



STORM WARNING

HIDDEN BAY

ELIZABETH GODDARD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HIDDEN BAY, BOOK 1

STORM WARNING

ELIZABETH GODDARD



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To Sharon.
I know how much you miss walking
the rocky beaches of the Pacific Northwest.
You're an inspiration to me
because you've always been
such a bright beacon of *His* light.

As memory may be a paradise from which we cannot be driven, it may also be a hell from which we cannot escape.

John Lancaster Spalding

The waves roar, O LORD,
the waves roar,
the waves roar and crash.
Above the sound of the surging water,
and the mighty waves of the sea,
the LORD sits enthroned in majesty.

Psalm 93:3–4 NET

Prologue

OLYMPIC PENINSULA, WASHINGTON COAST
FEBRUARY

Déjà vu.

A premonition.

Call it whatever you want. But Jo Cattrel had always had a feeling it would come to this. Her job as a maintenance engineer required long hours and, at times—okay, yeah, most times—the worst conditions, and she had to work in a way that caused the least amount of inconvenience to guests and even other employees.

She wasn't so good at the inconvenient part, or rather, she was great at the inconvenient part, possessing a real knack for inconveniencing others.

Like right now. In the dim lighting of this rustic cabin, the guest emerged from the bedroom wearing a winter mask and coat, ready to head out into the storm.

"A face mask is a good idea." She smiled. "I've inconvenienced you. I'll come back another time."

And try not to act like I saw those disturbing images on your tablet.

She'd always feared this exact scenario—that she would

witness a crime or see evidence lying around. She spent too many nights reading crime fiction.

Retracing her steps to the door, she walked backward. Something—maybe her literary experience—told her not to turn her back. The guest had been informed she would be checking on that leaky sink and hadn't answered when she'd knocked, so she let herself in because the storm of the decade was moving in and she wouldn't be able to come back later.

She needed to finish all her tasks, eat dinner with Pop, and get back to her own quarters on the property, though she could expect to be called upon to answer some kind of maintenance emergency that kept her life exciting. She'd always had a knack for fixing things, just like Pop, and she loved her job.

She loved Pop too. Wanted to eat chili with him tonight like they'd planned.

The eyes behind the mask narrowed.

He knows.

He knew . . . that she'd seen too much.

She'd never been a good liar. People could read her emotions on her face, and that transparency came with a lot of negatives. Like now.

At least she had "Little Jo" in her back pocket if she needed protection, but a small handgun would have been better than her heavy wrench.

"I have to go now." She turned and rushed to the door like a fleeing coward, reaching in her pocket for the wrench.

Pain seared her shoulders as he gripped her and yanked her away from the door, throwing her to the floor. Little Jo rattled across the floor and slid under the bed, but she could reach it if she moved fast enough. Except he'd pinned her in place with the darkest eyes she'd ever seen. Her heart rate shot up as he studied her. Was he considering how best to silence her?

He held a knife at his side.

“Whatever you’re planning, you’re not going to get away with it,” she said.

He approached, then dropped to one knee. Jo had the strangest sense of familiarity. *Do I know you?*

She wouldn’t give up without a fight and twisted, scrambled toward her wrench, but her limbs failed to respond. At the prick in her neck, she jerked around, grasping at her throat. Realization dawned that she’d already lost. She glanced again toward the knife but saw a syringe instead.

And he’d already won.

Dizziness pressed her body against the hard floor. Darkness edged her vision. He was going to throw her into the ocean where she’d never be found.

“This can’t be the end,” she whispered.

I’m so sorry, Pop!

1

Time was short.

And Paco was missing.

The storm system of the decade bore down on the Washington coast, and Remi Grant was right in its path on a beach battered by waves during what was projected to be a dramatic king tide.

Oh, she knew better. But . . .

“Paco! Where are you?” She doubted her shouts could be heard over the breakers lashing the shore, crashing into the rocks.

The expected heavy rain hadn’t started yet, but the wind remained cold, constant, and strong.

Sea stacks dotted the beach, and a rocky outcropping blocked her path as the tide rushed in, rising too quickly for comfort.

The only way around was to wait for the breakers to subside. Another wave crashed against the formation, then slinked back beneath the next one rolling in, building momentum.

Now!

She rushed around the mass of rocks, her efforts slowed by wet sand packed with rocks, barnacles, and shells. Beach Safety 101—never turn your back on the waves. But Remi did just that as she ran toward the bluff while simultaneously watching her steps along the rock-studded beach. Twisting her ankle or falling could be a death sentence.

Behind her, the roar of the sea resounded, filling her with fear. The ocean was closing in on her, and the beach would be gone in minutes.

The Pacific wouldn't take her today. Not if she had anything to do with it.

She made it to the dry beach—what was left of it—and that's when she heard the smallest of cries. Given the thunderous waves echoing against the cliff, she was surprised she'd heard anything else. Heavy sea spray doused her, but she expected no less from the approaching ferocious monster.

Heart pounding, she moved along the cliff, searching for the small pooch. *He must be frozen in terror.* Remi had to find him in time, for both their sakes.

She always expected the unexpected. And while she waited for the unexpected, she planned everything to the last detail. She'd prepared for the storm system of the decade, but she hadn't expected a guest from Texas to lose their lapdog on a dangerous beach as the storm moved in, eventually bringing mammoth twenty-foot-or-more waves.

"Paco! Come on, boy. Where are you?"

In response, she heard nothing but the angry surf, best enjoyed from a distance during a storm, which was just the setting her lodge on the bluff provided. She couldn't return without the Yorkshire terrier. Remi shouldn't be on the beach now—no one should—but here she was, headed north and away from the safety of the lodge.

Where could he be?

He probably would have hunkered as far away from the encroaching Pacific Ocean as he could get. She hurried along the cliff, looking into the crevices and around small piles of rocks and tumbles of driftwood. In this mess, she might never find him.

“Paco! Where are you?” Could he even hear her? If he did, would he trust a stranger with his fate? “Come on, boy . . .” she mumbled to herself.

Concern for the small creature chased her, but she wouldn’t entertain the strong possibility that he might already have been swept out to sea.

And there . . .

Huddled in the smallest of alcoves at the base of the cliff face, Paco shivered. Though time was running out, she approached slowly so he wouldn’t feel more threatened. If the dog ran away from her, escaping her efforts, then she wouldn’t have enough time to find and save him.

Salt water rushed toward her, reaching farther with each crashing breaker.

God, help me. I’m out of time.

Crouching, she continued forward, wishing she’d brought a treat. “I know you’re scared. I am too. But let me get us out of this.”

Trembling, cold, and wet, he shrank against the porous bedrock, deeper into the small recess. Then Paco sprang from his hiding place and dashed between her and the rocks, his short legs carrying him faster than she would have thought. Except he was in survival mode, adrenaline fueling his doomed getaway.

But it also fueled Remi, and with everything in her, she reached out for Paco.

But he slipped away. “No!” She raced after him as more salty water rushed toward them. “Paco, come back.” *You’re going to die if you don’t!*

He slowed, turning back in fear as the tide chased them.

His hesitation gave her the chance she needed. She sprang forward and snatched him, careful not to crush his small body while still maintaining her grip. Barking and biting, he tried to wriggle free, his sharp little teeth sinking into her thumb, but she ignored the pain and held him against her. "I've got you. It's going to be okay."

Rushing forward out of the water's reach, she gently tucked Paco inside her heavy raincoat to keep him warm. The terrier seemed to finally trust her, or he succumbed to exhaustion, but either way, he settled against her inside the coat. His trembling form reminded her of her own predicament.

Their predicament.

Remi pressed her back against the cliff, then raced toward the rocky outcropping that could trap her and block her escape to the staircase up to Cedar Trails Lodge at the top of the bluff. Waves washed back out to the ocean, but she saw now what she'd feared. The tide had already come in, blocking her way to the steps to safety.

So she turned and headed north in search of a place on the cliff where she could find traction and climb higher. Rescue crews would be hard-pressed to reach her in time out here, and she couldn't afford to wait for help.

Her radio squawked. She fished it out of her pocket. "I got him. I just need a way out."

"Use Jo's ladder!" Erika's voice sounded garbled over the radio.

"Roger that."

Jo had secured a rope ladder at the end of the campsites in case of an emergency until they could build another set of actual steps, but Remi had never found a need to use it. They'd always been adamant about when the beach was safe and when it was not safe, especially in the winter months,

during the storms that people came to the lodge to watch. Today, someone had violated those rules.

Paco squirmed inside her jacket, and she continued to speak to him in soothing tones. The cold wind knocked into her, bringing salty, cold spray along with it as she jogged forward. Polished rocks—large and small—made up most of the beach and were a tripping hazard if she didn't watch where she stepped. Half jogging, half slow-stepping, she made her way to a patch of wet, gray sand.

She should almost be near where the campsite ended on top of the bluff, and she paused to stare up the cliff face. Jagged edges melded with patches of dirt and bedrock, and at the top, loamy earth and thick evergreens. In places along the coast, the cliffs were as high as a hundred and fifty feet. Here, it was half that. Still . . .

Tidewater rushed around her ankles, reminding her that time was slipping away, along with her way out of this.

There . . .

She spotted the marine rope ladder that Jo had secured for the unfortunate scenario of getting trapped by the tide. Her heart jumped with hope.

But to get to the ladder, Remi had to traverse significant piles of driftwood stacked against the cliff. Sighing, she rushed forward, weaving her way around the large, pale tree trunks, some of them massive, which meant she'd have to climb over them. She stepped over one driftwood log after another, slid down between two larger ones, then crawled over the last log.

Once the water started rushing in, she'd have more to worry about than sneaker waves or breakers that could smash her against these rocks. She would be crushed by the driftwood.

She stood at the bottom of the cliff and looked up.

That Jo had assembled a rope ladder to span the distance

was impressive, but it didn't hang low enough for Remi to reach.

She peeked inside her coat. "I'm going to need you to stay still, okay?" He wasn't going to like it, but she had no choice. She secured him in the inside pocket of her coat, grateful he was small enough, zipped it closed, then tightened the bottom of her jacket. She fastened it completely up to her neck and secured the snap, then pulled her hood tighter—all of this just in case he clawed or chewed his way out of her pocket.

"Hold on, Paco." She jumped for the rope.

Jumped again.

Then she pulled a small chunk of driftwood over and balanced on it. Just one last jump. She reached with both hands and caught the bottom rung. Then pulled on it and walked along the rocks until she could gain traction with one foot, then the other.

Calisthenics. She'd done her share of them in the past, but clearly, she needed to beef up her exercise routine. Muscles straining, she climbed the ladder, which she realized didn't have anchor points. Once she got out of this, she and Jo would have a long talk.

"Hang in there. I'm climbing this ladder, Paco, and before you know it, you'll be safe in your momma's arms."

Despite the cold temps and buffeting winds, sweat trickled down the middle of her back. She was halfway there.

We're going to make it.

The ladder suddenly dropped a few inches. Her heart rate jumped.

Pulse soaring, eyes shut, she held on as the rope swung out and slapped against the bedrock. At least it had held.

Holding on tight, she stared up. What was going on? No time to ponder that question. This thing was slipping for some reason she couldn't fathom. She gripped the rope.

Stepped on another rung, pushing through the fear of falling and breaking her body against the rocks or driftwood.

Don't look down. Don't look down.

Remi looked down.

Mistake. Big mistake.

The tide had come in hard and fast, and seawater rushed against the cliff directly below her. Driftwood shifted and moved with the force of nature. Her heart clamored against her ribs. Remi once again squeezed her eyes shut, the sound of her pounding heart overpowering the waves.

You can do this. Just keep going.

One hand on the rope, she reached for the next rung, but it broke in half, leaving her pawing the air. Her palms slicked as she found the rope again and held on for dear life.

Caught her breath.

Paco whined. She could feel his body quivering in her pocket. "It's okay, buddy. I've got you."

The words came out breathy.

And you've got me, God.

She just had to focus and climb. She'd be up on top soon. Otherwise, she'd be swept away, lost forever.

Like the big hole in her life that left her unsure who she could trust, wary of everyone. And beyond this cliff, once she made it—and she would—she knew that time was running out for her. She could feel it.

But she could only worry about one crisis at a time as she continued climbing the failing ladder. She should be nearing the top. Ten feet.

Eight feet.

Five feet.

Four . . .

She looked at the last three rungs. Broken. She saw the crack in each of them. They wouldn't hold her weight. She'd

just have to pull from all her past training and climb the rope instead. Hope for the best.

Remi glanced up, focusing on what must be done. She started climbing and realized that the rope had been shredded.

She literally hung by a thread.

Her chest constricted. All the air whooshed out of her.

What am I going to do?

With the next crash of waves, she could have sworn she heard a voice. Had she imagined it? Desperation fooling her mind? But she glanced up again, searching, hoping.

Hands reached for her. A stranger with steel-blue eyes stared down at her.

“Grab my hands now before it’s too late.”

“What . . . ?” Her throat constricted.

“You’re going to die if you don’t take my hands now.”

Images suddenly crashed into her mind, paralyzing her, blinding her, then she was somewhere . . . hot, dry . . . somewhere else.

A breaker lashed hard against the cliff, bringing her back to the present. The rope thrashed with the impact. The thread broke. Remi reached for his hands and missed. Once again, she pawed the air.

Fear paralyzed her.

I’m going to die!

But the man caught her wrist.

Below her, the rope ladder tumbled down the cliff, leaving her feet dangling.

Now a stranger held her life in his hands.

2

Adrenaline spiked through Hawk Beckett. Lying flat to anchor his body, he gripped both her hands. In one momentous heave, he dragged her with him from the edge and hauled the woman up to safety from where she hung over a furious sea. He'd pulled her from the brink of death.

The angry ocean had boiled below her, stirring the driftwood into a soupy, deadly mess. For a minute there, he thought they were both done for. That she might pull him down with her and he'd drop right alongside her because no way would he release her hands.

He stared up at the thick green canopy and thanked his lucky stars. No. Not luck. He didn't believe in luck. But the trajectory he'd been on, he wasn't sure God wanted anything more to do with him. Sea spray coated his face, thanks to the gusting wind.

Lying next to him on a cluster of sword ferns, she gasped for breath. He climbed to his knees but didn't stand. Instead, he peered down at her, assessing.

How had she ended up on that beach?

Hazel, no wait, gray-blue eyes blinked up at him. He couldn't pin down the color, but her gaze held him. And just like that, he lost his train of thought. A small bark escaped from somewhere on her person, surprising him. He scrambled to his feet and offered his hand. She took it and stood, appearing to cradle the small creature she protected. Her rain hood had blown off, and she tugged it back on, but he'd glimpsed her long, auburn-brown hair. A smattering of freckles across her nose.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I think so. Thanks for your help." She unzipped her jacket and dug around in another compartment before pulling out a small pooch. Then held and comforted the barking ball of fur.

Two people hurried through the woods toward them, shouting over the wind.

"Remi! Remi!" A tall, blue-haired woman shouted from a distance. She looked stocky in her heavy raincoat as she weaved her way along a narrow trail that hedged the cliff.

Remi? He took another look at the woman he'd pulled from certain death. Must be Remi Grant—the Cedar Trails Lodge manager he'd planned to find and meet while here.

Holding the small dog against her with one hand, Remi swiped rain and sea spray from her face with the other. Then she looked at him, gratitude in her gaze. "I can't thank you enough. You saved our lives. You know that?"

While he believed that she was grateful, he hadn't missed the wariness that lingered in her eyes. Interesting. Saving her life wasn't reason enough to trust him. He understood that sentiment since he'd come to this wilderness coast, running from his own demons.

"You're welcome." A better response would have been to tell her that beach wasn't the safest place right now. But he'd come across as harsh and insensitive. Besides, he sus-

pected she knew that. Or if she hadn't known that before, she knew it now.

"Paco!" Breathing hard, a mix of relief and fear twisted up in her demeanor, a plump older woman cut her way through the underbrush, making a beeline for her baby. "Did you find my Paco?"

Blue-Hair came up behind her. Remi handed Paco off to the plump woman. "Here you go, Mrs. Daley. He's perfectly fine, just a little wet and cold is all."

And scared, but Hawk suspected Remi wanted to comfort the woman rather than add more stress.

Mrs. Daley pulled Paco to her and squeezed so hard that Hawk thought she might end his life by accident, but then she held Paco up to her face and let him lick the moisture off her nose and mouth. When the dog was satisfied, she tucked him under her arm and looked at Remi again. "I'm so sorry this happened. I can't believe—"

A gust of wind rattled the treetops and cut her off. All eyes looked up at the canopy. Then Hawk glanced out at the dark Pacific . . . boiling out in the depths, waves building momentum as they chased the coast. They needed to get out of the weather.

"It's okay." Remi touched Mrs. Daley's arm. "You should get inside. We'll catch up later."

Blue-Hair hugged Remi to her, pure relief in her eyes. "You made it. Thank goodness for Jo's ladder."

"Yeah, thank goodness for Jo's ladder." Remi eyed Hawk. A look passed between them. They shared a secret about that ladder. No mention of his assistance, but he wasn't looking for recognition.

She avoided looking at the ground and the auger-style anchors to which the rope ladder had been affixed. The marine rope wasn't old or worn out, and the quick assessment, impression, he'd gotten was that it had been intentionally

shredded. The cuts looked recent. But he kept it to himself for now.

Blue-Hair glanced around as if searching for the rope, her green contacts shifting in her eyes.

“Let’s get inside out of the weather,” Remi said. “The wind and rain are picking up.” Remi looked at him, raising her voice over the wind. “I didn’t get your name.”

“Hawk Beckett. You must be Remi Grant.”

“That I am.” She scrunched up her face. “Your name sounds familiar. Come back to the lodge. I owe you more than a cup of coffee, but we can start with that.”

“I’m Erika, by the way.” Blue-Hair’s eyes were sharp, and her smile was warm and friendly.

Erika turned and headed back toward the lodge. Mrs. Daley had left them behind in her rush to return Paco to a warm environment. Remi followed Erika, and Hawk followed Remi as they made their way along the trail that would lead them back to Cedar Trails Lodge. The trail was close enough to the cliff that he could look out over the rocky beach drowning in ocean waves. If anyone asked him, it wasn’t safe.

An image of Remi climbing up the doomed ladder, then hanging by a thread flashed in his mind. He needed to talk to her about that rope, but in private.

They passed the area where the rental cabins were located, spread out and secluded enough in the trees to provide privacy. Then they walked through another patch of dense woods before stepping into a clearing on their approach to the main lodge, built from driftwood logs almost a century ago.

Remi slowed to walk next to him. “Where are you staying?”

“I’m in the Bluff Cabin.”

“Wow, you landed the best one.”

“A cancellation opened up at the last minute, so I took it.”

Another cold gust urged him forward to shelter, but Remi stopped in her tracks, and he stopped too. Her big, beautiful eyes peered at him from the shadows of her raincoat hood.

“How did you happen to be in position to pull me up? I mean, just in the nick of time.” That caution flickered again.

What was going on that she would question his reason for being in a position to save her? Her wariness kind of took him aback. “I recently came to town.” *Rented a house temporarily.* “I was considering getting a camper and wanted to check out the campground.”

“It’s closed during the winter months.”

“I got that. I was just making my way back.”

Remi appeared satisfied and they continued forward. When they reached the lodge doors, a strong wind slammed them both with sideways rain. When he opened the door, he got a taste of the strength behind that approaching storm—it would only get worse. Inside the lodge, a few people were gathered at the panoramic windows.

“Please, order a coffee on me.” Remi smiled. “Coffee *and* breakfast are on the house. Whatever you want.”

Remi left his side, spoke to the blond barista behind the coffee bar, then moved to the window to speak with Mrs. Daley and Erika. Though she smiled and acted like a great hostess, Hawk could tell she was still shaken from nearly falling to her death. Who wouldn’t be?

He stepped up to the coffee bar and looked up at the menu. In his peripheral vision, he tracked Remi until she disappeared down a hallway. Hawk frowned. Considering he needed to talk to her about the frayed ladder, he could have handled that so much better. He ordered the plain Americano with two shots, and while he waited, he moved

closer to the wall of photos to get a better look at the amazing, framed images of breakers crashing against the rocky outcroppings and sea stacks.

A couple of them depicted faces in the waves. Seriously? One of them was a monster, his mouth wide, ready to chomp down on his prey. Disturbing. He walked along the wall, absorbing the images and looking for the photographer's signature, but found none. Hmm.

The image of rolling marine fog drew him closer. A ship was barely visible inside the fog. He couldn't put his finger on what was so special about the photo, but it was stunning. The barista approached and stood next to him.

"That's the *Specter's Bounty*."

"Huh?" He took the coffee she handed him. "Oh, I'm sorry. I could have—"

"No problem. That's my favorite picture. I've heard about the *Specter's Bounty*, but I've never actually seen the ghost ship."

"Who took these?"

But she had already turned to rush back to the coffee bar against the far wall. Had the photographer also drawn the sketches and caricatures on display?

A couple left a small table by the window, so Hawk sat while he had the chance. This place must have been built around this perfect view of the ocean and the rocky shore below because it was truly mesmerizing. The lodge itself was rustic and backwoodsy. Not many people chose to travel to a place with spotty if no cell coverage and no Wi-Fi.

To him those features, or lack thereof, were a big plus. Technology was neither good nor bad, but it had taken over people's lives. Sometimes a person needed to unplug. Literally. Humans had a way of taking something meant for good and using it for evil, but the difference between the good guys and the bad guys was often a matter of point of

view. At least that's what his former commanding officer, retired Chief Warrant Officer John Marshall, often said.

He was glad he'd listened to John's advice—his urging, really—that Hawk visit Cedar Trails nestled at the edge of Hidden Bay. When the place had been booked up, Hawk rented the house in the nearby small town of Forestview. That's how much he trusted his former CO, the pilot with whom he'd flown over fifteen missions. John now worked in the private sector, but he remained Hawk's friend and mentor.

Finished with his coffee, Hawk debated heading back to his cabin before he had to face off with the blustery weather. He gave up hope that he'd have an opportunity to talk to Remi again, at least today. Hawk returned the mug to the counter and headed for the door.

"Leaving already?" Remi called.

He paused, turned, and smiled. "I finished the coffee." He closed the distance between them. "Honestly, I'd hoped to talk to you more."

The way he'd said the words came out entirely wrong and sounded like he was flirting, which he absolutely wasn't. But admittedly, her eyes kind of sucker punched him that first moment they'd stared up at him. He shoved those thoughts away, hoping she hadn't taken his words the wrong way.

She glanced at her watch and gestured to the table by the window where he'd been sitting. "I have a few minutes."

He sat in the same chair as before and gestured at the wall. "Who's responsible for the photographs and sketches?"

She shrugged. "The artists didn't want to be identified."

"Artists?"

"Someone took the pictures and someone else drew the sketches."

The way her cheeks warmed gave him a clue that she

was one of the someones but didn't want to talk about it. Just as well, he had a serious question. "Why'd you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Risk your safety like that."

"Come on. Don't tell me you wouldn't have tried to save the dog."

"All I'm saying is that it was risky." *You could have died.* "I've seen people swept away in lesser waves." He wished he could unsee it.

"Well, it's over and Paco's safe, thanks to you."

He hadn't known she'd been harboring an animal in her coat, and he'd been even more impressed with her skills to make that climb on a rope ladder that hadn't even been secured at the bottom.

She clasped her hands on the table. "I owe you more than coffee."

"You don't owe me anything. What was I going to do? Let you fall?"

In spite of his efforts, she'd almost done just that. "About that . . . did you happen to notice anything about the rope?"

Expression grim, his lips flattened. "Yes. I had hoped to talk to you about it."

Her expression turned serious, and she leaned forward. "I'm listening."

He didn't think she'd fully bought his explanation for being there at the right moment, so he'd start with that. "When you were on the beach, I didn't see you at first. I was looking at the storm brewing in the distance. Through the trees, I saw two women at the top of the steps, looking down and shouting. That's when I saw you and realized you were trapped by the tide. So I walked along the edge, trying to figure out what I could do to help. I saw the rope and figured you were heading there. I wanted to make sure

it was secure, and that's when I got a closer look and saw it had been tampered with. Shredded . . . but not completely. I tried to get your attention, but you couldn't hear me over the waves, and even if you could, that rope ladder was your only chance. I didn't have time to grab something else, you know?"

She leaned back and blew out a breath. "I'm just . . . thank you. I don't want to think about what would have happened if you hadn't reached out for me."

"I'm glad everything turned out all right." Frowning, he crossed his arms. "But whoever is responsible for tampering with that ladder—knowing that someone would eventually use it and get hurt or die—needs to be caught."

She gave him a hard, questioning look. "You don't think it was kids?"

"I think that's for the local law to figure out. I can't call them without cell service, but *you* can." Or he could just drive into the county seat and talk to a deputy sheriff, which he wanted to avoid.

"I'll talk to them, but only a portion of the rope remains," she said. "I'll call the sheriff and let him know. He might want you to explain what you saw as well."

"And I'm willing to do that."

"Your help is appreciated." Remi's eyes held him again, as if she was studying, searching. Though she'd been congenial in this exchange, he still got the feeling she was wary and not just about the incident, but about *him*.

But she could think the same about Hawk because he was also on edge. And maybe he was only seeing himself reflected in her gaze, but he doubted it.

She shifted in her chair. "Hawk Beckett." Angling her head slightly, she squinted her eyes. "Why does your name sound familiar? I mean, yes, you're a guest here, but do I know you from somewhere else?"

Well, that was just great. Good thing he showed up in person. “Honestly, that kind of stings.”

Her eyes widened. “I remember now. You left a message for me about running a helicopter tour package out of the lodge.” She pressed a hand to her head. “I’ve had so much on my plate, making sure everything at the lodge is ready for the biggest series of storms in more than a decade.”

A half-grin erupted. He shouldn’t, he really shouldn’t, but he would. “And like you said, you owe me.”

“I said that, didn’t I?” She quirked a grin.

Cute. But that was no answer.

“At least give me a chance. You’ve got nothing to lose.” The idea had popped into his head only a couple of weeks ago. After all, he had his own bird, and it would give him the freedom to stay on top of his personal mission to search for answers.

“I tell you what.” Her eyes met his. “I’ll give you a chance to convince me.”

Seriously? He hadn’t thought it would be so difficult and figured she would jump on the opportunity. He’d heard a few complaints about the lodge experience—not that he would share that with her right now. But some complained that there wasn’t much to do here other than walk on the beach. To his way of thinking, the beach should be enough—with the sea stacks and cliffs, driftwood. What more could a person want? Except maybe a helicopter tour of the region.

He scratched his temple. “Challenge accepted.”

“Right. Well, the thing is, it’s quiet here,” she said. “The noisy rotors kind of ruin that.”

Hmm. If noise was her only complaint, he could work with that.

“Obviously you’re not flying during this storm, so let’s meet again on this topic next week.” She drew in a breath. Hesitated. “Plus, I need to know a little more about you.”

Again, that guarded look in her eyes, and it increased his own questions about her.

Remi's radio squawked. "Remi?"

She gave Hawk an apologetic look. "Excuse me." Then spoke into the radio. "Go ahead, Dylan."

"Jo isn't responding on the radio and one of the doors on Cabin 10 is stuck."

"I'll find her. Thanks for letting me know." Remi stood and looked at Hawk. "I need to get back to work. Enjoy your cabin stay, and we'll talk more on the other side of the storms."

Then she left him sitting there, watching her walk away. She was as mesmerizing as the ocean tempests. Hawk shook his head. What had gotten into him? Nothing good, that's what. He pulled his gaze away and focused on nature's show through the window. Usually, the skies were flat and gray this time of year, but dark, angry clouds were rolling in fast. He stared out the window, taking his time to process everything she'd said.

She wanted to know a little more about him. Understandable. And that's what he could offer her—a *little* more. And with her guarded expression, maybe he needed to know more about *her*. But he wouldn't pry.

He left Cedar Trails Lodge and walked back to his cabin. The path was lined with the towering forest, including old-growth Pacific red cedars, the ground covered with a plethora of underbrush and sword ferns. The Bluff Cabin where he stayed was the last cabin along this trail, and four cabins away from the lodge. He'd lucked out getting the one right on the bluff so he could actually watch the storm. Others were tucked in the woods around him, but not close enough to actually see the forces of nature in action from the safety of their cozy dwelling.

Inside, the cabin shook and rattled with the gusts, and

STORM WARNING

Hawk began to question his decision to stay here, right over the bluff. He'd noticed signs of erosion. Years in the future, this cabin would probably be gone.

That was the perfect metaphor to describe his own slowly eroding life. He assumed that most everyone was already holed up. High wind warnings were in effect, and he should hunker down like the rest of the guests. Or should he drive into the county seat and report what he'd seen of the rope? But who was to say that he hadn't been the one to cause the trouble? It would be just his word.

And right now, he doubted his word was any good when it came to law enforcement.