

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN

By:

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Acknowledgment

To the great Creator Almighty who makes all things possible, I submit my most humble gratitude.

This book is dedicated to two unique women, Angie, and Nancy. Tireless workers at my local humane society, their willingness to sacrifice and devote their lives to the needs of suffering and abandoned animals is a cause that I greatly admire.

Special thanks to Mike Angley, Special Agent OSI (USAF ret.). See his website (<http://www.childfinder.us/>)

I want to acknowledge the loving support of my husband, daughter, and son-in-law, the faithfulness of my sister, my wonderful critique partner, Hywela Lyn, and the aid of Rebecca J. Vickery. These two women are incredible authors in their own right!

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Chapter 1

Jagged forks of red-hot lightning speared the midnight sky. Rain pelted her exposed face, choking her. Raising a leaden arm, she let it fall, all sensation gone. Debilitated, she surrendered to the ocean's fury. Swept away into the night, she rode the crest of the mountainous waves, hardly aware when a firm hand grasped her forearm. Dimly, she glimpsed the outline of a man bending over her. The rough texture of a soaked jacket scratched her cheek as he shielded her to his chest. Shrieking wind slapped sodden strands of hair across her eyes. Unable to see, unable to resist, she allowed the world to go dark.

* * * *

Distant sounds solidified into nearby voices. "Who is she?"

"Dunno."

"Her clothes have a *Jean-Pierre* label."

"That means what?"

"It means she's worth some money."

The noise of a crashing bang jerked her abruptly awake. Bolting upright, she winced. Sharp pain tore past her left elbow up to her shoulder blades. Clapping a hand to her arm, she bit her lip to keep from moaning aloud.

"You must have a sprain. I didn't find any broken bones."

Slowly, she raised her head and met a woman's aloof blue eyes. The clink of rattling glass sent her disoriented gaze towards the right side of the room. French doors shuddered against the assault of howling wind. They burst open, a waterfall of rain pounding the floor.

From the direction of a far corner, a man strode forward. Grasping the doors, he leaned his shoulder to the wind as he worked to slam them close. Quickly, he reached for a sturdily framed loveseat and dragged it over, setting it snug under the knobs. Straightening to his full height, he swiped a hand across his face, pushing back a clump of damp and mussed hair.

"We may have to go around and double-check all the doors and windows," the woman said. "I can't have these floors getting ruined."

"In a minute." He moved to the end of the four-poster bed and rested a tanned forearm against one column. "Lady, what the hell were you doing in the middle of a cat four hurricane?"

"Who are you?" The woman turned her attention back. "What's your name?"

"Lo—" She struggled to get her bearings and to speak coherently. "Lois." Almost in a mumble, she added, "Steinberg."

"Well, Lois. I'd like to remark that I've heard it rains cats and dogs, but this is the first time I've personally known a storm to wash up a half-drowned girl." The woman gestured at the man beside her. "Victor Helm. I'm Jenna Milford."

Lois managed a weak smile and asked hesitantly, "May I have a drink of water, please?"

Jenna obliged, pouring water from a prettily engraved, fragile looking pitcher. A band of jeweled bracelets at her wrist tinkled as she extended the glass. Gratefully, Lois drank long and deep.

Without warning, the bedroom door snapped open. An older man in wrinkled shirt and khaki pants paused in the threshold. “Jenna,” he said, “things are starting to get bad.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Tone testy, Jenna beckoned him further inside. “What is it, Paul?”

“My crew got out okay, but the airport’s closed.” He slouched against the door, eyes directed toward a window where a shower of twigs and leaves flew by. “From the looks of it, we’ll need to switch to generators soon.”

“How many guests made it in?”

“Ten.”

“That’s all?” She swore under her breath, “Damn.” Mouth hardening, she gave a curt nod. “Well, that’s it then. Prepare a light dinner.”

“By myself?”

“You just said the crew left. If that means you’re the only cook, then you’re the only cook.”

“Folks might be too stressed to eat.”

“You’ll feed them.” She enunciated the words through clenched teeth. “Get back to the kitchen where you belong.”

“Serving ten people is a lot of work for one guy.”

“I don’t have time for your pettiness.” Jenna’s expression brooked no argument. “I pay you to cook. Get busy.”

“Won’t be fancy. Maybe just a buffet.”

“Do it, Paul!”

He waited a moment, scratched the end of his nose reflectively, then swaggered out the door. Jenna huffed in exasperation. “I’m going to wind up choking that man.” Palming a tendril of slate gray hair back toward her pinned bun, she turned and looked at Lois. She appeared startled, as if she’d forgotten about her. “Arm still hurt? I guess I better find some kind of sling. Let me check my supplies.” Briskly, she strode from the room.

Alone with the man named Victor, Lois sipped from the glass, watching him through her lashes. Another rattle at the French doors drew his concerned glance.

“How long were you in the ocean?”

Lois cleared her throat, lowering her gaze with an effort. “I don’t know.” She stretched to set the glass on the bedside table. Victor came around and took it from her. He stood close, and Lois had to tilt her head to look up. She tried not to note the wide shoulders, lean chest, and long legs that a pair of jeans fit to perfection. “Where am I?”

“Wycliff House Resort.”

“Where is that?”

“Hanibel Island.” One brow raised a fraction. “You know where you are, don’t you?”

“If you mean do I know Hanibel’s one of the islands off South Carolina’s coast, yes.” She pressed cold fingertips to the side of her temple. “But I don’t remember how I got here, inside this house.”

"I brought you after I found you in the Atlantic." At her questioning glance, Victor gave a slight shrug. "Well, actually, Mite found you."

"Who's Mite?"

"My dog. I took him for a walk along the beach. He saw you bobbing in the water. When I got to you, it looked like you'd been there a while." Setting the glass on the table, he averted his gaze. "Good thing you washed up when you did."

For a moment she listened to the tempest raging outside, fully comprehending the truth of his statement. "Thank you," she said sincerely.

He gave a brief smile. "Thank Mite when you meet him." Expression turning serious, he asked, "How did you lose your life jacket? Or are you a surfer and maybe you were out hoping to catch the big waves?"

"Nothing like that. Just snorkeling. I didn't know the weather was so bad until it was too late."

"You ignored all the warnings?" He sounded skeptical. "It's been a major news maker the past week."

"It has?" She tugged at the collar of the garment she wore, realizing it was a pajama shirt. By the way the large neckline exposed her bare shoulders, she guessed it to belong to a man. "I'm camping on Sand Dollar Island. Been there two weeks with no electricity, or radio. Um...whose shirt is this?" She didn't need to peek beneath the sheet to know nothing covered her legs. "Where are my clothes?"

"They're being cleaned." He regarded her with a quizzical eye. "Sand Dollar is a good ten miles away. You're damned lucky you didn't wash out to sea."

The door opened and Jenna entered the room. "You're still here, Victor?" She scowled. "Why don't you make yourself useful and check all the windows?"

He raised a hand to his brow in a mock salute. "Will I get paid for that, Madam Genial Hostess?"

Ignoring Jenna's withering glare, he sauntered past. She slammed the door behind him, then came over and laid some items atop the foot of the bed. "Another guest seems to be about your size," she extended a long sleeved blouse and a pair of tailored-cut slacks, "and she's loaned these to you."

"I'm very grateful. Thank her for me." Lois hesitated. "I feel so filthy. Can I take a shower?"

Jenna gave her a considering look. "You ought to while we have running water. Can you manage on your own?"

"I think so." Carefully, Lois moved her arm, trying not to wince. "Maybe it's not sprained."

"Hmm." Jenna pushed the shirt off Lois' shoulder and probed her skin in a deft examination. Lois stared at the almost hypnotic sparkle of jeweled rings that adorned Jenna's fingers. "You have a monster bruise." She clucked her tongue. "Twenty-five years as a nurse, but I'm no doctor. You'd think I'd learn not to diagnose."

Wind wailed past the eaves, plastering a fringed palm frond against the French doors. Lois started, swallowing a sense of growing anxiety. She tried to keep her thoughts focused on the moment. Pointing at a small archway recessed in the room's far wall, she asked, "Is the bathroom through there?"

Jenna nodded. "You'll find soap and shampoo, even a blow dryer. If you think you're okay, there're other things I need to see to."

"Please, don't let me keep you," Lois encouraged her. "I'm fine, really."

At the threshold, Jenna paused. "You're not one of my guests, are you? I don't remember making a

reservation in your name.”

“No, I’m not.” Quickly, Lois related her snorkeling incident. Jenna gave a grunt of surprise. “You didn’t have a mask or flippers when Victor carried you in.”

“They’re long gone. I got rid of those when I realized I was in trouble.” She gestured at the pajama shirt. “When I first saw this, I thought maybe I lost my clothes to the ocean too.”

A corner of Jenna’s mouth twitched. “We had to get you into something dry. The first thing Victor grabbed was one of his shirts. He didn’t include the bottoms because he said he’d probably need those.”

“Oh.” Lois didn’t want to ask the obvious.

The bedside lamp flickered and Jenna said, “You might want to hurry with that shower. I need to get to the kitchen and make sure Paul’s busy.”

“Thank you for all your help, Ms. Milford,” Lois said again. “I’m indebted to you.”

“Call me Jenna.” She fingered a rope of pearls at her throat, an inscrutable expression crossing her features. “And you’ll get my bill. Because I don’t do anything for free.”