

Prologue

NINE MONTHS AGO
AFGHANISTAN

Sergeant First Class Caden Wallis grinned as his CO whistled—perhaps the fifteenth time today—that same tune again. On the floor of the Humvee, the six-year-old Belgian Malinois’ ears perked. And Caden’s canine friend, K9 Sergeant First Class Friday, barked.

Caden laughed. “Even Friday’s sick of that song.”

His team leader, Master Sergeant Joe Nelson, was the closest he’d ever come to a best friend, and to the younger guys Joe was a father figure. They’d all—Caden and Friday included—follow him without hesitation into a death trap if so ordered.

From the front passenger seat, Joe angled. His eyebrows arched, vanishing underneath his combat helmet. “Not just any tune. A hymn, but also a love song. ‘Here is love,’” he warbled in his terrible off-key baritone. “Vast—”

The vehicle rattled over the bomb-pitted road, jostling them. Bracing, Caden grabbed hold of the side to keep from lurching forward.

Sanchez, team medic, cut his eyes at Caden and nudged Pulaski at the wheel. They took up where Joe left off, but in a shrill falsetto.

“Vast as an ocean, loving kindness as the flood . . .”

Joe rolled his eyes as they hammed it up.

“Who his love will not remember? Who can cease to sing His praise?”

Biting the inside of his cheek, Joe tolerated the impromptu concert. Anything to lessen pre-mission tension.

“Through the floodgates of God’s mercy flowed a vast and gracious tide . . .”

Friday howled.

Sanchez and Pulaski broke into laughter, as did Joe.

Caden smiled. Joe was the best man he'd ever known. A godly man, the real deal. Caden wasn't into religion, but he'd come to believe that Joe's faith had somehow buffered them, protected them by proxy, throughout their long deployment thus far.

The only thing on Caden's radar was getting home to his girlfriend in one piece. Thinking of Nikki, his stomach cramped. She hadn't answered his calls in over a month. Sensing her handler's disquiet, Friday insinuated her head underneath her hand and licked his fingers.

Had Nikki, as threatened, grown tired of waiting for him?

The armored personnel vehicle jerked to a standstill. And the dust—always the dust—swirled through the open windows. In terms of mileage, the village wasn't far from base camp, but lately anywhere outside the wire had become a killing zone. Out of the other Humvees in the convoy, the rest of their team emptied onto the deserted street. Including the Afghan military officer.

Caden had taken a dislike to him during their extensive pre-mission planning. Maybe he was hyperparanoid, or maybe on his third tour he didn't trust any of the locals. The officer was a necessary evil in his opinion, considered essential in brokering the agreement between coalition forces and the tribal leader.

"Keep your head on a swivel for unfriendlies." Joe made eye contact with each member of their twelve-man Alpha team. "We're on foot from here."

Yazz—Navajo Hosteen Yazzie, their communications specialist—grunted. Caden seconded the feeling.

The dirt street disappeared into a maze of mud-brick dwellings three stories high. Row after row of potential sweet spots for a sniper. Or an entire terrorist faction. Silence reigned as the men assumed a defensive posture, clutching their M-4 rifles.

Joe adjusted the black-checked shemagh around his neck. "I don't need to tell you how kinetic this area has been. The headman's support will pave the way to peace in this province."

Weapons Specialist Tavon Miller's dark face tightened. "So where is everyone?"

Scruggs—the newest and youngest team member—snickered. “Maybe the spooks didn’t hand out enough chocolate when they set up this meet and greet.”

Pulaski’s mouth thinned. “Or we’re walking into an ambush.”

“What they pay us the big bucks for,” Scruggs smirked.

Yazz sighed. “Not.”

One look from Joe silenced the chatter. Their nerves were frayed. Too many back-to-back encounters of a deadly kind. But the quiet was unnerving. Caden grasped a tighter hold on Friday’s leash.

“Glad you go first, Sergeant Friday,” joked Pulaski, breaking the eerie hush.

The men had grown to love and depend on Friday. Her bomb-sniffing capabilities had saved their lives on more than one occasion.

Joe cut his eyes at the narrow street ahead. “And we’ve got your six.”

Venturing deeper into the village, Caden and Friday did their job. The team and the Afghan officer followed Friday’s lead. Only the sound of the men’s boots on the hard-packed road broke the stillness. As Friday pulled forward on the leash, Caden’s arms prickled. He felt the unseen force of a hundred eyes behind the mud-brick walls.

Suddenly, from somewhere behind Caden, the Afghan officer’s shrill cry shattered the calm. “Allah Akbar!”

Caden’s gaze swung over his shoulder just as the Afghan fired point blank at Joe. Tavon opened fire on the Afghan, pink mist spraying. Caden took a step intending to pivot, but Friday pulled down on the leash, sniffing his foot.

“What’re you doing, girl? Hold—”

Something beneath his boot clicked. He half turned. Friday rammed her body against him. And at that moment he realized a second too late that he’d missed her signal.

The blast lifted him into the air amidst a searing pain. A percussive roar drowned out further sound. Darkness engulfed him.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself flat on his back. Blackened debris lay scattered in every direction. He blinked, waiting for the swirling dust and smoke to settle.

Gunfire erupted from the shadows, followed by the retort of the

M-4s. Savage yells reverberated off the walls. Responding with curses, the men hunkered behind whatever cover they could find.

Fear gripped his chest. "Friday? Where are you, girl?"

He struggled to rise, but his legs wouldn't cooperate. And despite the broiling noonday sun, a glacial coldness crept from his toes to his torso.

Where was his rifle? If he could find it . . . leverage himself upright . . .

But it had either been scattered out of reach or demolished beyond repair.

Someone slid to a stop beside Caden. Two others crouched as a defensive shield, protecting them and responding to small-arms fire from their unseen enemy.

"Helo inbound," Yazz shouted from a doorway.

Sanchez ripped open Caden's medical kit, the one-pounder every soldier carried in his gear.

"The sergeant first," Caden rasped.

Sanchez ignored him. Velcro ripped.

"A tourniquet?" His heart accelerated. "Where's—"

"I've got three or four minutes before you bleed out." Sanchez's lips flattened. "With all due respect, Wallis, shut up." He secured the tourniquet onto Caden's leg, positioned the Velcro strap, and tightened the attached rod.

Flinching, he bit back the scream of pain threatening to explode from his lungs.

Sanchez swallowed. "I'm sorry . . ."

It felt as if flames licked at his legs. "I'm on fire," he groaned.

The *rata-tat-tat* of gunfire continued. Amid the searing pain in his lower extremities, he heard the distant whir of the bird's rotors.

"Rick," he whispered.

Something in the New Mexican's face flickered before Sanchez clamped down his emotions again.

Caden fought against an onslaught of pain, so terrible it threatened to suck the oxygen out of his lungs. "I need you to put out the—"

Sanchez forced a fentanyl lollipop between Caden's clenched teeth.

Caden's hand inched toward his leg. Toward the wrenching,

mind-numbing pain. Instead of flesh, solid muscle or bone, a gushing warmth spurted between his fingers. A flowing fountain . . .

Echoes of Joe's favorite song filtered through his mind. He raised his hand and stared. A stream of crimson flowed between his fingers.

A vast and gracious tide . . .

His breath hitched as an unknown, helpless horror skyrocketed from the marrow of his bones. The white-faced figure of Sanchez blurred. The last sound he heard was Sanchez yanking open his own medical kit.

And Velcro ripping on another tourniquet.

Chapter One

PRESENT

THE OUTER BANKS OF NORTH CAROLINA

The explosive cawing of seagulls jolted her heart into overdrive. At the edge of the beach, she spun around on the deck of her boat. A gaggle of birds darted upward, their cries echoing on the wind, warning of danger.

Of predators.

McKenna Dockery clutched her camera, pressing it against her chest. She went still to identify the source of the misplaced noise that had almost sounded like gunfire. The island was narrow at this end, but on the other side of the dunes all was quiet, except for the relentless, pounding waves of the Atlantic rolling onto the shore.

Over the weekend, a tropical storm had battered the Outer Banks. Now the desolate yet wildly beautiful Yaupon was a treasure trove of sea glass. But no one except her ever ventured to Yaupon Island anymore, and it'd been a while since she visited.

She climbed out of the boat and reached for her plastic bucket. Ankle deep in the channel waters, she dug her toes into the sand, resisting the pull of the outgoing tide. Though late September, it was warmer than usual.

Curiosity overpowered her fear—and often her good sense, her father complained. Yet leaving her boat anchored in the sheltered cove, she traversed the beach and climbed the sandy trail winding over the dune. At the top, a stiff ocean breeze whipped tendrils of her hair into her eyes, obscuring her vision. She raked the strands out of her

face and, lifting the camera hanging around her neck, peered through the telescopic lens. Her finger clicked the shutter button, the camera making faint whirring sounds as she scanned the deserted shoreline. Nothing she saw accounted for the *boom* she'd heard moments before.

Probably her imagination working overtime. Her dad had been ill last night. She'd awakened every time he struggled to make his way to the hall bathroom.

She tilted her head, listening, but heard only the soothing sound of churning waves and the skritch of the sand crabs on the beach below. Had she imagined the sound? Silence thrummed, underscoring the wind-swept abandonment of the isolated island off the coast of North Carolina.

Neither her dad nor Bryce liked her going off alone in the boat. She'd grown up on the Banks and knew how to handle herself on the water, but today . . .

Her skin prickled.

Gripping the camera, she gazed across the turbulent inlet that separated the small barrier island from the larger island of Hatteras. The air hung thick with trepidation. An early-morning fog snaked above the dark waters of the wetlands.

Suddenly the ever-present wind that buffeted year-round residents died. And quiet descended like a smothering blanket. No bird calls. As if they, too, waited. But for what?

An eerie stillness reigned, broken only by the tide lapping against the seashore. She fingered the cell phone tucked into the pocket of her denim shorts. No signal this far from Hatteras. A village had thrived here once beside a life-saving station, until repeated storms forced the villagers to relocate to Hatteras. Now only wild creatures remained.

She shook herself. This was ridiculous. Probably high school kids playing hooky. Though there had been a recent rash of more violent crime farther north on the Banks. Her dad, Tuckahoe's police chief, blamed it on a new player in the drug market. Connected to a Central American cartel, an unknown dealer was peddling an even more powerful and deadly drug. And where there was money to be made, so also came ruthless criminals to the otherwise peaceful Outer Banks.

As the police chief's daughter, she should've known better than to

come here. Her hand shook as she replaced the cap over the lens. From Blackbeard to the gin runners of Prohibition, the barrier islands had proven a haven for unsavory elements.

Feeling eyes on the back of her head, a shiver of uneasiness traveled the length of her spine. She backpedaled the way she'd come. Underneath her windbreaker, tentacles of cold fear crawled up and down her arms. On the back side of Yaupon again, she sloshed through the knee-deep water of the cove. But she never took her eyes off the rotting stumps of the dock, the long-abandoned husks of boats. She groped behind her for the familiar fiberglass bow of her boat and heaved it off the sand, putting her back into it. Only then did she clamber onto the deck. Breathing heavily, she padded over to the controls. Turning the ignition, she brought the engine to life. And above the humming of the motor . . .

On a distant sandy rise behind the stark outline of stone foundations, a babble of voices. The words indistinguishable. Angry, loud voices.

Throwing open the throttle, she gunned the engine and headed for the safety of home.



TUCKAHOE, HATTERAS ISLAND, NC

Caden startled awake, not quite sure where he was. But at the rolling crash of the waves, he remembered. And immediately wished to return to the oblivion from which he'd awoken.

As impossible as returning to his life before. He'd come to the end of the world. The end of the road. Soon the end of everything.

He rubbed the sandy grit from his eyes. Leaning heavily upon the piling underneath the pier, he strong-armed his way to his feet. Or rather, what remained of his feet.

Caden grimaced, stiff from his overnight sojourn on the sand. The last island ferry had dropped him off at Hatteras Village at midnight. The long journey to North Carolina had depleted his small cash reserve. First the train, then a bus. A fellow vet offered him a ride to the ferry landing in Swan Quarter. Once on Ocracoke, he'd caught another

ferry—the free ferry—to Hatteras Village. Then he'd walked north on Highway 12 until he could go no further.

But this was as far as he needed to go. To fulfill one last desire. To complete one final mission.

Joe . . . Friday . . . Red-hot memories sizzled his brain. His chest tightened. He fought the panic. The urge to run. Not that running was an option anymore.

A pinkish glow bathed the shoreline in striations of golden light, shining through the breaks in the dunes. Caden ran a shaky hand over the stubble on his face.

He'd dreamed last night of running the long, grassy field at his old high school, a football tucked underneath his arm, his feet pounding the turf, darting and dodging the defensive line.

Nine months ago he'd awoken at Reed to the sensation of a blowtorch on his feet. And the pain hadn't lessened. How could anything no longer there still hurt so much? The bomb—a pressure-sensitive homemade device—had shattered his leg. Shredded his tissue into shards of flesh. Severed his left leg below the knee.

He owed his life to Sanchez. But Sanchez had done him no favors.

“Keep breathing. Stay awake. Don't you rack out on me.” Sanchez had refused to abandon him until the C-17 deposited him at the combat support hospital in Kandahar, where they stabilized him.

There had then been a blessedly unconscious flight to Bagram Air Base outside Kabul. From there to Germany, where they'd removed the breathing tube in the Level One trauma center at Landstuhl. And ultimately to Walter Reed.

Seven days. Seven thousand miles. From Afghanistan to DC. From vibrant life to a living death. From wholeness to utter brokenness.

He'd endured multiple surgeries during his stay on Ward 57 to remove scraps of metal from his wounds. But as his calls and texts to Nikki went unanswered, the festering, gnawing fear inside him quadrupled.

“Take one day at a time,” the doctor advised.

Many soldiers were wounded far worse than he had been, yet they'd overcome their disabilities. So he worked hard, harder than he'd ever worked in his life, to take back his life. To return to Nikki. To create a home with Nikki. To be the man Nikki deserved.

“You watch,” he’d told the physical therapist in the amputee wing. “I’m going to climb those nine flights of stairs in record time. One month tops.”

Caden glanced out from underneath the pier. Guys like him were trained to never quit. If one solution didn’t work, they devised another plan. And if victory proved impossible, they died still trying. But this . . . He didn’t know how to move forward from what had happened.

Nikki’s last words had slashed his insides sharper than shrapnel, confirming everything he’d ever suspected about himself. And when she walked out of Reed . . . for the first time he heard oblivion call to him.

Stomach clenching, Caden scanned the blue-gray waters of the Atlantic. He’d always yearned to see the ocean—a desire fueled when the nurse deposited a brown parcel on his hospital bed. Inside the package he’d found ocean waves in the folds of fabric. A quilt. But it was the label on the reverse side he couldn’t forget.

Always come home.

Foster homes didn’t qualify as home—part of why he’d joined the army. And he’d found there for a time a family of sorts.

He pushed away thoughts of Joe and the brothers he’d left behind. There was no going back. Only forward.

“Your only limitations—” He could hear the prosthetist in his head.—“are the ones you make for yourself.”

The quilt had gotten him through bad bouts of pain after intense PT. Wrapping around him like the arms of the mother he never had. The quilt kept him fighting.

Could he rebuild his life? Or was his life over? Eight months ago Nikki had answered that question for him.

He’d lost more than his leg in Afghanistan. He’d lost his pride, his chance for a life. And worst of all, hope.

That’s when he made his decision. He had to end this—before the pain wore away at his resolve. No matter what, he’d not give into the temptation to numb the pain. He wouldn’t—he’d rather die than become his parents.

A quick internet search revealed everything he needed to know to

see the ocean for the first and last time. Everything he needed to find the quilter—*M. Dockery, Tuckahoe, NC*—named on the label.

Caden nudged the duffel in the sand beside him with his boot. Soon as he returned the blue-and-white quilt to its rightful owner, he'd return here. Stick to the plan. Go in deep until he could no longer see the beach. Waves would roll over him. He'd lose his footing. Saltwater would fill his lungs. Choking, gasping, he wouldn't be able to breathe. And then he—

He took a deep breath, the sea breeze bringing a briny aroma to his nostrils. Propping his hip against the wooden piling, he carefully—every movement minutely planned these days—hoisted the bag, ducked his head, and slung the strap over his shoulder. He fought to maintain his balance on the shifting sand. His knuckles whitened on the strap. He was hanging on by only a thread, and not just to his ruck.

Caden practiced the breathing techniques. Didn't help much, but the stabbing intensity of the pain abated somewhat.

He straightened. Refocused on his mission. He was tethered to this world by only the threads of a quilt. At least until eventide.



McKenna's heart continued to thump long after the island disappeared behind the boat's wake. She steered across the channel toward the sheltered bay. Slowing the boat, she pulled back on the throttle and chugged into the Tuckahoe marina, maneuvering past a recreational boater headed out, a man with stringy gray-blond hair and brawny arms at the wheel. His short-sleeved tropical shirt with a riotous display of flora belied the beer gut above his cargo shorts. One of those aging hippies on a never-ending quest for the magic elixir of eternal youth. A stereotype of island escapism.

Before she got a close look at his face, however, the boater slipped Maui Jim sunglasses over his eyes. But she'd seen him before at Skip-jacks. Odd he was still hanging around. Unless he was one of those weird writer types renting a house for the winter to pen his version of the Great American Novel.

Still, it was within a Banker's best interests to be friendly. Tourists were their bread and butter. She raised her hand to wave, but as the

adrenaline escaped down her arm and through her fingertips, her hand shook.

His teeth flashed, a contrast against his peeling, sunburned skin, and then their boats were past each other.

Once inside the Tuckahoe harbor, she eased the boat into the rented berth and cut the engine. In one leap, she bridged the gap between the boat and the dock. The silver-weathered planks felt solid beneath her. She reached for her bucket—

“Top of the mornin’ to you.”

She whirled.

Beside his charter boat, a grizzled waterman lifted his hand in greeting. Laddie Ferguson, longtime family friend.

She willed her heartbeat to subside. It wasn’t like her to get spooked. But after her unsettling experience on Yaupon, her nerves were frayed.

“Out early, aren’t you now?” Beneath the brim of a stained ball cap, Laddie’s bushy gray brows lowered. “Where you been?”

“Hunting sea glass.” She secured a mooring line to a cleat on the pier. “You’re heading out late, aren’t you, Laddie?”

“Business to take care of this morning.” Coming alongside, Laddie tied off another line for her. “I’ll be out and about soon enough.”

She glanced at her watch. “Thanks for your help.” Still time before her shift, if she hurried. “Next time you’re in the diner, I’ll owe you a danish.”

Behind the bristly beard, the waterman’s lips curved, and creases from a lifetime of gauging sea horizons fanned out from his faded blue eyes. “Tell that grandmother of yours I said hello.”

After leaving the bucket of sea glass in the bed of her truck, she crossed the marina parking lot to the public access path. At the bottom of the dune, she took the wooden steps two at a time. Topping the incline, she took a cautious, exploratory breath. Her pulse quieted. The sound of the waves always made her better, and she cast aside the strange foreboding she’d experienced on Yaupon.

She plodded through the sand until she stood at the water’s edge. But despite the healing power of the wind and the waves, the old ache she’d come to consider a part of herself resurfaced. Grief had proven as slippery as an eel. Just when she believed she had a solid grip on it,

a tsunami of breath-stealing anguish rolled in, taking her completely by surprise.

“Will it always be like this, God?” she whispered toward the leftover streaks of pink in the morning sky.

Silence, except for the sighing of the waves.

Three years since Shawn had died. She’d almost begun to believe there’d never be an answer. The tide frothed at her feet, flowing in and ebbing out. Kind of like her hope.

Every day, she lost more of Shawn. And one day—soon?—she feared she’d lose the memory of his laugh completely. Already, she no longer recalled the exact shade of his eyes. Blue-green? Or more green than blue?

Was this it for her? And if so, why did something within her yearn to find herself again—find her heart again—in someone else’s arms? Why couldn’t the life she had now be enough? A life with her dad and her grandmother, Lovey. Keeping the business afloat was a full-time job. So many had so much less. Was she ungrateful?

God, forgive me if I am.

Her eyes flicked upward toward the gulls wheeling in acrobatic figure eights in the sky. Something—Someone—whispered for her to wait. To be patient. To not lose faith.

To hold on to her hope.

But she’d become mired in a kind of emotional paralysis. Stuck between her life *Before* and an *After* she was afraid to embrace. Not if the future meant letting go of Shawn. She couldn’t betray him like that.

Her heart ached at a sudden, quick memory of how Shawn used to smile when he watched her dance on stage.

Kicking off her flip-flops, she lifted her face to the morning sun. Soaking in the blessing. Claiming the promise. Lulled by the waves. The gentle sea breeze fluttered across her skin, imparting peace and strength. She staked her life and her heart on the fulfillment of that which she had yet to see. Choosing, despite the empty void, to trust while her dreams remained unfulfilled. When the pain and loneliness were at their height.

When, perhaps, faith meant the most.



Rounding the curve of the shoreline, a flicker of movement at the water's edge caught Caden's attention. He noticed her legs first, homing in upon that which he no longer possessed. Encased in denim shorts, her legs went on forever.

She was a tall woman in a seen-better-days navy windbreaker. The unfurling of the sun highlighted the straight blonde hair skimming her shoulders. Eyes closed, arms outstretched, she arched one foot over the water and made a circling motion with her pointed toe, balancing on her other leg. She raised her arms above her head, her fingers artfully posed. Leaning sideways, she kicked upward. Her feet scissored above the surface of the water. He held his breath, transfixed. Yet she landed nimble, soft and sure footed as a butterfly lighting upon a leaf. Her knees flexed and straightened.

Poetry in motion.

Caden scowled at his useless leg and bit his lip until he tasted the coppery, metallic taste of blood. "Why do you hate me so much, God?"

As his sibilant whisper floated across the sand, the woman reeled midmotion. Her arms lowered from their duet with the sky. And she rotated, as graceful as the opening of a door, toward him.

For a long moment, they stared at each other. An eternity as they weighed the measure of the other. Until her eyes—blue like the Carolina morning—sharpened.

Something in those fathomless depths rocked him. Jarred him. A frightening intensity tugged at him. Read him down to his soul.

The soul he used to have.

His heart skipped a beat. He had to get away from here, from her, before she distracted him from his purpose. Before—

She stretched out her hand. Absurdly panicked, he pivoted without thinking.

And fell flat on his face.

Chapter Two

IN THREE STRIDES, MCKENNA REACHED THE MAN LYING ON THE sand. His pant leg had ridden up to his shin, revealing not actual flesh but a prosthesis.

Judging from his tactical pants, maybe a veteran. Dark hair feathered over the collar of an army-green T-shirt. Around his neck a metal chain glinted. Dog tags?

Something warned her not to help him. To save his pride and allow him to stand on his own.

“I got it,” he grunted and rolled onto his side. “I don’t need your help.”

By sheer force of will—and locking her arms behind her back—she stopped herself from rushing to his rescue. “I wasn’t offering.”

At her tone, he stiffened. Using the duffel as a prop, he counterbalanced and crawled to a kneeling position.

She’d seen death in his face. His unvoiced intentions hit her like a blow. She’d seen a coming grave in those large, dark eyes of his. Sad, weary-of-life eyes. And a seething anger at an all-too-familiar enemy surged within her heart.

The man, perhaps a few years older, was gaunt. Late twenties. But he’d once been powerfully built with broad, muscled shoulders. His bent, emaciated frame was probably just under six foot. And behind the scraggly beard that framed his mouth, she imagined he’d also once been almost handsome. High cheekbones. A rugged jawline. Before pain wracked his features and flattened his lips into a thin, straight line.

Gasping, the man righted himself into a standing position. He tossed her a triumphant look. "I told you I could do it."

She shrugged. "Never doubted it."

The man glared at her. She glared back until his eyes darted over her shoulder to the waves. "What's that?"

Her breath hitched at the sight of the black-green object floating on the tide. She sped toward the water as the sea turtle flopped onto the shore. Sinking to her knees, she performed a cursory examination. A front flipper remained entangled in a fishing line. One of the back flippers had been severed, perhaps by the blades of a boat's propeller.

Belatedly, she remembered the other wounded creature by the dunes. But he was exactly where she'd left him. Still scowling.

She scrambled to her feet. "I could use some help here."

He jolted, nearly unsettling his carefully contrived balance. "You want me?"

She planted her hands on her hips. "I want you."

He blinked. And she blushed.

Averting her gaze, she brushed away the sand encrusting her knees. "I mean I need you. Really need—" She cleared her throat. "I need your help."

Pity demoralized. Responsibility inspired.

She studied him as indecision fought with something akin to dignity. Finally, he moved forward as self-respect gained the upper hand. His gait was jerky, uneven. She'd be willing to bet he'd ditched physical therapy too soon, before the benefits outweighed the pain.

He flushed when he caught her staring.

McKenna turned away, giving him the chance to approach without scrutiny. Reaching her side, he leaned closer. She prepared to be overwhelmed by the homeless stench of him, or alcohol. But he only smelled of the salty sea air, like everyone in Tuckahoe. Like her.

So maybe he wasn't homeless. Or homeless long. As a police chief's daughter, she knew enough to recognize a drug-induced haze in a person's eyes. This man's eyes were clear . . . except for the crushing weight of fear and a heart-wrenching childlike disbelief in the face of desperate pain.

McKenna pushed away a helpless feeling. This was why she hadn't gone into nursing. Her natural empathy unraveled her, rendering her useful to no one.

"I thought sea turtles lived in the ocean."

He had a strong, deep voice.

McKenna tilted her head. "When sea turtles get hurt, sometimes they get lost."

She resisted the temptation to point out the similarities between the turtle's injuries and his own. Despite the pain, intelligence also shone out of his dark eyes.

The man wasn't stupid. Suicidal, yes. Stupid, no.

His mouth twisted. "Where I come from, they'd shoot a horse in this condition."

A cowboy? Maybe the bow-legged gait wasn't solely a war wound. She frowned. "We don't shoot turtles here."

His mouth hardened. "Maybe you should." A thread of anger flitted across the broad planes of his face.

She preferred anger to the other thing she'd seen in his eyes.

"Here's what we'll do." She outlined how she'd retrieve her truck, drive as close as she could get on the beach, and fill the baby swimming pool she kept in the truck bed for emergencies like this.

"We'll lift Cecil into the tub, then take him to the sea turtle rescue hospital."

"Cecil?" A laugh barked from between his lips. A rusty laugh, but a laugh all the same. "You know this turtle?"

Her lips curved. "Dr. Thompson lets me name the wounded ones I bring him."

The man raked a hand across the top of his dark hair. "A veterinarian?"

"Marine animal specialist. We share him with the aquarium over the bridge." She dusted off her hands. "We'd better hurry before Dr. Thompson heads to Manteo."

"You work at the animal hospital?"

She shook her head. "The turtle rehab is staffed by volunteers like me. We provide a temporary home for the wounded until we can equip them to survive on their own."

The man gave her the strangest look. "A labor of love."
Crinkling her eyes, she smiled. "Exactly."



Her smile dazzled him. Like a string of diamonds glinting across the water. A glittering trail of hope-encrusted bread crumbs. A commodity Caden had no use for. Not anymore.

She trudged toward the dunes. Sea oats waving in the wind, the woman disappeared from view. For a second he wondered if he'd imagined her.

But the creature—Cecil?—hunkered in the sand. So he wasn't going crazy. Or at least any crazier than he'd been when he arrived.

The injured turtle was real, so she must be real. The turtle-rescuing, beach-dancing woman. Tall, willowy, and blonde. Totally unlike Nikki. Her winsome smile had caught him by surprise. As did his unbidden response to the embodiment of hope she brought with her.

He stuffed the good feeling down. He'd help her with the turtle. Maybe she'd give him a ride to the diner.

Caden paced around the animal, his footprints sinking in the wet sand. He'd known the instant she noticed his leg. He could always tell by the slight hesitation, the hitch of breath. He'd steeled himself for the usual pity. But instead of pity—or disgust, in Nikki's case—there'd been something unexpected in the woman's face. A ferocity he recognized from fellow warriors in the height of battle. Though what Beach Girl believed she battled he hadn't a clue.

His gaze lifted as a blue Chevy truck rumbled onto the beach. Jumping out, she hurried around to open the tailgate. She handed him a plastic jug. "Fill 'er up."

Caden wasn't sure he could trust his footing in the foaming surf. What if he fell on his face and made a fool out of himself again? But she moved away, not giving him the chance to refuse.

Unscrewing the cap, he waded ankle deep into the water. So far so good. The water felt cool against his real foot, and sloshing, gurgling liquid filled the jug.

Heading up the incline with a confident stride he could only envy,

she dumped the contents of her own container into the baby pool. "Just enough to make the ride to the clinic comfortable for him."

Sand was tricky, slippery. He moved cautiously up the slope and emptied his jug into the pool, pleased he hadn't disgraced himself. He retraced his steps to where she knelt beside Cecil.

"Loggerheads aren't as heavy as leatherbacks. And Cecil isn't full grown. Probably an adolescent, lucky for us."

Caden scowled. "Lucky for us."

Her eyes flicked at the bitterness in his voice. His knee protested as he lowered himself on the other side of Cecil.

"The hardest part," she warned, "will be lifting so you don't lose your balance."

He squared his jaw. Everything was hard. "Let's do it already."

"Okay. One . . . two . . . three." She hoisted her side free of the cloying sand.

Caden heaved and bit back a groan. But he toughed it out and took the brunt of the turtle's weight. Which was the way it should be. Soaking wet, Beach Girl probably wouldn't weigh much over a hundred pounds.

Together they lowered Cecil into the tub. The turtle fluttered what remained of his flippers. The woman clambered into the bed, gently splashing water over Cecil's pitted shell.

Breathing in short spurts, Caden was ashamed how such a small effort took so much out of him these days.

She gestured toward the crew cab. "Would you mind riding to the clinic to help me settle Cecil in case we don't catch the doc?"

"As long as you'll drop me off in town."

Jumping down, she slammed the tailgate shut. "Deal."

He yanked open the passenger door and tossed in his ruck. After inserting his torso into the cab like the therapist had shown him, he swung his legs inside.

Sliding behind the wheel, she inspected the dashboard clock and grimaced. "I'm supposed to be at work in fifteen minutes." She turned the key in the ignition. The engine sputtered before catching.

"Is the clinic far?"

Both hands on the wheel, she maneuvered off the treacherous sand. “Nothing in Tuckahoe is far.”

He gripped the armrest, trying to cushion his joints against the jolt. “H-had the shocks checked r-recently?” He gritted his rattling teeth.

“Too expensive right now.” She flung a sideways look at him. “You offering?”

“No . . . I’m not . . .” He made a motion toward his leg. “In case you forgot . . .” His lips clamped together.

“I didn’t forget.” She faced forward. “But maybe you should.”

She had some nerve. Clenching his fists, he angled toward the passing scenery. Three minutes of blessed silence ticked by.

“Visiting someone on the Banks?”

This woman talked too much. He drummed his fingers on the armrest.

“Well?” She wasn’t going to let this go.

“No.” He cranked down the window, letting the wind buffet him.

They passed a post office and a grocery store. Two minutes passed. He knew because he fixed his gaze on the clock, waiting. And sure enough—

“Just passing through?” Her lips twitched. “Tuckahoe isn’t exactly on the beaten path.”

These never-met-a-stranger southerners didn’t understand how to mind their own business.

He folded his arms across his chest. “I’m returning something to its rightful owner. I’ve got no use for it anymore.”

“Nice of you. And then you’re off to someplace else?”

“To nowhere else,” he muttered under his breath.

“Only two ways on or off Hatteras Island—the ferry at Hatteras Village south or north on Highway 12 across the Bonner Bridge. How’d you get here?”

He glared. “Ferry.”

She motioned toward the notch between the dunes lining the highway that revealed a tantalizing glimpse of blue ocean. “It’s a nice place we call home. Tuckahoe has everything you’ll ever need.”

He snorted. “Like?”

“Like good people, ocean breezes, gorgeous sunrises or sunsets—take your pick.” She smiled.

And something—it wasn’t pain this time—banged against his rib cage.

She pointed to a clump of twisted, stunted trees where a white steeple pierced the azure sky.

“God and I aren’t on a speaking basis.”

She threw him a look. “Suit yourself.”

He surveyed the terrain. “Not many people around.”

“Summertime we get about forty thousand visitors. Bankers—that’s what we year-rounders on the Outer Banks call ourselves—we work two or three jobs during tourist season to earn most of what we make the whole year.” She quirked her eyebrow. “Like squirrels storing nuts for winter. But past Labor Day, we get the Banks to ourselves again.”

“With no room for an outsider like me.”

She turned off Highway 12 into the parking lot of a low-slung concrete building. *Tuckahoe Turtle Rescue Center*, the sign over the entrance read.

“There’s always room.” She glanced in the rearview mirror. “What’s *he* doing here?”

A Town of Tuckahoe police cruiser pulled in behind them, and a thirty-something man in a short-sleeved, gray police uniform got out.

“Hey, Bryce.” She left the door dingling as she hurried around the truck. “I’m glad you’re here. I could use the muscle.”

The athletic man with frat-boy good looks caught her around the waist. “I went to the marina. You took the boat out again, didn’t you?” He shook his head. “You shouldn’t take off with no one knowing where you are.”

She lifted her chin. “As you can see, I’m fine.”

Ice-blue eyes narrowing, the policeman tightened his arms around her in a proprietary way. “Aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

Beach Girl and the man obviously had some sort of relationship. Caden’s brow furrowed. None of his business.

Ever-fluid motion, she glided out of the man’s hold. “I’m going to be late if you don’t help me.” She tugged him toward the pickup. “I ran into a situation this morning—”

Spotting Caden, the policeman's chiseled features underwent a transformation. "What have you done?" Lip curling, he jerked her to a standstill.

Caden's nostrils flared. He didn't like the guy manhandling her. Inside the cab, he unfolded his arms, his fingers flexing.

"Let go of me, Bryce." She pulled free. "He isn't the situation I'm talking about. I found an injured loggerhead on the beach."

Bryce's patrician nose wrinkled. "You don't even know his name, do you? A bum. A drug-crazed addict you picked up on the beach."

She slapped his hand away as he reached for her again. "Stop it, Bryce. He'll hear you. And he's not—"

"He's another stray," the policeman hissed.

"My ears aren't missing. Just my leg." He leaned out the window. "And the name's Caden Wallis."

She flashed him another one of those killer smiles. His gut quivered. The look Bryce threw his way was far from nice.

Her silver dolphin earrings jangled as she sidestepped the policeman. "But if you're on a call, I'm sure Caden—" She emphasized his name. "—can handle relocating Cecil to the tank inside the center."

The police officer's face darkened. "I came looking for you because Dispatch radioed me," he snapped. "Your dad was a no-show for roll call this morning."

She bit her lip. "He had a rough night. I realize he's been MIA a lot lately, but I'm sure he's on his way to the station."

An older man in surgical scrubs stepped out of the building, and she let out a breath.

"I thought I heard voices." The doctor peered into the truck bed. "A new patient?"

Caden fumbled for the door handle, but the officer leaned against the door, keeping it shut. "Wouldn't want a man in your condition to hurt yourself."

While Caden fumed in the truck, the three of them wrestled the kiddie pool with Cecil into the facility. Minutes later, she emerged with the policeman on her heels. He strolled toward Caden's open window.

"Somewhere I can drop you?" Not so much a question as a command.

Beach Girl yanked open the driver-side door. "I got this, Bryce. Stop being such a worrywart."

"You are so hardheaded," he growled, raking his hand over his close-cropped blond hair. "When will you learn not everyone is a good guy? Not everyone deserves to be rescued."

Anger flashed across her features. "I'm not the naive fool you think I am, Bryce."

His face fell. "I didn't mean . . . I just . . ."

She pulled the door shut. "Don't you have a drug dealer to catch, Officer Hinson?"

His eyes flitted to Caden. "How long are you staying in Tuckahoe?"

"Not long." Caden jutted his jaw. "No worries."

Bryce Hinson's brows lowered. "I'm not worried. But I consider the chief's family to be my family. And we take care of our own here on the Banks."

She revved the engine. "Goodbye, Bryce."

With a final death glare at Caden, he stepped away as she put the truck in motion.

On the highway again, her forehead scrunched as she glanced at the clock. "Where to now, Caden?" She favored him with another smile. His heart skipped a beat. Irritation shot through him at the pleasure he felt in its sunshine. There was this little dimple in her chin. An extremely friendly southern person, she probably smiled at everyone, turtles and dogs too.

"Drop me off at Skipjacks, please. If it's not out of your way." The ferry captain had told him the Dockerys owned Skipjacks. He'd go there, return the quilt, then leave. For good.

"I'm headed there too." Her cheeks lifted. "Although my grandmother is going to skin me alive for not being there when the doors opened."

"Good." He coughed. "I mean, not good that you're going to be skinned alive, but good that I'm not taking you out of your way. We're both headed in the same direction." He scrubbed the back of his neck. "Your dad's the police chief?"

Her face clouded. "With everything that's been happening, there's talk about him being forced to resign."

“What’s been happening?”

Her fingers tensed on the wheel. “We serve a great breakfast at Skipjacks.”

Okay, her dad’s work was off limits. Not like he’d ever see her again once he got out of the truck.

She steered into the crushed oyster shell parking lot of a cedar-shingled restaurant on stilts. “Thanks for helping me rescue Cecil. How about the Fisherman’s Breakfast Catch? On the house.”

He bristled. “I don’t need your charity.”

She eased into the space nearest the ramp. “I park around back, but I’ll let you off here.” The engine idled in the handicapped spot—designed for a cripple like him.

Teeth on edge, he threw open the door and swung his legs over the side. He inched his way down and flinched when his leg made contact with the ground. The jarring motion set off a new round of aches in his stump. He bent to retrieve his ruck, hiding his pain.

He looked across the seat at her. “Thanks for the lift. For . . .” For one last chance to be useful.

She glanced at him through her lashes. “Maybe we’ll run into each other again.”

“Run?” He tightened his hold on the bag. “No chance of that.”