



PERILOUS TIDES

HIDDEN BAY

ELIZABETH GODDARD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HIDDEN BAY, BOOK 2

PERILOUS TIDES

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Dedicated to those who brave the
uncharted places of the heart.

Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead.

Benjamin Franklin

1

DOWNTOWN SEATTLE MARCH

You won't see danger coming . . . until it's too late."

Those words, shared by her mother moments before her death, had defined Jo Cattrel's life for the last three years, since she'd fled Michigan. And maybe the life of every dead or missing person whose case she'd ever worked as a forensic artist. As for suspects, she lived to take them down with nothing more than a pencil. But there was a downside to it. A morbidity.

So much time spent with the dead and the missing or drawing criminal faces meant that she couldn't trust people. It meant that she glanced over her shoulder more than the average person. Like right now. If anyone cared to notice, she might appear downright paranoid.

Was someone watching? Following?

She couldn't escape the fear that she'd made a mistake in leaving her hiding place in Hidden Bay along the Washington coast.

But Pop had left her a cryptic note.

Don't worry about me, Jo. I didn't mean to lead trouble to you. Please forgive me.

That message had compelled her across Puget Sound to the city, of all places, to search for her father. She'd only just found him three years ago. She wasn't about to lose him now.

And this note felt like . . . *goodbye*.

No way would she let him disappear on her. Was she a fool to chase after him? Yet another person to leave her? Didn't matter. She was here.

I'm doing this.

After living in the misty rainforest, she was overwhelmed by the city sights and sounds. Nothing like a lungful of concentrated exhaust. The towering skyscrapers impeded fresh air. Having parked two blocks away, she dragged in too many breaths of pollution as she ascended the slick uphill sidewalk on a cold, rainy day, hiking toward the tallest building in Seattle.

If Pop hadn't wanted her to follow, he should have responded to her many texts demanding an explanation. So she'd used a locator app they shared. Fortunately for her, he'd probably forgotten about it.

She couldn't picture Pop in the big city. Back in Forestview—part of the Hidden Bay region of the Washington coast—he owned and operated the R&D Auto Repair Shop, got his hands dirty, and was always in his coveralls, fiddling with tools and covered in grime. He called himself a grease monkey, so what was he doing in downtown Seattle at the Columbia Center?

Finally arriving at her destination, she peered up at the seventy-six-story building. Dizziness swept over her, so she stared at her feet instead. Got her bearings. Then pushed through the glass door.

The sleek lobby intimidated, but she pressed forward. She needed to act like she belonged. The locator app told her that Pop was here. Or at least he *had* been. But now when she looked at the app, she got nothing. Was he still here?

She started toward the bank and nodded with a friendly smile at the security guard, though she feared the “I don’t belong here” look on her face would give her away. Jo’s sling bag snagged on a brass stanchion, and she knocked the whole thing over. Of course, it banged on the floor and echoed. A few people glanced her way.

Her heart pounded as the security guard approached. He set the stanchion back in place.

“I’m so sorry. I’m just clumsy. I’m just . . .” She pointed. “I’m going now.”

She hurried toward the directory. How in the world would she find Pop? He could be literally anywhere. Numerous businesses took up space. Tenants too. She could take the elevator and look around the Sky View Observatory. But she’d need to purchase a ticket first. Jo retrieved her cell and texted Pop again.

I’m at the Columbia Center. Where are you?

Then she took a picture of the directory. Jo should really get out more often because right now, she couldn’t feel more out of place.

I just want to go home.

But . . . Pop.

“Can I help you, ma’am?” The security guard stood next to her at the directory.

Yeah, she had a feeling she was giving off the wrong vibes.

“Actually, maybe. I’m looking for this man.” She pulled up an image of her father on her cell and showed it to the

guy. “He’s my father. His name is Raymond Dodge. I was supposed to meet him here.”

A little white lie. But the security guard didn’t need to know everything.

“A lot of people come and go, but you’re lucky. I remember seeing him. He left about an hour ago.”

What? “Weird. Okay, I’ll just wait at the Starbucks. I can text him that I’ll be there.” Now that she thought about it, the security guard might wonder why she hadn’t texted Pop to begin with. Well, she had but never got a response. “Thanks.”

Acid rose in her throat. Jo rushed through the exit without looking back. But there was nothing more she could do.

I never should have come.

She stepped out into the rain and hurried down the hill. Glancing over her shoulder, she happened to catch someone leaving the building . . . and stopping to watch her. She turned to get a better look. The watcher ducked out of sight. Frowning, Jo blew out a shaky breath. She was just seeing things.

Jo rushed forward, speed-walking her way around the pedestrian traffic until she got to the corner.

Another glance back confirmed that no one followed her. Still, the sounds, the rush of people, would give her an anxiety attack. She didn’t wait for the light to signal but dashed across the street, receiving honks and a few choice words. At the parking garage, she raced to her vehicle in the corner. Another glance over her shoulder—because there could never be too many—told her others entered the garage, heading to their vehicles, oblivious to her.

Sayonara, Seattle.

Jo scrambled into her red Land Rover Defender, which Pop had customized. Starting it, she appreciated the deep rumble. Nobody was going to mess with her while she was

in this beast. She paid at the gate and sped out of the parking lot.

Jo was done with the city. And . . . done with her father? The thought sent a pang through her heart. She wasn't done with him. This couldn't be the end.

Downtown traffic was maddening, and Jo didn't relax until she was on the ferry, crossing Puget Sound to Bremerton, where she could drive the rest of the way to Hidden Bay. Sitting in cold silence, Jo remained in her beast where it was safe, fighting the nausea erupting from the rocking motion of the ferry. The water was surprisingly rough today.

Jo glanced up from her cell and couldn't believe her eyes.

Waves crashed onto the deck with the cars, moving them around a little too much for comfort. She couldn't imagine this was a normal happening. Maybe she should get out. Another wave, and then the Toyota Camry in front of her nearly knocked into the Lexus next to it. Getting out now might be dangerous.

I should have stayed in Hidden Bay. She'd been hiding away for the last three years, and now venturing out into the world was giving her a panic attack.

The waves calmed. If she was getting out of her vehicle, now was her chance. She'd head up to the top deck. Grab some vending machine food. Jo weaved between the parked cars, noticing that she'd been the only one to remain inside her vehicle.

"What are you doing?" A muffled, fear-filled voice drew her attention.

The question hadn't been for her. She glanced around the shadowed car deck filled with vehicles. Hearing nothing more, she headed toward the steps, where she could make her way up. Pressing forward between the cars, she couldn't ignore the grunts that came with a struggle, and in the reflection of a truck window, she watched as someone

slid down the side of a car. Someone else holding a knife appeared in the reflection and looked down at the body, then slinked away. The killer wore a heavy overcoat with the hood pulled forward.

Jo should scream.

But she couldn't breathe.

He hadn't looked in her direction, but he was aware she was there and watching—she knew that to her bones. Looking at her would send him to prison—whatever he was—because then she would see his face. She hoped security cameras caught him.

Jo hurried toward the stairs. She had to get out of here. Get away. He was still here somewhere, hiding behind or in a vehicle, she didn't know. Another wave crashed, sending water onto the loading deck. If she could just escape before he saw her. The intrusive waves rushed around her ankles, soaking her shoes in ice-cold water. The cars were moving with the waves again, and she could end up crushed.

She eyed the stairwell. Where were the two ferry crew members she'd seen earlier? Maybe someone would come down to check on the vehicles and see what was happening. She had no choice, really. Jo rushed between the cars and sloshed through the water, slipping a few times as another wave crashed.

A chill crawled over her. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck lifted. Her breaths quickened.

She sensed someone near and—

A hand covered her mouth as a strong arm seized her. She fought and kicked, but he treated her as if she was as weightless as a small plastic toy. He dragged her between the vehicles, then, at the last car, opened the door. Horror filled her when she saw a body in the back seat. The man he'd killed. A scream erupted in her throat, but he punched her in the face, stunning her. Pain shot through her head

as it lolled. She struggled to find her way out of the growing darkness and failed.

Blinking, she suddenly realized she was in the driver's seat of a sedan. He'd knocked her out, but she was awake now. She scrambled to get out, but the car was already in motion, rolling over the edge. He must have removed the net barriers and forced the vehicle over.

Heart hammering, Jo screamed as the sedan plunged into the water. The man stared down at her from the deck, his face shrouded in darkness.

Except his eyes.

She'd never forget them.

And that's why he was killing her now, destroying the only witness.

I'm going to die.

The car slammed into the water, then bobbed and rocked on the rough, stormy waters. Icy cold seawater filled the cab as it sank faster than she would have thought. But she could escape. She could do this. She tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge against the pressure of the water, so she tried the window button.

Hope filled her. She could swim through the opening.

Except the window stopped. What? Why had it stopped? No way could she make it through that small gap. "No, no, no! God, help me!" Jo cried out.

She just needed to break the glass.

The force of the water pushed her up to the roof, and it was then she realized her foot was tied to the accelerator. Even if she could get the window open, she was trapped. She yanked on her ankle, tried to undo the zip tie, but she couldn't free herself.

A knife, she needed a knife.

The vehicle was completely submerged now, and cold seawater poured in. Her entire body shook as she held up

her face to breathe from the remaining air pocket. Her last lifeline.

She fought the window and the door. Taking what could be her last gulp of air, she opened the glove compartment to search for a gun or a hammer—anything to help her break the glass—or a knife to cut herself free. Papers floated out of the compartment.

A lump of terror squeezed her throat.

Panic engulfed her as fast as the rising water.

God, I'm going to die. All this hiding from one killer, and another one got me anyway.

Mom had been right.

Jo hadn't seen danger coming . . .

2

Standing on the deck of a small recreational cruiser he'd secured when he flashed a big wad of cash to the hesitant owner, Cole Mercer couldn't believe his eyes. A silver Lexus sedan had rolled off the Washington State ferry with someone still inside.

Someone do something! But people on the second level of the ferry simply watched the tragedy unfold. Nobody jumped in.

"Get me up there. Take us closer!" He shouted to the pilot steering the boat.

"But—"

"Now!"

Looked like Cole would have to be the one. He'd had enough traumatic experience when it came to the deep blue that he recoiled at the thought of jumping in. But he would do what he had to do.

The boat sped forward, closing in on the ferry, which kept moving. "Stop here!"

Bubbles erupted on the surface of the rough waters. The

vehicle had floated for about thirty seconds before sinking completely.

God, save whoever's inside. Keep them alive. Help me get them out! Cole shrugged out of his coat and took off his boots. Drawing in a big breath, he dove into the frigid, murky water. The shock of cold almost robbed him of breath. He caught the grille of the sinking sedan in his peripheral vision and, kicking hard, corrected course. His mind raced through the steps required to free whoever remained trapped inside. He feared he would be too late as he made it to the slowly sinking vehicle. At the driver's side, he found the window halfway down—not enough for someone to slip out. He tried the door, but it refused to open. He'd need to break the window. The front of the cab was completely submerged. Was there even a pocket of air left?

He tried to signal to the clearly panicked woman inside.

Big brown eyes stared back. His heart lurched.

Jo? And he might have released too much air. Even so, his pounding heart was using up too much oxygen. He removed his gun from the holster at his waist and waved her away. He hoped the water wouldn't slow the bullet enough to make it ineffective in breaking the glass.

She shook her head, eyes wide with fear. Was she stuck? Couldn't move?

Cole angled away from her and fired at the window. It shattered. The bits of glass floating away posed a danger of their own. But her path was free.

Except, she remained in the vehicle. She pointed to the floorboard. He suspected her foot had somehow gotten stuck, so he maneuvered until he could find the problem. And there it was. Her foot was zip-tied to the pedal. Fury rolled through him as he tugged out his pocketknife.

Cole dove into the space that grew darker by the second as the vehicle continued sinking. He couldn't see a

thing, but he felt the tie, secured it away from her ankle as best he could, and cut, then he pulled the plastic away. Her body instantly floated free and upward in the space. Heart pounding, running out of air, he grabbed her hand. Noting someone else was in the back seat that he hadn't seen before, he shoved her forward and up toward the surface, but she tugged him toward her. Shook her head. The other passenger was gone.

And he and Jo would be too if they didn't get to the surface. The cold worked against his body, making his limbs numb as he kicked and swam toward the light. Breaching the surface, hauling Jo up alongside him, he drew in a long breath.

Jo sucked in air too. Treading water, she glanced around them, then zeroed in on him, giving him a brief questioning look that he could read only too well. Why his sudden appearance?

After all, he hadn't seen her in months. But he would answer her questions later. Right now, they were in survival mode.

Together they bobbed on the surface, the rough chop during this spring storm that tried to drown them. He'd get them through this. He fought the aggressive waves that pummeled him, draining his strength. Jo's too. Puget Sound waters were rough today, and the temperature was always too cold.

Now for the second rescue.

Kicking to stay afloat, he turned in every direction, searching for the ferry. There. Finally stopping, the vessel floated nearby. An orange life ring had been tossed out, and Cole and Jo swam for it. They finally made it and held on while they waited for the rescue boat.

Finally, rescuers pulled Cole and Jo from the water and transported them back to the ferry.

Aboard the MV *Chimacum*, they sat inside the upper deck, blankets wrapped around them both. Cole held Jo in his arms. He tried to ignore the fear-spiked adrenaline still pumping through his veins and instead simply be grateful for this moment.

She was here.

He was here.

I almost lost you . . .

He wanted to kiss her blue lips and put some color back into them as well as her pale face. But that would be totally selfish. He might have kissed her before, back when they spent time together, but he doubted she'd want that from him now. Even if she wanted him to show her just how much he missed her, they had an audience. A public display of affection wasn't happening. Standing around, far and wide, ferry patrons watched them, zooming in with their cell phone cameras, no doubt. Mumbling and questioning what had just happened.

A car had rolled off the ferry and into the water. That's what. While that wasn't *ever* supposed to happen, this wouldn't be the first time, though maybe not on this particular ferry. Cole didn't know.

He *did* know that this had been no accident.

Jo told the *Chimacum* captain that she'd witnessed a murder, and the killer was responsible for stashing her in the vehicle, along with the body of the murder victim, and sending the vehicle into the water—as if no one would notice? Dropping her overboard along with the body, attached to some kind of anchor, might have been a better way to hide his crimes, but he'd chosen to . . . what? Make a statement?

Two crew members had been found bound and gagged. At least they hadn't been murdered. But they hadn't seen the man's face. Neither had Jo. How was that possible?

Cole was just glad he'd made the decision to come after Jo and that he'd been there at the right moment to pull her from the cold depths of Puget Sound.

The ferry master had contacted the Seattle PD Harbor Patrol, who requested the *Chimacum* return to the ferry terminal in Seattle, to the utter displeasure of all the patrons who needed to get to Bremerton. But the authorities would need to question and investigate. Regardless of who had jurisdiction, law enforcement would get the man who'd done this. Except Cole had a feeling the killer would slip through the noose before it could close around his throat. Either he was a complete idiot, or he had planned it all out and wouldn't have murdered someone on a ferry with no plan for escape. Next to him, Jo shifted, drawing his focus back to her.

Questions, accusation, rose in her big golden-brown eyes. He suspected she wouldn't soon overcome the shock of witnessing a murder and then almost being killed herself in a dramatic and horrific way. After nearly drowning, she must have questions about why *he* was the one to rescue her.

He had questions too. Answers wouldn't come until the dive team recovered the murder victim's body. Still, he suspected the question burning through her right now had nothing to do with that.

Explaining his reasons for being here would be . . . complicated. As he looked at her, he had so much he wanted to say, to explain. His chest ached with the need to get back what he'd left behind in Hidden Bay.

Jo Cattrel.

But he hadn't walked away by choice. The threat of criminal charges and the manipulation of the truth had been held over him to coerce him into participating in a classified, covert mission.

So what was he supposed to tell her when he called her from DC?

It's me, not you?

The other, equally painful truth of it was that Jo had already been through so much, and he was a mess. He had no business falling for her. Making promises he feared he couldn't keep. But how did he tell her that? It sounded lame, even to his own thoughts. The two of them together were headed for massive heartbreak.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "Why were you on the same ferry I was on?"

I wasn't. "I'll explain all that later. I'm just glad you're alive. Let's focus on that right now." And keeping her that way.

On the bench, Jo scooted away a few inches. Understandable. She'd struggled with trust issues, and he hadn't made it easy for her to trust him, even after saving her life today. The color returned to her cheeks and lips. Good, at least her outrage at his sudden unexplained appearance was causing the blood to flow.

"Were you *following* me?" Fire erupted in her eyes. Fire and fear. "Because I had the feeling I was being followed. I mean, I know I get that a lot. But you know why."

Seeing the pure confusion in her eyes cut through him. He wanted to reassure her, but he couldn't have this conversation in front of witnesses, some with their camera phones out. "Some privacy, please?" He glared at the onlookers.

"No, Jo." He lowered his voice so only she could hear. "It's not like that. I wasn't following you as in stalking you."

Then he turned her away from the cameras, and they both faced the windows looking out over the water. Her eyes grew even wider as though she finally got it. "Cameras. Oh no . . ."

Exactly. What if the videos went viral? What if the wrong person saw them? She'd been hiding at Cedar Trails Lodge in Hidden Bay for years now.

Shivering, she hung her head. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

And that was the whole reason *he* was here. He’d come to try to end her need to hide, if she would allow that. “Let’s get you out of here and just get through what comes next as quickly as possible. I promise, I’ll explain everything.” *I just have to figure out how.*

“I haven’t seen you in months, and you just show up . . .”

To pull her from a sinking car.

Again, he leaned in, whispering in her ear. “I can’t stress how important it is to keep your head down and not say too much in front of the world.”

Because right now, the world was watching as the images filled up social media and either died or grew viral or appeared on the evening news. With her wet hair, pale features, and dark circles under her eyes, she didn’t look like herself right now. Good. That could work to her advantage. At some point, her name would be attached to the images. Maybe even her current address.

Cole hoped that Jo wouldn’t push him away before he got the chance to explain. In the meantime, they watched through the window as the *Chimacum* slowed on approach to the ferry terminal. Law enforcement vehicles were already waiting. He wasn’t sure what jurisdiction this murder on a ferry would fall under in the tangle of law enforcement entities—Coast Guard, Washington State Police, King County or Seattle PD, or Harbor Patrol—none of this was good for a woman who’d been hiding from danger.

His insides twisted up at the thought of Jo having to answer their questions. Exposing the truth of who she was and *where* she was hiding to even one more person was dangerous for her.

Cole tugged her closer to keep her warm and was relieved

when she didn't pull away. Honestly, he needed that extra heat too. "Don't worry. It's going to be all right."

But he feared the opposite was true. Regardless, he would do everything in his power to protect her.

Her lack of response troubled him. What was she thinking? What would *anyone* think after what she'd just been through?

The ferry docked, and authorities from the Washington State Police confined everyone to the vessel. Passengers were upset but understanding. A murderer needed to be caught. Evidence gathered. Passengers questioned. What a nightmare to be kept on a ferry because of someone else's crimes when you had places to go and people to see.

Jo and, fortunately, Cole—because she'd insisted—were transported to the state police offices in Seattle. She'd also insisted that someone retrieve her cell phone from her vehicle. They'd been questioned separately, and Cole had explained to Detective Hargrove his reasons for being in the boat chasing after the ferry. Hiding anything would only create suspicion and ignite questions later, and he hoped to secure an ally—someone he could work with in protecting Jo. She might not realize it yet, but hiding in Hidden Bay, working at the Cedar Trails Lodge, was no longer good enough.

Three hours later, an officer took Cole and Jo back to Cole's rented vehicle—a black Yukon—parked at the ferry station. Her vehicle had been offloaded from the ferry and remained at the Bremerton ferry station. Offloading it here would have been too complicated. She'd need to pick it up at Bremerton. That had been the destination to begin with.

"I know you don't want to talk about this anymore," he said. "But I don't know what happened." She hadn't shared the details on the ferry because too many people were

watching, then she'd been separated from Cole to give her statement to the detective. "And I need the details."

He expected her to ask why, but she started right in. "I saw him standing over the guy, the body was . . . um . . . it slid down the car . . ." Her voice grew thick with emotion as she shared the entire sordid story, even the part he knew. It was surreal hearing his rescue from her point of view.

"I didn't get a look at his face," she said, "but I drew the eyes for them."

She showed him a copy of the image. "I get it now, from the other side."

"The other side?"

"When victims of a crime are asked to describe their attacker, sometimes they can't remember much, but they always remember the eyes." She turned away and swiped at her cheek.

Oh, Jo. His heart ached for her. He looked at the sketch. Dark eyes that were filled with hatred. Just so much detail. How could she have seen so much and yet missed the rest of his face? The sketch of eyes peering out from beneath a rain jacket hood. He suspected that, in that moment of desperation, believing she was going to die, that image had etched into her mind forever.

He could barely swallow as he took in the sketch. Cole had seen a lot in his life, so his reaction to this surprised him, but then again, this had happened to Jo. The images bombarded him again. The sinking car, then Jo's face and hands pressed against the window as the cab filled with water.

She blinked, clearing the unshed tears. "If you hadn't been there, I probably would have died. You saved my life, Cole. Thank you."

His heart beat a little faster at her gratitude. "I guess that makes us even. You saved my life on the beach that day."

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She hung her head a moment, then suddenly lifted her face. “I still don’t know what you’re doing here. I thought you were back to gallivanting around the world on special missions.”

Partially true. At least her assumptions would make it easier. Cole drew in a long breath. How did he untangle this complicated story? He pressed his lips into a thin line and, to his shame, looked away.

“Are you going to tell me? Because if not, then I’m getting out and going home.”

Same take-charge Jo he’d met on that beach last winter. He thought back to that moment, when she’d heaved his battered, shot-through body from the rocks and assisted him out of danger. *She* was *his* hero. And he hated to add another layer of anguish to her day.

Cole faced her. “I was hired to look into your mother’s murder.”