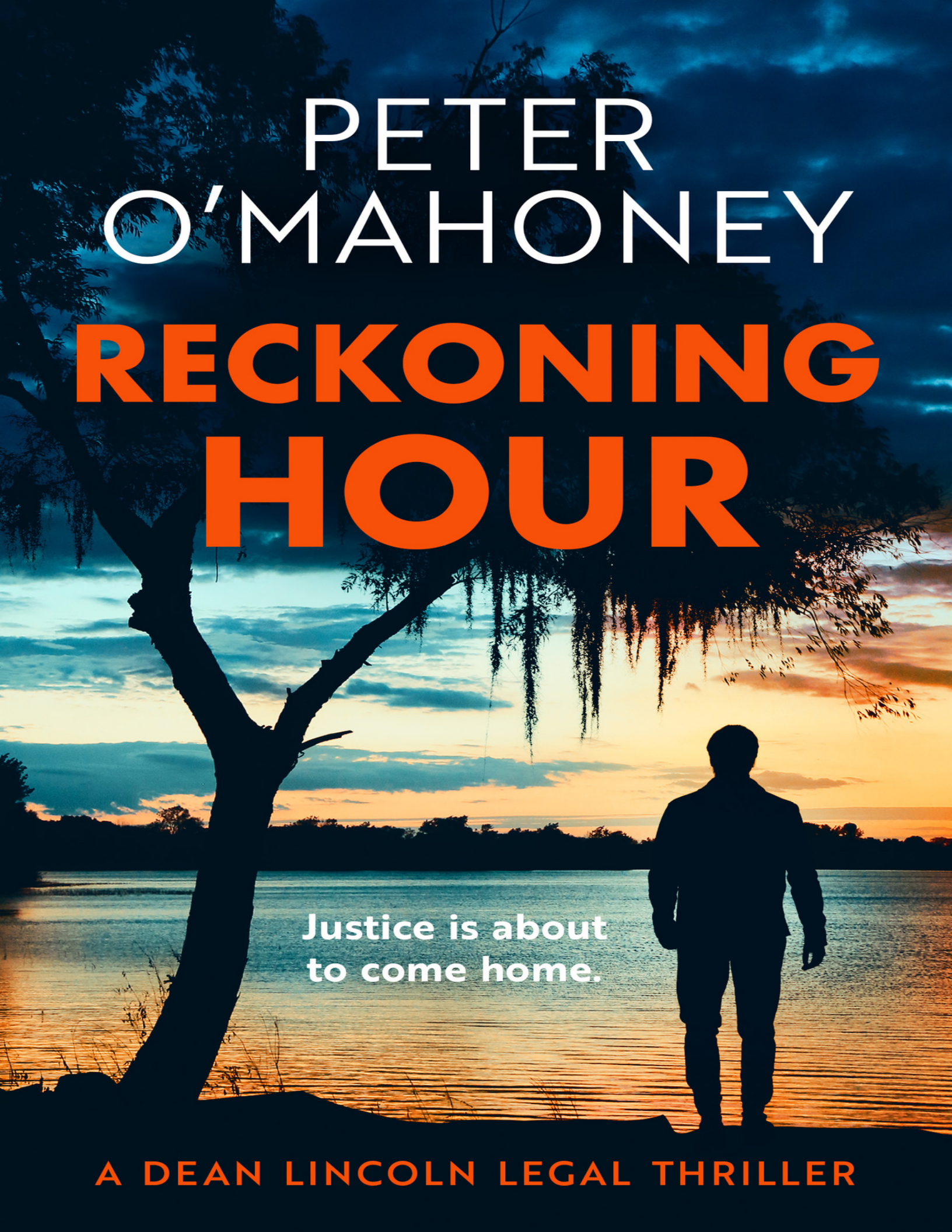




PETER
O'MAHONEY

RECKONING HOUR

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to come home.

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RECKONING HOUR

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RECKONING HOUR

A DEAN LINCOLN LEGAL THRILLER

PETER
O'MAHONEY

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

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For Ethan, Chelsea, and Sophie

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CHAPTER 1

“Are you sure you’re okay coming back here?”

I didn’t answer my wife’s question. I had heard her, loud and clear, but my eyes were on the road. The South Carolina Lowcountry had presented itself before me and it took my breath away. The Spanish moss danced off the trees, waving in the gusts as we drove underneath the canopies, swaying and twirling and floating to the rhythm of the wind. The scene brought back so many memories of my childhood, running free in the grass, chasing cousins, getting in trouble with nature as my playground.

“Dean?” my wife repeated. “Did you hear me? I asked whether you’d be fine coming back to Beaufort? I know there’s a lot of pain here.”

Emma was the most beautiful woman I had ever met, from the first day I laid eyes on her to today. She was stunning. The way she moved, the way she smiled, the way she knew me better than I knew myself.

“Earth to Dean? Hello?”

“I heard you.” I smiled and tapped my thumb on the steering wheel. “And if this is what you need to do, then this is what we do.”

Emma nodded with a knowing look that comes from being married for ten years. Eyebrows raised, chin tucked down, creases in the forehead. I’d seen it many times, and usually it was accompanied by a warning. She allowed the silence to sit between us until a few minutes later, when she added, “Don’t cause any trouble.”

“Trouble? Me?”

“You can’t hide that smile from me. I can see those dimples as clear as day.” She grinned. “But I mean it—don’t cause any trouble. We’ve come back to look after my mother, not to disrupt everything. You can be very unwavering in your sense of right and wrong, and it’s not always the best thing. Sometimes, you need to compromise.”

“I promise I’ll—”

Lights flashed behind me. A cop. A country road. No houses nearby. Not a good sign.

Emma looked over her shoulder, then at me, then back over her shoulder, and then exhaled loudly. She knew trouble had a way of following me. I slowed our SUV and parked on the side of the road. I avoided eye contact with Emma, but I could feel her glare on me.

Looking in the rearview mirror, I watched the deputy sheriff exit his car. He was an older man with slicked back brown hair, held in place with too much gel. He walked with a limp, and his stomach hung over the top of his thick belt. His face was round, but not like a new basketball, more like a half-deflated ball that hadn’t been used in years, squished and ill-shaped, forgotten in the deep recesses of the garage.

The deputy tapped his hand on the back of the car and approached the open window. “Do you know what I pulled you over for, boy?”

The tone of the word “boy” was laced with arrogance and superiority. I looked at Emma. She squinted, and her expression said more than her mouth ever could—*don’t you dare cause any trouble, mister*.

I turned back to the cop. “No, sir.”

“I pulled you over because you’ve got Illinois plates and you were going over the speed limit. This is a long drive from Illinois.”

“It is.”

“It’s quicker if you’re speeding, I guess. Got your license and registration?”

“Certainly.” I turned to reach for the information, but Emma already had it in her hands. She passed it over, still squinting and glaring at me.

“Dean Lincoln, huh?” The man studied my license, then studied me, then studied my license again. “I’ll need you to step out of the car.”

I grunted, reached for the handle, and flung open the door. I stepped out, towering over the deputy.

“Whoa, you’re a big guy,” the deputy said as he stepped back. “They didn’t tell me you’d be the size of a linebacker.”

“Who didn’t tell you?”

“Huh? Nobody. It’s just a saying,” he continued, but it was clear he was lying. “I need you to kneel down.”

I chuckled. “Pardon?”

“Are you deaf?”

“No.”

“Then I said kneel down.”

“I heard what you said.”

“Then kneel down.”

“No.”

“I don’t think you understand.” The deputy’s jaw clenched. He glared at me. His right hand went to his belt, resting on his gun. “I said kneel down.”

“*Dean.*” It was Emma. Her voice was scolding. She had stepped out of the car and was walking around the back of the vehicle. “I’m sorry, Officer, but my husband has a problem with his knees. He’s in his late thirties now, and I guess his body is starting to fall apart. We arrived from Chicago yesterday, and all that driving has been hard on my husband’s knees. We’ve just been out for boiled peanuts, but it’s been a while since he got out to stretch his legs. My husband is a defense lawyer, and my mother lives here in Beaufort, off Carteret Street. We’re coming back to care for her as she goes through cancer treatment.” Emma tried to ease the tension with a story about our local connections. “Can I ask what this is about? Is there a problem with the car?”

The deputy stared at me, before he looked at Emma. He eased his hand off his weapon. “No, ma’am. No problem at all.” He smiled, but his tone was patronizing. “Now, why don’t you be a good little girl and get back in the car?”

I stepped forward, but Emma held her hand out as a stop sign. “I can get back in the car.” Emma smiled her best Southern smile. She leaned forward and read his badge. “*Officer Thomas Grayson.*”

Her tone shook him more than my physical presence. The deputy stood up straighter, puffed his chest out, and the tension eased from his face.

Emma gave him a friendly smile and returned to her side of the car.

The deputy waited until Emma's car door closed. He grunted, stepped closer and lowered his voice. "I know who you are. I knew as soon as I saw those Illinois plates. Watch your step in this county, lawyer boy."

I didn't respond as he turned and walked away. I had expected a rough welcome to my old hometown, I had expected some feathers would be ruffled, but I hadn't expected it to be so blatant.

As much as Emma didn't want it, as much as I tried to avoid it, there was no doubt about it—trouble had a way of following me.

CHAPTER 2

The landscape of Beaufort County, South Carolina, had an aura that encouraged tenderness and quietness. The semitropical air, the gentle marshes, the smells of azaleas and jasmine and wisterias—there was a seductive quality to the scenery, a softness that drew you in, embraced you, and made you feel calm under its spell.

My return had triggered so many long-forgotten memories, filled with an assortment of pain and joy, of happiness and sadness. I had memories of hot summer days spent with friends by the rivers, of afternoons on boats, of oyster roasts, of heavy August storms, of eerie nights, of festivals, of herons, of sunsets, of the breathtaking magnificence of the Spanish moss. Despite all those wonderful memories, despite all those moments that had shaped me into who I am, returning to the small town still felt like stepping backward in life. The work opportunities weren't here. I had moved to Chicago ten years earlier to make a career, to build something I could be proud of, and until a month ago, I hadn't looked back.

The Law Office of Bruce Hawthorn was in the beating heart of Beaufort, on the main thoroughfare of Carteret Street. The white colonial-styled building stood proudly on a corner block, hiding under the shade of two Southern live oaks. I rolled my SUV over the gravel parking lot and stopped next to a new BMW sedan, recently cleaned, and reflecting the sun's glare like a mirror. I stepped out and took in a lungful of air. It was so thick with humidity I could almost chew it. As I walked across the small parking lot, I wiped my brow with the back of my hand; it was already damp. I was back in South Carolina, there was no doubt about it.

As I entered the building, I was thankful to be hit by a wall of cool air. Natural light flooded through the tall windows, with the white walls and cream-colored carpets only increasing the brightness. All the office classics

were there—potted plants tucked into corners, a coffee table with two outdated magazines, and several pieces of landscape art on the walls. The smell was fresh, thanks to a squirt of a nearby air-freshener, and the hum of the air conditioner was constant.

“Hello,” I greeted the assistant. “I’m—”

“Dean!” I heard Bruce Hawthorn before I saw him. “Dean Lincoln!”

I smiled as my former mentor appeared out of a nearby room. He was still the same man I had known all those years earlier. He was rounder now, with less hair and more wrinkles, but he still had the same unmistakable grin. We greeted each other with smiles, a solid handshake, and then a hug. We slapped each other’s backs hard enough to leave a mark, then pulled away.

Bruce Hawthorn was born in Beaufort, studied in Beaufort, and had been married three times in Beaufort. His children lived in Beaufort, their children lived in Beaufort, and all things going well, their children would live in Beaufort. The area was in his blood. He was a solid man, with shoulders wide enough to be intimidating and hands large enough to double as baseball mitts. His stomach had grown bigger, his hair had grayed, and he seemed shorter than I remembered, barely reaching my shoulder, but his vibrant personality hadn’t changed.

“Dean, this is Kayla Smith,” Bruce introduced me to his assistant. “The best assistant in the world. I couldn’t last a single day without her magic touch. In fact, I’m sure she’s an angel sent down to look after me.”

Kayla smiled as she walked around her desk. We shook hands firmly. I was impressed—the petite lady had the grip of a rock-climber. Middle-aged, Kayla was well dressed, toned, and had the glow of good health. Her blonde hair was tied back to show off a pair of jade earrings, her red dress hugged her athletic frame, and her red high heels glimmered in the afternoon light.

“I didn’t expect you until tomorrow, Dean,” Bruce said as he patted me on the back again. “We had everything set up for a big welcome. I’ve even ordered a Huguenot torte from Charleston. It’s one of my favorites—full of fresh pecans and apples.”

“I won’t say no to that, but I thought it’d be good to drop by for a chat today.”

“Absolutely.” Bruce held his hand out to point down the hall. “Come into my office.”

I followed Bruce into his room, which was spacious and clean, and had a faint smell of sandalwood. I imagined that was Kayla’s touch. There was a large mahogany desk to the back, and a tall bookshelf full of old law volumes to the right. They had gathered dust, and it was clear they hadn’t been used since the internet had taken over record-keeping duties.

“It’s not often you get to work for your mentor,” I said as I sat in front of his desk. “It’s an honor.”

“Work for? Are you kidding me?” Bruce laughed as he sat heavily on the tall leather chair behind his desk. The chair rocked under his weight. “I might have thirty years of practice on you, but you’re more experienced than me now. Those ten years in Chicago have given you a world of knowledge that you never would’ve gained here. I hear you even got your smiling face on the national news a few times. And I tell you, you’ve got a face for the news, Dean. Those good looks and that thick black hair—you’ve got the looks of a movie star. Me, well, I’ve got a face for radio.” Bruce chuckled to himself. “Just as well I’m good at law, otherwise I never would’ve landed my first wife . . . or my second wife, or my third wife.” He laughed again. “So, how long are you and Emma planning on staying here?”

“We’ve rented the house for twelve months.”

“Ah, do I sense a hint of reluctance in your voice?”

“Emma needs to care for her mother throughout the cancer treatment, so we’re here while that happens, and then we’ll head back to Chicago. And listen, I’d do anything for Emma. She could ask me to shave my head, join a moon-worshipping cult, and move to the Appalachian Mountains, and I’d do it.” I smiled. “Our life is good up North. My career is booming, but life has a way of throwing things at you. That’s why I appreciate you giving me some work while we’re here. It’ll keep my mind active.”

“And your job in Chicago?”