

ACCLAIM FOR COLLEEN COBLE

Tidewater Inn

“Coble’s atmospheric and suspenseful series launch should appeal to fans of Tracie Peterson and other authors of Christian romantic suspense.”

—LIBRARY JOURNAL

Three Missing Days

“Coble’s clear-cut prose makes it easy for the reader to follow the numerous scenarios and characters. This is just the ticket for readers of romantic suspense.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY ON *THREE MISSING DAYS*

“Colleen Coble is my go-to author for the best romantic suspense today. *Three Missing Days* is now my favorite in the series, and I adored the other two. A stay-up-all-night page turning story!”

—CARRIE STUART PARKS, AUTHOR OF *FRAGMENTS OF FEAR*

Two Reasons to Run

“You can’t go wrong with a Colleen Coble novel. She always brings readers great characters and edgy, intense story lines. Definitely check out this series.”

—BESTINSUSPENSE.COM

“Colleen Coble’s latest has it all: characters to root for, a sinister villain, and a story that just won’t stop.”

—SIRI MITCHELL, AUTHOR OF *STATE OF LIES*

“Colleen Coble’s superpower is transporting her readers into beautiful settings in vivid detail. *Two Reasons to Run* is no exception. Add to that the suspense that keeps you wanting to know more, and characters that pull at your heart. These are the ingredients of a fun read!”

—TERRI BLACKSTOCK, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *IF I RUN, IF I’M FOUND, AND IF I LIVE*

One Little Lie

“This is a romantic suspense novel that will be a surprise when the last page reveals all of the secrets.”

—THE PARKERSBURG NEWS SENTINEL

“There are just enough threads left dangling at the end of this well-crafted romantic suspense to leave fans hungrily awaiting the next installment.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Colleen Coble once again proves she is at the pinnacle of Christian romantic suspense. Filled with characters you’ll come to love, faith lost and found, and scenes that will have you holding your breath, Jane Hardy’s story deftly follows the complex and tangled web that can be woven by one little lie.”

—LISA WINGATE, #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *BEFORE WE WERE YOURS*

“Coble’s latest, *One Little Lie* is a powerful read . . . one of her absolute best. I stayed up way too late finishing this book because I literally couldn’t go to sleep without knowing what happened. This is a must read! Highly recommend!”

—ROBIN CAROLL, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE DARKWATER INN SAGA

“In *One Little Lie* the repercussions of one lie skids through the town of Pelican Harbor creating ripples of chaos and suspense. Who will survive the questions? *One Little Lie* is the latest page-turner from Colleen Coble. Set on the Gulf coast of Alabama, Jane Hardy is the new police chief who is fighting to clear her father. Reid Dixon has secrets of his own as he follows Jane around town for a documentary. Together they must face their secrets and decide when a secret becomes a lie? And when does it become too much to forgive?”

—CARA PUTMAN, BESTSELLING AND AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

“I always look forward to Colleen Coble’s new releases. *One Little Lie* is One Phenomenal Read. I don’t know how she does it, but she just keeps getting better. Be sure to have plenty of time to flip the pages in this

one because you won't want to put it down. I devoured it! Thank you, Colleen, for more hours of edge of the seat entertainment. I'm already looking forward to the next one!"

—LYNETTE EASON, AWARD-WINNING AND BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF THE BLUE JUSTICE SERIES

"Ever since Colleen Coble talked about the premise of *One Little Lie*, I was dying to read it. She's an amazing author and is at the top of her game with this page-turning suspense story. I think it's her best yet—and that's saying A LOT!"

—CARRIE STUART PARKS, AUTHOR OF *FRAGMENTS OF FEAR*

"Colleen Coble always raises the notch on romantic suspense, and *One Little Lie* is my favorite yet! The story took me on a wild and wonderful ride."

—DIANN MILLS, BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Strands of Truth

"Coble wows with this suspense-filled inspirational . . . With startling twists and endearing characters, Coble's engrossing story explores the tragedy, betrayal, and redemption of faithful people all searching to reclaim their sense of identity. Fans of Susan May Warren will enjoy this."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

"It's in her blood! Colleen Coble once again shows her suspense prowess with a thriller as intricate and beautiful as a strand of DNA. *Strands of Truth* dives into an unusual profession involving mollusks and shell beds that weaves a unique, silky thread throughout the story. So fascinating I couldn't stop reading!"

—RONIE KENDIG, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE TOX FILES*

"Once again, Colleen Coble delivers an intriguing, suspenseful tale in *Strands of Truth*. The mystery and tension mount toward an explosive and satisfying finish. Well done."

—CRESTON MAPES, BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“Free-dive into a romantic suspense that will leave you breathless and craving for more.”

—DIANN MILLS, BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Secrets at Cedar Cabin

“Once again Colleen Coble has delivered a page-turning, can’t-put-down suspense thriller with *Secrets at Cedar Cabin*! I vowed I’d read it slowly over several nights before going to bed. The story wouldn’t wait—I HAD to finish it!”

—CARRIE STUART PARKS, AUTHOR OF *FRAGMENTS OF FEAR*

“*Secrets at Cedar Cabin* is filled with twists and turns that will keep readers turning the pages as they plunge into the horrific world of sex trafficking where they come face to face with evil. Colleen Coble delivers a fast-paced story with a strong, lovable ensemble cast and a sweet heaping helping of romance.”

—KELLY IRVIN, AUTHOR OF *TELL HER NO LIES*

The House at Saltwater Point

“Coble fans will appreciate this book.”

—CBA MARKET

“The corkscrew plot will keep readers guessing, as it careens one way, only to veer in a completely different direction . . . Taking place on Washington State’s Puget Sound, this follow-up to *The View from Rainshadow Bay* features delightful characters and an evocative, atmospheric setting. Ideal for fans of romantic suspense and authors Dani Pettrey, Dee Henderson, and Brandilyn Collins.”

—LIBRARY JOURNAL

The View from Rainshadow Bay

“Coble (*Twilight at Blueberry Barrens*) keeps the tension tight and the action moving in this gripping tale, the first in her Lavender Tides series set in the Pacific Northwest.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Filled with the suspense for which Coble is known, the novel is rich in detail with a healthy dose of romance, allowing readers to bask in the beauty of Washington state’s lavender fields, lush forests and jagged coastline.”

—BOOKPAGE

“Prepare to stay up all night with Colleen Coble. Coble’s beautiful, emotional prose coupled with her keen sense of pacing, escalating danger, and very real characters place her firmly at the top of the suspense genre. I could not put this book down.”

—ALLISON BRENNAN, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SHATTERED*

TIDEWATER INN

ALSO BY COLLEEN COBLE

Hope Beach Novels

Tidewater Inn
Rosemary Cottage
Seagrass Pier
All Is Bright: A Hope Beach
Christmas Novella (e-book only)

Pelican Harbor Novels

One Little Lie
Two Reasons to Run
Three Missing Days

Lavender Tides Novels

The View from Rainshadow Bay
Leaving Lavender Tides Novella
The House at Saltwater Point
Secrets at Cedar Cabin

Rock Harbor Novels

Without a Trace
Beyond a Doubt
Into the Deep
Cry in the Night
Haven of Swans (formerly
titled *Abomination*)
Silent Night: A Rock Harbor
Christmas Novella (e-book only)
Beneath Copper Falls

YA/Middle Grade Rock Harbor Books

Rock Harbor Search and Rescue
Rock Harbor Lost and Found

Children's Rock Harbor Book

The Blessings Jar

Sunset Cove Novels

The Inn at Ocean's Edge
Mermaid Moon
Twilight at Blueberry Barrens

Under Texas Stars Novels

Blue Moon Promise
Safe in His Arms
Bluebonnet Bride Novella (e-book only)

The Aloha Reef Novels

Distant Echoes
Black Sands
Dangerous Depths
Midnight Sea
Holy Night: An Aloha Reef Christmas
Novella (e-book only)

The Mercy Falls Series

The Lightkeeper's Daughter
The Lightkeeper's Bride
The Lightkeeper's Ball

Journey of the Heart Series

A Heart's Disguise
A Heart's Obsession
A Heart's Danger
A Heart's Betrayal
A Heart's Promise
A Heart's Home

Lonestar Novels

Lonestar Sanctuary
Lonestar Secrets
Lonestar Homecoming
Lonestar Angel
All Is Calm: A Lonestar Christmas
Novella (e-book only)

Stand-Alone Novels

A Stranger's Game (available
January 2022)
Strands of Truth
Freedom's Light
Alaska Twilight
Fire Dancer
Where Shadows Meet (formerly
titled *Anathema*)
Butterfly Palace
Because You're Mine

TIDEWATER INN

A HOPE BEACH NOVEL

COLLEEN COBLE



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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*For Erin Healy
Editor extraordinaire and friend*

ONE

Libby Holladay fought her way through the brambles to the overgrown garden. She paused to wave a swarm of gnats away from her face. The house was definitely in the Federal style, as she'd been told. Palladian windows flanked a centered door, or rather the opening for a door. The structure was in serious disrepair. Moss grew on the roof, and fingers of vine pried through the brick mortar. The aroma of honeysuckle vied with that of mildew.

She stepped closer to the house and jotted a few impressions in her notebook before moving inside to the domed living room. The floorboards were missing in places and rotted in others, so she planted her tan flats carefully. She could almost see the original occupants in this place. She imagined her own furniture grouped around the gorgeous fireplace. She'd love to have this place, but something so grand that needed this much repair would never be hers. The best she could do would be to preserve it for someone else who would love it. She itched to get started.

Her cell phone rang, and she groped in her canvas bag for it. Glancing at the display, she saw her partner's name. "Hey, Nicole," she said. "You should see this place. A gorgeous Federal-style mansion. I think it was built in 1830. And the setting by the river is beautiful. Or

it will be once the vegetation is tamed.” Perching on the window seat, she made another note about the fireplace. “Nicole? Are you there?”

There was a long pause, then Nicole finally spoke. “I’m here.”

“You sound funny. What’s wrong?” Nicole was usually talkative, and Libby couldn’t remember the last time she’d heard strain in her friend’s voice. “Are you still in the Outer Banks? Listen, I heard there might be a hurricane heading that way.” She dug into her purse for her jalapeño jellybeans and popped one in her mouth.

“I’m here,” Nicole said. “The residents are sure the storm will miss Hope Island. The investor is really interested in this little town. And we have the chance to make a boatload of money on it. It’s all in your hands.”

“My hands? You’re the one with the money smarts.”

Nicole was the mover and shaker in Holladay Renovations. She convinced owners to dramatically increase the value of their historic properties by entrusting them to Libby’s expertise. Libby had little to do with the money side of the business, and that was how she liked it.

“I think I’d better go back to the beginning,” Nicole said. “Rooney sent me here to see about renovating some buildings in the small downtown area. He’s working on getting a ferry to the island. It will bring in a lot more tourism for the hotel he’s planning, but the buildings need to be restored to draw new business.”

“I know that much. But what do you mean ‘it’s in my hands’?” Libby glanced at her notes, then around the room again. This was taking up her time, and she wanted to get back to work. “We’re doing the lifesaving station for sure, right?”

“Yes, I’ve already seen it. We were right to buy that sweet building outright. After you get your hands on it, we’ll make a bundle *and* have instant credibility here. I’ve started making notes of the materials and crew we’ll need. But I’m not calling about the renovations. I’m talking a lot of money, Libby. Millions.”

That got Libby’s attention. “Millions?”

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“I stopped by the local attorney’s office to see about having him handle the paperwork for our purchase of the lifesaving station. Horace Whittaker. He’s got both our names on the paperwork now.”

“So?”

“The secretary gasped when she heard your name.”

“She knew me?”

“The attorney has been looking for a Libby Holladay. Daughter of Ray Mitchell.”

“That’s my dad’s name.”

“I thought it might be. I’d heard you mention the name Ray, but I wasn’t sure of the last name.”

Libby rubbed her head. “Why is he looking for me? My father has been dead a long time—since I was five.”

“He died a month ago, Libby. And he left you some valuable land. In fact, it’s the land Rooney thought he had agreed to purchase. So we’re in the driver’s seat on this deal.” Nicole’s voice rose.

Libby gasped, then she swallowed hard. “It’s a hoax. I bet the attorney asked for a fee, right?”

“No, it’s real. According to the secretary, your father was living in the Outer Banks all this time. And Horace has a box of letters Ray wrote to you that were all marked *Return to Sender*. It appears your mother refused them.”

Libby’s midsection plunged. Throughout her childhood she’d asked her mother about her father. There were never any answers. Surely her mother wouldn’t have *lied*. Libby stared out the window at two hummingbirds buzzing near the overgrown flowers.

“Do you have any idea how much money this land is worth?” Nicole’s voice quivered. “It’s right along the ocean. There’s a charming little inn.”

It sounded darling. “What’s the area like?”

“Beautiful but remote.” Nicole paused. “Um, listen, there’s something else. I met a woman who looked like you a couple days ago.”

Libby eased off the window ledge. “Who is she?”

“Your half sister, Vanessa. You also have a brother, Brent. He’s twenty-two.”

“My father married again?” Libby couldn’t take it all in. This morning she had no family but a younger stepbrother, whom she rarely saw. Why had her mother kept all this from her? “What about my father’s wife?”

“She doesn’t seem to be around. But there’s an aunt too.”

Family. For as long as she could remember, Libby had longed for a large extended family. Her free-spirited mother was always wanting to see some new and exciting place. They had never lived at the same address for more than two years at a time.

“You need to get here right away,” Nicole said. “There are a million details to take care of. This is the big deal we’ve been praying for, Libby. You will never want for anything again, and you’ll have plenty of money to help your stepbrother. He can get out of that trailer with his family.”

The thought of buying her stepbrother’s love held some appeal. They weren’t close, but not because she hadn’t tried. “I can’t get away until tomorrow, Nicole. I have to finish up here first. We have other clients.”

How much of her reluctance was rooted in the thought of facing a future that was about to change radically? She never had been good with change. In her experience, change was something that generally made things worse, not better.

Her partner’s sigh was heavy in Libby’s ear. “Okay. Hey, want to see Vanessa? She’ll be here in a few minutes. There’s a beach cam out by the lifesaving station, and I’m supposed to meet her there. I’ll send you a link to it. You can see her before you meet her.”

Libby glanced through the window toward her car. “I have my computer in the car.” She tucked her long hair behind her ear and gathered her things. “What does Vanessa think about our father

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leaving prime real estate to me?” She left the house and started for her vehicle.

Nicole cleared her throat. “Um, she’s pretty upset.”

“I would imagine. What did you tell her about me?”

“As little as possible.”

“I don’t know if that’s good or bad.”

“I wouldn’t worry about them. She and her brother are fishing for info though. She mentioned lighthouse ruins and I asked for directions. She offered to show me, but I went out there by myself yesterday. I’m still meeting her today because I knew you’d want to know more about her.”

It sounded like a disaster in the making. “I have so many questions.”

“Then come down as soon as you can and get them answered. Wait until you see Tidewater Inn, Libby! It’s really old. It’s on the eastern edge of the island with tons of land along the beach. The inn was a house once, and it is a little run-down but very quaint. It’s hard to get out here. Until Rooney gets the ferry approved, you’ll have to hire a boat. You’re going to love it though. I love this island. It’s like stepping back in time. And I’ve even seen some caves to explore.”

“No road to it from the mainland?” Libby couldn’t fathom a place that remote.

“Nope. Boat access only.”

Her phone still to her ear, Libby opened her car door and slid in. The computer was on the floor, and she opened it. “I’m going to have to get off a minute to tether my phone to the computer. Send me the link to the harbor cam. Don’t tell Vanessa I’m watching.”

“When can you get here tomorrow?”

“It’s about two hours from Virginia Beach?”

“Yes.”

Libby doubted she’d sleep tonight. It would be no problem to be in the shower by six. “I’ll be there by nine.”

She ended the call, then attached the cord that tethered the phone to the computer. She would use the cell signal to watch Nicole's video feed on the larger screen. Then she could watch and still take any calls that came in. Her skin itched from the brambles. She established the connection, then logged on to the Internet. No e-mail yet.

She owned property. The thought was mind boggling. No matter what condition it was in, it was a resource to fall back on, something she hadn't possessed yesterday. The thought lightened her heart. She stared at the grand old home beside her. What if there was enough money from the sale of the inn to allow her to buy a historic house and restore it? It would be a dream come true. She could help her stepbrother. She could buy some Allston paintings too, something she'd never dreamed she could afford.

A woman pecked on Libby's car window, and Libby turned on the key and ran down the window. "Hello. I'm not an intruder. I'm evaluating this gorgeous old place for the historic registry."

The woman smiled. "I thought maybe you were buying it. Someone should restore it."

"Someone plans to," Libby said. What if it could be her instead of her client?

The woman pointed. "I'm taking up a collection for the Warders, who live on the corner. They had a fire in the kitchen and no insurance."

Libby had only two hundred dollars in her checking account, and she had to get to the Outer Banks. "I wish I could help," she said with real regret. "I don't have anything to spare right now."

"Thanks anyway." The woman smiled and moved to the next house.

Libby ran the window back up and clicked on her in-box. An e-mail from Nicole appeared. She stared at the link. All she had to do was click and she'd catch a glimpse of a sister she had no

idea even existed. Her hands shook as she maneuvered the pointer over the link and clicked. The page opened, and she was staring at a boardwalk over deep sand dunes that were heaped like snowdrifts. In the distance was a brilliant blue ocean. A pier extended into the pristine water. The scene was like something out of a magazine. She could almost feel the sea breeze.

She clicked to enlarge the video and turned up the speakers so she could hear the roar of the surf. Where was Nicole? The pier was empty, and so was the sea. A dilapidated building stood to the right of the screen, and she could just make out a sign over the door. Hope Beach Lifesaving Station.

Then there was a movement on the boardwalk. Nicole appeared. She smiled and waved. “Hi, Libby,” she said. The sound quality was surprisingly good. The sound of the ocean in the background was a pleasant lull.

Libby had to resist the impulse to wave back. Her partner’s blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail under a sun hat, and she wore a hot-pink cover-up over her brown bathing suit.

Nicole glanced at her watch and frowned. “Vanessa is late. Like I started to say earlier, I didn’t want to wait on her to see the lighthouse ruins, so I went out there alone. I have to show it to you. Wait until you see what I found. You’ll seriously freak! Hey, give me a call. This pier is one of the few places where my phone works. Isn’t that crazy—an entire island without cell service. Almost, anyway.”

Libby picked up her cell phone, still connected to the computer. They could talk a few minutes. Before she could call, a small boat pulled up to the shore. Two men jumped out and pulled the boat aground. Nicole turned toward them. The men walked toward her. There was no one else in sight, and Libby tensed when Nicole took a step back. Libby punched in Nicole’s number. She watched her friend dig in her bag when it rang.

When Nicole answered the phone, Libby leaped to her feet and yelled, "Get out of there. Go to your car!"

Nicole was still watching the men walk toward her. "It's just a couple of tourists, Libby," she said. "You worry too much." She smiled and waved at the men.

Libby leaned closer to the laptop. "There's something wrong." She gasped at the intention in their faces. "Please, Nicole, run!"

But it was the men who broke into a run as they drew closer to the boardwalk. As they neared the cam, Libby could see them more clearly. One was in his forties with a cap pulled low over his eyes. He sported a beard. The other was in his late twenties. He had blond hair and hadn't shaved in a couple of days.

Nicole took another step back as the older man in the lead smiled at her. The man said, "Hang up." He grabbed her arm.

"Let go of her!" Libby shouted into the phone.

The man knocked the phone from Nicole's hand and the connection was broken. The other man reached the two, and he plunged a needle into Nicole's arm. Both men began dragging Nicole toward the boat. She was struggling and shouting for help, then went limp. Her hat fell to the ground.

Barely aware that she was screaming, Libby dialed 9-1-1. "Oh God, oh God, help her!"

The dispatcher answered and Libby babbled about her friend being abducted right in front of her. "It's in the Outer Banks." She couldn't take her eyes off the boat motoring away from the pier. "Wait, wait, they're taking her away! Do something!"

"Where?"

"I told you, the Outer Banks." Libby looked at the heading above the video stream. "Hope Beach. It's Hope Beach. Get someone out there."

"Another dispatcher is calling the sheriff. I have an officer on his way to you."

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“I’m going to Hope Beach now.”

“Stay where you are,” the dispatcher said. “We’ve got the sheriff on the line there. He’s on his way to the site. Don’t hang up until an officer arrives.”

She had to do something. Anything but run screaming into the street. Libby looked at the computer. She could call up the video, save it for evidence. But the stream had no rewind, no way to save it. If she could hack into the site, she could get to the file. The police could save time and get the pictures of those men circulating. With a few keystrokes, she broke through the firewall and was in the code.

Then her computer blinked and went black. And when she called up the site again, the entire code was gone. What had she done?

T W O

Smog hung over the New York skyline and matched Lawrence Rooney's mood. He studied the expansive view from his penthouse office on Fifth Avenue. The senator sitting in the chair on the other side of the gleaming walnut desk had better come through with the promised plum after all Lawrence had done for him.

Lawrence kept his attention away from the senator long enough to make sure the other man knew who was in charge, then turned from his perusal of his domain and settled in his chair. "You have news for me?"

Senator Troy Bassett tugged on his tie, then pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blotted his damp forehead. "The city is like an oven today," he muttered.

In his fifties now, he had once been handsome, but his blond good looks had been replaced by flab and gray hair. Lawrence had known him since they went to Harvard together. They knew each other's weaknesses all too well. Lawrence had funneled a fortune into getting Bassett elected. But the rewards were coming—now.

"The vote?" Lawrence prodded.

The senator nodded. "Came through. The ferry system will be added next year."

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“Excellent.” Lawrence sat back in his leather chair. “I will have possession of the land by the end of the summer.”

“I thought the old man refused to sell it.”

“Luckily for us, he died.” How he wished he could have seen Ray Mitchell take his last breath.

Bassett lifted a brow. “Natural causes?”

Lawrence laughed. “Of course. We both know I like to have my own way, but I’ve never stooped to murder. I’ve found money talks well enough that it’s not necessary.” A smile tugged at his lips. “Though there’s always a first time for everything.”

“You’d met your match in Mitchell though. He was adamant.”

“True enough. But his son has no such scruples. He knows when to take a good offer and run with it.”

“So he’s agreed to your price?”

Lawrence nodded. “He has. I was willing to go up another five million if I had to, but he didn’t know that. I got a bargain.”

“You always do.”

The door opened and Lawrence’s secretary stuck her head in. “Mr. Rooney, Mr. Poe is here to see you.”

“Excellent. Send him in,” Lawrence said. “Stay,” he told the senator, who had started to rise. “Poe will bring us both up to date.”

Kenneth Poe, in a navy suit and red tie, strolled into the office. Every dark strand of hair perfectly coiffed, he was the epitome of a gentleman. His usefulness to Lawrence had grown in the past year. If Lawrence had been blessed with a son, he would have wanted the boy to be like Poe. Smart, ruthless, and handsome. He was nearly thirty now and still unmarried. Perhaps it was time to introduce him to Katelyn. Lawrence couldn’t imagine a better son-in-law.

“Sir,” Poe said, extending his hand. “Senator.”

The men shook hands, and Lawrence ticked another box in Poe’s favor. He knew how to act around power and had made sure

to show respect to Lawrence first. The boy must have taken a class on sucking up. Lawrence liked it.

“I hope you have a signed bill of sale for me,” Lawrence said.

Poe settled into the other chair and casually propped one foot on the opposite knee. “Unfortunately, we’ve hit a snag.”

Lawrence frowned at Poe’s grave tone. “What kind of snag?”

“It’s serious.”

When Poe said something was serious, Lawrence paid attention. “How serious?”

“A young woman came to town. Very smart and nosy. She found the cave. I’m not sure if she saw the contents.” He glanced at the senator.

Lawrence pursed his lips. “We just need her out of the way long enough for us to get the land signed over. Can you put her in a safe place until we accomplish that?”

“It’s already done. But what if that causes even more problems?”

“If it does, we’ll deal with it later. I have a great deal of money riding on this, Kenneth. I won’t allow my plans to be derailed by a spelunker. Fix it.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll do my best.”

Poe’s best was usually spectacular. Lawrence dismissed his concerns and began to think about what he would do with the money that would come pouring in when he turned Hope Island into the next Myrtle Beach.

The sailboat was sinking fast, and so was the sun. Two people flailed about in the water below. Chief Petty Officer Alec Bourne sat on the floor of the Dolphin helicopter with his feet dangling over the edge. “Take it lower,” he shouted over the roar of the rotors. His

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Coast Guard team received the call for help twenty minutes ago, and he'd prayed all the way out that they'd be in time.

The hurricane had veered and was going to miss them, but its outer band stirred up fifteen-foot seas, and the small craft below had floundered in the wind and waves. It heeled to the port by about forty-five degrees. This distress call was likely to be the first of several for the day.

Aircraft Commander Josh Holman nodded, and the helicopter hovered closer to the waves pounding at the boat. Alec leaned into the wind. The stinging rain struck his face, and he smelled the salty air as he waited for the signal from Curtis Ireland, his flight mechanic and best friend.

"Stand by to deploy swimmer," Josh barked.

"Roger, checking swimmer." Curtis slapped Alec's chest.

Alec inhaled, then flipped the hinged buckle and released his gunner's belt, the last piece of gear that held him in the helicopter. He shoved off the aircraft. The wind buffeted him on the way down. The waves slapped the air from his lungs and he submerged, then popped to the surface and struck out for the first of the people in the water.

A woman in the sea struggled toward him. When she reached him, she grabbed his neck and nearly took him under the water. "Calm down!" He pushed her away, then grabbed her from behind in the traditional rescue hold. She stiffened, then relaxed in his grip. He gave Curtis a thumbs-up, and the rescue basket began to descend toward them.

"You're going to be okay," he assured the woman.

"We hit a shoal," she gasped, her lips blue. "We've been in the water for two hours."

"It's almost over." He grabbed the basket and got her inside, then signaled to Curtis to lift her to the helicopter while he went after her husband.

Five minutes later he was back aboard the Dolphin too. Mission accomplished. The health service technician, Sara Kavanagh, began to check out the woman's pulse and blood pressure. Both patients were swathed in blankets. They thanked Alec and his crew several times as the chopper veered back to the Coast Guard station, where medical personnel waited to attend the capsized sailors.

On days like this Alec knew he was right where God wanted him. There were other days when nothing went right, or when they lost someone they were trying to save.

He was smiling when he walked to the grassy picnic area of the station with his friends. Alec and Curtis had gone through training together. They were as different as two best friends could be. Curtis was the quiet, thoughtful one of the group. Though he came from money, he never flaunted it. Sara Kavanagh was the only female on their team. Her reserve kept the men at the station from making any inappropriate remarks, and she had earned their trust with her skills. He sometimes wondered if she and Josh Holman would end up a couple. Josh was a jokester and kept the rest of them laughing, but sometimes Alec thought he saw a special spark when Josh looked at Sara.

"You've got three days off, Alec," Josh said. "Gonna leave the island and head for the casino so you can win big and buy me a Jaguar?"

"I think you'll have to settle for a bicycle on what I have," Alec said. "Me and Zach will go crabbing. I hear there have been some good hauls. Maybe I'll make enough to build that back deck."

Sara was pulling food from a sack. "How is Zach?"

Alec's smile faded. He shrugged. "It's only been two weeks. You know how it is with a teenager. One minute he's got a head on his shoulders and the next he's doing something so stupid you think he was raised under a rock. He's sure glad to be back on the island though. He hated Richmond."

“There are bound to be challenges. You’ve never raised a kid before,” Sara said.

“Darrell did most of the raising and I’ll figure out the rest. He’s all I have left of Darrell.”

The small plane crash had been only six months ago, and Alec still missed his older brother with a painful ache. Zach was the spitting image of Darrell at that age too. The kid was a handful for his grandparents, though, and Alec had taken custody two weeks ago. He should have taken him right from the start, but Alec’s mother had been adamant that the boy’s place was with them. And Darrell had named his parents as guardians.

His cell phone rang and he grabbed it. The station was one of the few places on the island where his cell worked. The call was from his cousin Tom, who also happened to be the sheriff on this rock. “Hey, Tom.”

“Sorry to bother you, buddy, but I’ve got Zach here in jail.”

Alec’s stomach plummeted. “What’s he done?”

“He and some of his friends took it into their heads to spray-paint graffiti on the school. I caught him with the paint. I think you should leave him here overnight. Might teach him a lesson.”

The thought of his nephew in jail pained Alec, but he knew his cousin was right. “Whatever you think is best.”

“While I’ve got you on the phone, I need your help. A woman named Nicole Ingram was abducted out at Tidewater Pier.”

“Abducted?”

“The Virginia Beach police called me. Her business partner saw it all on the cam.”

Alec winced. “That had to have been rough.”

“She was hysterical, according to the officer who called me. She’s on her way here. Can I get your team to keep your eyes open on this one? The kidnapers took her in a boat.”

“Sure thing. You got a description of the woman?”

COLLEEN COBLE

Tom gave it to him. “Oops, got another call. Don’t come until lunch tomorrow to spring your nephew.”

Alec ended the call and put his phone away. The others were looking at him with curiosity. “Zach’s in jail.”

“So we gathered,” Curtis said. “What’d he do?”

“Spray-painted graffiti on the school.”

“I did that once,” Josh said. “It’s a rite of passage to adulthood.”

“I never did,” Alec said.

“Yeah, but you walk on water.”

Alec grinned at the familiar joke. Just because he didn’t drink or smoke, most of the other men thought he was some kind of saint. The truth was far different.