once he'd broken her mother's arm, but Noelle refused to go to the hospital, to the doctor, and ordered Susan to keep quiet. Her father just looked at

her, daring her, and she'd done nothing. Nothing. Her fingers rubbed unconsciously over the white line where the ring had been. She could remember the past so clearly her first day at school, when she was on the seesaw and a little boy pointed, laughing that he saw her panties. It was just the past week that was a near blank in

her mind. The week her father had been killed. The whole week was like a very long dream that had almost

dissolved into nothing more than an occasional wisp of memory with the coming of the morning. Sally knew she had been at her parents house that night, but she couldn't remember anything more, at least nothing she could grasp just vague shadows that blurred, then faded in and out. But they didn't know that. They wanted her badly, she realized that soon enough. If they couldn't use her to prove that Noelle had killed her husband, why, then they'd take her and prove that she'd killed her father. Why not? Other children had murdered their fathers. Although there were plenty of times she'd wanted to, she didn't believe she'd killed him. On the other hand, she just didn't know. It was all a blank, locked tightly away in her brain. She knew she was capable of killing that bastard, but had she? There were many people who could have wanted her father dead. Perhaps they'd found out she'd been there after all. Yes, that was it. She'd been a witness and they knew it. She probably had been. She just didn't remember. She had to stay focused on the present. She looked out the Greyhound window at the small town the bus was going through. Ugly gray exhaust spewed out the back of the bus. She bet the locals loved that. They were driving along Highway 101 southwest. Just another half hour, she thought, just thirty more minutes, and she wouldn't have to worry anymore, at least for a while. She would take any safe time she could get. Soon she wouldn't have to be afraid of anyone who chanced to look at her. No one knew about her aunt, no one. She was terrified that the young Marine would get off after her when she stepped down from the bus at the junction of Highways 101 and 101A. But he didn't. No one did. She stood there with her one small bag, staring at the young Marine, who'd turned around in his seat and was looking back at her. She tamped down on her fear. He just wanted to flirt, not hurt her. She thought he had lousy taste in women. She watched for cars, but none were coming from either direction. She walked west along Highway 101A to The Cove. Highway 101A didn't go east. Yes? She stared at the woman she'd seen once in her life when she was no more than seven years old. She looked like a hippie, a colorful scarf wrapped around her long, curling, dark hair, huge gold hoops dangling from her ears, her skirt ankle-length and painted all in dark blues and browns. She was wearing blue sneakers. Her face was strong, her cheekbones high and prominent, her chin sharp, her eyes dark and intelligent. Actually, she was the most beautiful woman Sally had ever seen. Aunt Amabel? What did you say? Amabel stared at the young woman who stood on her front doorstep, a young woman who didn't look cheap with all that makeup she'd piled on her face, just exhausted and sickly pale. And frightened. Then, of course, she knew. She had known deep down that she would come. Yes, she'd known, but it still shook her. In Sally, she said and pulled off the black wig and took out half a dozen hairpins. Thick, waving dark-blond hair tumbled down to her shoulders. Maybe you called me Susan? Not many people do anymore.⁶ Catherine Coulter The woman was shaking her head back and forth, those dazzling earrings slapping against her neck. My God, it's really you, Sally? She rocked back on her heels. Yes, Aunt. Oh, my, Amabel said and quickly pulled her niece against her, hugged her tightly, then pushed her back to look at her. Oh, my goodness. I've been so worried. I finally heard the news about your papa, but I didn't know if I should call Noelle. You know how she is. I was going to call her tonight when the rates go down, but you're here, Sally. I guess I hoped you'd come to me. What happened? Is your mama all right? Noelle is fine, I think, Sally said. I didn't know where else to go, so I came here. Can I stay here, Aunt Amabel, just for a little while? Just until I can think of something, make some plans? Of course you can. Look at that black wig and all that makeup on your face. Why, baby? The endearment undid her. She'd not cried, not once, until now, until this woman she didn't really know called her baby. Her aunt's hands were stroking her back, her voice was low and soothing. It's all right, lovey. I promise you, everything will be all right now. Come in, Sally, and I'll take care of you. That's what I told your mama when I first saw you. You were the cutest little thing, so skinny, your arms and legs wobbly like a colts, and the biggest smile I'd ever seen. I wanted to take care of you then. You'll be safe here. Come on, baby. The damnable tears wouldn't stop. They just kept dripping down her face, ruining the god-awful thick black mascara. She even tasted it, and when she swiped her hand over her face it came away with black streaks. I look like a circus clown, she said, swallowing hard to stop the tears, to smile, to make herself smile. She took out the green-colored contacts. With the crying, they hurt. No, you look like a little girl trying on her mama's makeup. That's right, take out those ugly contacts. Ah, now you've got your pretty blue eyes again. Come to the kitchen and I'll make you some tea. I always put a drop of brandy in mine. It wouldn't hurt you one little bit. How old are you now, Sally? Twenty-six, I think. What do you mean, you think? her aunt said, cocking her head to one side, making the gold hoop earring hang straight down almost to her shoulder. Sally couldn't tell her that though she thought her birthday had come and gone in that place, she couldn't seem to see the day in her mind, couldn't dredge up anyone saying anything to her, not that she could imagine it anyway. She couldn't even remember if her father had been there. She prayed he hadn't. She couldn't tell Amabel about that, she just couldn't. She

shook her head, smiled, and said, not lying well, It was just a way of speaking, Aunt Amabel. I'd love some tea and a drop of brandy. Amabel sat her niece down in the kitchen at her old pine table that had three magazines under one leg to keep it steady. At least she'd made cushions for the wooden seats, so they were comfortable. She put the kettle on the gas burner and turned it on. There, she said. That won't take too long. Sally watched her put a Lipton tea bag into each cup and pour in the brandy. Amabel said, I always pour the brandy in first. It soaks into the tea bag and makes the flavor stronger. Brandy's expensive and I've got to make it last. This bottle she lifted the Christian Brothers is going on its third month. Not bad. You'll see, you'll like it. No one followed me, Aunt Amabel. I was really careful. I imagine you know that everyone is after me. But I managed to get away. As far as I know, no one knows about you. Noelle never told a soul. Only Father knew about you, and he's dead. Amabel just nodded. Sally sat quietly, watching Amabel move around her small kitchen, each action smooth and efficient. She was graceful, this aunt of hers in her hippie clothes. She looked at those strong hands, the long fingers, the short, buffed nails painted an awesome bright red. Amabel was an artist, she remembered that now. She couldn't see any resemblance at all to Noelle, Amabel's younger sister. Amabel was dark as a gypsy, while Noelle was blond and fair-complexioned, blue-eyed and soft as a pillow. Like me, Sally thought. But Sally wasn't soft anymore. She was hard as a brick. She waited, expecting Amabel to whip out a deck of cards and tell her fortune. She wondered why none of Noelle's family ever spoke of Amabel. What had she done that was so terrible? Her fingers rubbed over the white band where the ring had been. She said as she looked around the old kitchen with its ancient refrigerator and porcelain sink, You don't mind that I'm here, Aunt Amabel? Call me Amabel, honey, that'll be just fine. I don't mind at all. Both of us will protect your mama. As for you, why, I don't think you could hurt that little bug that's scurrying across the kitchen floor. Sally shook her head, got out of her seat, and squashed the bug beneath her heel. She sat down again. I just want you to see me as I really am, she said. Amabel only shrugged, turned back to the stove when the teakettle whistled, and poured the water into the teacups. She said, not turning around, Things happen to people, change them. Take your mama. Everyone always protected your mama, including me. Why wouldn't her daughter do the same? You are protecting her, aren't you, Sally? She handed Sally her cup of tea. She pulled the tea bag back and forth, making the tea darker and darker. Finally, she lifted the bag and placed it carefully on the saucer. She swished that tea bag just the way her mother always had when she'd been young. She took a drink, held the brandied tea in her mouth a moment, then swallowed. The tea was wonderful, thick, rich, and sinful. She felt less on edge almost immediately. That brandy was something. Surely she'd be safe here. Surely Amabel would take her in just for a little while until she figured out what to do. She imagined her aunt wanted to hear everything, but she wasn't pushing. Sally was immensely grateful for that. I've often wondered what kind of woman you'd become, Amabel said. Looks to me like you've become a fine one. This mess and that's what it is it will pass. Everything will be resolved, you'll see. She was silent a moment, remembering the affection she'd felt for the little girl, that bone-deep desire to keep her close, to hug her until she squeaked. It surprised her that it was still there. She didn't like it, nor did she want it. Careful of leaning on that end of the table, Sally. Purn Davies wanted to fix it for me, but I wouldn't let him. She knew Sally wasn't hearing her, but it didn't matter, Amabel was just making noise until Sally got some of that brandy in her belly. This tea's something else, Amabel. Strange, but good. She took another drink, then another. She felt warmth pooling in her stomach. She realized she hadn't felt this warm in more than five days. You might as well tell me now, Sally. You came here so you could protect your mama, didn't you, baby? Sally took another big drink of the tea. What could she say? She said nothing. Did your mama kill your papa? Sally set down her cup and stared into it, wishing she knew the truth of things, but that night was as murky in her mind as the tea in the bottom of her cup. I don't know, she said finally. I just don't know, but they think I do. They think I'm either protecting Noelle or running because I did it. They're trying to find me. I didn't want to take a chance, so that's why I'm here. Was she lying? Amabel didn't say anything. She merely smiled at her niece, who looked exhausted, her face white and pinched, her lovely blue eyes as faded and worn as an old dress. She was too thin; her sweater and slacks hung on her. In that moment her niece looked very old, as if she had seen too much of the wicked side of life. Well, it was too bad, but there was more wickedness in the world than anyone cared to admit. She said quietly as she stared down into her teacup, If your mama did kill her husband, I'll bet the bastard deserved it.