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# DANI PETTREY

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THE  
DEADLY  
SHALLOWS

COASTAL GUARDIANS



BOOK THREE

COASTAL GUARDIANS // BOOK 3

# THE DEADLY SHALLOWS

DANI PETTREY



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To Steve Oates, David Horton, and Jim Parrish

You three took an unknown author under your wings. You supported me, championed my work, and made me feel like part of the BHP family from the moment I met you.

I was so nervous the first day I visited Bethany House, and you three welcomed me so kindly. You have a lasting legacy with BHP, with all the authors you shepherded over the years and the vast number of books that are out in the world because of you. I'm forever grateful for the privilege and honor of working with you.

May God bless you all.

Death was a breath away.

# ONE

## EARLY DECEMBER

### HOLLY RIDGE, NORTH CAROLINA

Crisp night air slapped his cheeks, but he'd long since learned to endure the elements. Tonight's op was nothing compared to some of the filth he'd crawled through. Their objective simple, his targets unaware.

The four-person catering crew loaded trays into the back of their van, along with their tools of the trade.

Standing at the edge of the woods, the ground tight beneath his boots, he shifted his gaze to the house. *Quiet. Still.* His team held position, awaiting his signal.

Lights clicked off, shrouding the house and van in darkness.

The last member of the catering crew climbed into the rear of the vehicle.

Shifting his grizzled jaw, Dwayne signaled his team forward with a flick of two fingers.

They swept from the woods, moving across the driveway at a fast, silent clip before the van's ignition turned.

They hit the back of the van, doors still open and silent shots finding their mark.

Climbing into the van, Max pushed the slumped body out of the driver's seat and took position behind the wheel.

The rear doors shut, and Dwayne, now situated in the passenger seat, tapped the dash.

Max turned the key, and the taillights spilled red across the circular drive behind them.

In the blink of an eye, they were rolling for the road and on to Fairpark Cemetery.

## TWO

The mission's execution was flawless. The van taken. The cemetery gate lock picked. The bodies discarded in the mausoleum, where no one would find them—at least not in time to stop their primary objective.

Back at headquarters, Dwayne stood, inspecting his team as they loaded the arsenal into the van.

*Nearly time.* A commencement unlike any other was about to begin.

“The van is outfitted, sir,” Adam said.

Copenhagen nestled deep within his lower lip, Dwayne spit into his cup. “Well done,” he said, the chewing tobacco tingling behind his lip.

His gaze swept over his team, zeroing in on Dylan's eyes. Few men could douse the shadow of fear from their gaze, and Dylan certainly wasn't one of them.

He lifted his chin in Dylan's direction. “Something wrong?”

“No.” Dylan's voice hiccupped.

His jaw shifted on instinct. The kid was lying. “You got a problem with the mission?”

Dylan swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing down his thin, pasty neck. He shook his head too vehemently. “No, sir.”

Dwayne eyed the sweat sizzling down Dylan's pulsing temple.

“I demand honesty. Honesty is essential. This is all in or all

out. Understood?” He stepped forward, the wooden boards creaking beneath his boots. “Which is it?” He set his cup on the wooden railing beside him, fingering his gun grip.

Dylan hesitated, and Dwayne fired.

The kid’s body crumpled to the floor, blood pooling at the base of his skull.

“Anybody else unsure?” The words slithered through his coffee-stained teeth.

His question was met with stony silence.

# THREE

## WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

Brooke zipped her walking jacket, the temp hovering at fifty-one. Her family would crack up if they saw her wearing a jacket on what they'd view as a warm day back home in northern Colorado. But she'd adapted to Wilmington's weather and swore her blood had thinned.

She spotted Gabby across the street and waved. The red light shifted to green, the walk symbol flashed, and Gabby crossed over. "Good morning."

"Good's two coffee cups away." Brooke worked a kink out of her neck. It'd been a long night, but they'd made three saves—well worth the aches and pains.

Gabby jogged in place, her knees nearly hitting a ninety-degree angle. "Down to the Riverwalk?" she said.

Brooke rubbed her mittened hands together. "You're entirely too peppy. The sun isn't even up."

"You're the one who suggested the earlier run," Gabby said as they jogged down the sloping sidewalk leading to Wilmington's gorgeous walkway along the Cape Fear River. Birds chirped among a cascade of insect hums in the marsh grass lining the path.

“I’m meeting someone for breakfast before the graduation ceremony.”

“You aren’t surfing with us?”

By *us* Gabby meant herself; her fiancé, Finn; and her brother, Noah.

Brooke took a steadying inhale. *Noah Rowley*. He was even more addictive than riding the winter swells.

But any hope she’d had for that relationship flatlined weeks ago. She’d fallen hard for the kind, handsome man, but he clearly hadn’t fallen for her. And she couldn’t keep going with the status quo. As much as it would break her heart, it was time to move on. She sniffed back the pinch of tears pricking her eyes.

Thankfully, Gabby was too busy ruminating to notice—her brows deeply furrowed.

“No.” Brooke finally answered her friend’s question. She cleared her throat, knowing Gabby would be beyond bummed, but it was time.

“Can I ask who you’re having breakfast with?”

“Always the investigative journalist.” Brooke chuckled. The lady couldn’t help it. It was woven into her being.

“Sorry.” Gabby offered an impish grin. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“I know.” Brooke smiled back. “But that would be cruel. I can see the curiosity is killing you.” She took a steadying inhale and released it slowly. “I’m having breakfast with Dave Keller.”

“Hmm . . . Dave Keller?” Gabby eased her pace. “The name is familiar . . . but I can’t place it.”

“He’s a friend of Brad and Jason.” Her Coast Guard “brothers.” She’d been paired with the two rescue swimmers since her first flight-medical duty. They wouldn’t steer her wrong.

Gabby pursed her lips as she did when mulling something over.

Brooke shook her head, unable to smother a smile. Gabby

was a mess, but she'd figure out where she'd heard Dave's name soon enough.

Casting her gaze across the Golden River—as folks in Wilmington called it—Brooke scanned its dark-hued surface, searching for eyes. Nearly every morning she saw at least one alligator, often more. It was something she still hadn't gotten used to, and she'd been stationed in Wilmington for years.

“Church.” Gabby snapped, making Brooke jump as they rounded to run the Riverwalk's nearly two miles again.

Gabby tightened her ponytail. “Was he the guy Jason was introducing you to after service on Sunday?”

“Yes.” Maybe if she left it there Gabby would too, but she knew better.

Gabby's breathing increased along with their stride. “What about Noah?”

Brooke knew how much Gabby wanted them to be together. How much *she* wanted them to be together. But that dream was hopeless. “What *about* Noah?”

“I know you like him,” Gabby said, never one to mince words.

“Of course I like him.” And *like* was putting it mildly.

“So?” Gabby nudged.

“So we've been spending tons of time together for the last *two* months and . . .”

“And?” Gabby nudged.

“And nada.” Nothing that said he wanted to move beyond friendship, and it stung.

“He spends an awful lot of time with you to call it nada,” Gabby said, adjusting her fleece headband to better cover her ears.

“Yes,” Brooke admitted, “he's over most Saturdays to help restore the bus.” But helping her fix her grandparents' VW bus was far from a romantic overture.

“He spends time with you at Finn's for surfing and breakfast most mornings and at Nana Jo's weekly dinners.”

“Yes, he spends time with me but not like that. You guys treat me like family, and I love it, but it’s not like Noah’s asking me out on a date or to go with him to those events.” She searched for the right words. “I’m just one of the gang.” It took Brooke a minute to realize she’d left Gabby standing at the top of the hill.

“What do you mean ‘just one of the gang’?” Gabby said, catching back up to her. “You know that’s not true.”

Brooke sighed rather than arguing. Gabby meant well and wanted them to be together nearly as bad as she did, but it was beyond frustrating. There’d been moments—a lingering gaze in her direction, a charming smile on his lips, a level of deep comfort in his presence—when she’d thought . . . *maybe* he cared the same way about her, but clearly, she’d been misreading the situation.

Even after so much quality time together, he’d never made a move beyond friendship. It sucked, but she could only linger in the muck for so long. Today she was hauling herself out. Dave seemed like a nice guy. If her Coast Guard brothers said he was solid, he was solid. And it was time for some solid in her life.

//////////

Dwayne tapped the Copenhagen tin against his palm, then opened it and pulled a fresh pinch out. He rolled his lip forward and had barely settled it in place when his cell rang.

Fishing the phone from his shirt pocket, he answered the call but remained silent.

“Are we a go?” she asked.

He rolled his tongue against the inside of his cheek. Well, if it wasn’t Miss-High-and-Mighty herself. “Affirmative. And you?”

She snorted. “What do you think?”

He curled his fists, a silent curse wagging in his mind.

“Don’t be late, and don’t mess this up,” she snapped.

The line went dead.

Adrenaline surged through his limbs.  
He glanced at his watch. *Not long now.*  
He smothered any hint of pleasure from his face. It'd been years since he'd attended a graduation.

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Gabby's face softened as they hit the final stretch of the Riverwalk. Pausing, Gabby laid her hand on Brooke's arm, took an inhale, and blew it out as if she was about to share something big.

Brooke stepped closer, almost expecting Gabby to whisper in her ear.

Gabby gazed across the river—pondering? Brooke fought the sudden urge to shake it out of her. Whatever *it* was.

“Gab?” Brooke asked

Her friend turned to face her, the rising sun's rays silhouetting her.

Brooke shielded her eyes with her hand. “You clearly want to say something.”

Gabby slid her jacket zipper partly up and then down, then exhaled. “Just remember Noah has a past too.”

“Which he never shares,” Brooke said, then glanced at her Apple watch. She needed to hurry to make breakfast with Dave and get to the graduation in time. They trudged up the steep incline of Main Street, her calves burning with the good warmth of exercise, her mind spinning on Gabby's cryptic comment. What past? Was she indicating something bad had happened? “That's just part of the frustration,” she said. “I know nothing of Noah's background other than professionally.” He never confided in her.

“But you know *him*, and that's what matters.” Gabby stuck her hands in her pockets, stretching her arms out and the jacket along with them.

“I know *about* him. I know he loves his family. I know he loves Jesus. I know he excels as a CGIS special agent in charge. He’s disciplined and always in control.”

“See, you know the important things about him—his love of family, the Lord, his country, and his team.”

“Which is *about* him. Not *him*.” Brooke shook her head. “You know what I’m saying. I’m sorry if I’m being short. I’m just . . .” *Heartbroken*.

Gabby’s shoulders slackened. “I understand and I’m going to share something with you. Something I think will help you understand Noah better, and maybe you won’t give up on him just yet. But it has to stay between us.” She dipped her chin, her brows hiking.

“I promise.” It felt wrong learning something about Noah from his sister rather than from him, but if it gave her insight into the man she’d fallen for—a peek beyond the wall he’d erected so firmly in place—she’d listen.

“Noah has a *complicated* relationship history.”

*Seriously?* Brooke tried to smother her sarcastic chuckle. But, seriously, didn’t Gabby know who she was talking to? Her collective dating experience looked like a who’s who of losers. “Who doesn’t?” she said.

Gabby shrugged a shoulder. “Fair enough.”

“I thank you for sharing, but whatever this complicated history is, it’s either affecting him enough that he *won’t* move forward with me, or he simply doesn’t want to.” The moments when she thought there might be more between them than friendship were amazing, but he always pulled back, keeping her at arm’s length.

“Give him time,” Gabby said, a hint of hope holding tight in her voice.

Brooke exhaled. “It’s been two months. If he cared enough to trust me and share even a little bit of life or his past with me, it would be different. But at some point, I have to let go of the dream and live in reality.”

She glanced at her watch. 0640. “Shoot. I’ve got to go.”

“What time are you meeting Dave?”

“0715 at Belle’s.”

“Oh, yum,” Gabby said. “She makes the best French toast. Well, you best scoot.”

“Thanks.” She waved, then headed right, toward home. It was the first house she’d actually owned, and she loved the feeling of being settled.

Gabby headed left. “Have a nice time,” she called.

“Thanks,” she said before rounding the corner. With the silence of early morning enveloping her, she released an exhale and turned to her Father in prayer.

*Help me to be open to giving Dave a real chance, Lord. I’ve fallen for Noah, but he clearly doesn’t feel the same way. It’s time I accept that our relationship will only be that of friendship. Please help me move on, even though it’s the last thing I want to do.*