



DANI PETTREY

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THE CRUSHING DEPTHS

COASTAL GUARDIANS  BOOK TWO

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THE
CRUSHING
DEPTHS

DANI PETTREY



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To Dee Henderson

I'm so blessed by your friendship, guidance, and support over all these years. But I am most grateful for your example of living a life of devotion to and in relationship with God. May I walk daily with our Father as you do. Love you, friend!

The silence of the abyss engulfed her.

ONE

LATE SEPTEMBER

THIRTY-EIGHT MILES OFF NORTH CAROLINA'S COAST

Greg Barnes clinked along the grated metal steps, his boot heels rasping with each shuffle as he headed topside for a much-needed breath of smoke.

Thrusting the door open with a resounding creak, he stepped out into the night air. A litany of protestors' chants mimicked the shrill whining of cicadas.

He glanced at his watch. *1930*. Didn't those eco-nuts ever give it a rest?

As if the cursed rig wasn't enough—they had the dang relentless protestors going practically day and night.

Exhaling, he rubbed his thumb along the smooth surface of the tarnished gold lighter in his pocket. His tight muscles seized, making his movements stiff. He shook his head. Those people needed to get a life.

Edging around the far corner of the main separator facility, he pressed his back against the structure's cool outer wall. Generators whirred across from him, finally drowning out the clatter. He scanned his surroundings and exhaled in relief. Finally, alone.

His leg twitched. Just one drag . . . maybe two. It'd been an awful day, and that was the gentleman's way of putting it.

With unsteady hands, he pulled the plastic-wrapped pack from his shirt pocket.

It crinkled beneath his hold and the sweet scent of tobacco wafted beneath his nose. He tamped the cigarette in his palm and slid it between his cracked lips. *Just one drag.*

Tugging the lighter from his pocket, he flipped it open, then rolled the pad of his thumb across the ignitor.

A spark flashed and fire roared, hissing over him in a sizzling cascade of torment.

TWO

WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH, NORTH CAROLINA

Rissi Dawson sat at the long table on Dockside's waterfront deck, gaping at Mason Rogers. He turned to look at her, his green eyes illuminated in the bright pole lights lining the wooden structural beams. She averted her eyes as heat rushed up her throat, spreading across her cheeks. He'd caught her staring *again*. Embarrassment drenched her. It'd been three days since his arrival, and she still couldn't wrap her mind around the fact he was actually sitting next to her.

The boy she'd had the biggest crush on as a teen was back in her life. And on her Coast Guard Investigative Service team.

He handed her the basket of hush puppies the restaurant served instead of bread to start everyone off. His hand brushed hers with the movement, and her heart fluttered. "Thanks," she said, keeping her gaze fixed on the red basket as she pulled two balls of fried cornmeal from it. She plopped the still-warm puppies onto the round plate to the right of her Coke. *Get it together, girl!*

The whir of a boat's motor dropping to an idle sounded over the deck's edge. A teen jumped out of the white outboard and onto the pier, tying her up to the cleat. Rissi loved living in a place with a boat drive-thru.

Noah raised his glass of iced tea. "Everyone . . ." The team lifted their glasses in response to their boss's prompting.

Noah dipped his chin. “Welcome, Mason. Happy to have you on board.”

The team clinked their glasses together, even Caleb, who sat brooding to her left. Observant as he was, there was no chance he missed the way she looked at Mason. In recent months, he’d developed feelings for her, so it wasn’t surprising he’d bristled at Mason’s arrival—especially after learning she and Mason shared a past, though he didn’t know the half of it. Only that they spent time in a children’s home together for a handful of months as teens.

The opening riff of “Sweet Home Alabama” emanated from Noah’s jean pocket. He hitched up as he extracted his phone. “Rowley,” he answered. “Yes?” Standing, he headed down the ramp toward the restaurant’s pier.

“Rockfish tacos,” the waitress said, placing the plate in front of Rissi. The sweet, tropical scent of the mango slaw swirled in the air.

The waitress handed out plate after plate to each of them, setting Noah’s burger at his spot while he continued to pace the pier.

Caleb bit into his Carolina BBQ pork sandwich, the scent of vinegar wafting in the night’s gentle breeze.

Finn Walker did the same with his crab cake sandwich. He and Noah, who was from Maryland, had argued for months over which state had the best crab cake. Finn had been convinced it was North Carolina, right up until Noah had crab cakes flown in fresh from Jimmy’s Famous Seafood in Baltimore. It took two bites for Finn to concede the win.

“Sorry about that, folks,” Noah said, retaking his seat.

“Everything okay?” Emmy Thorton asked. Rissi looked forward to seeing the quirky angel every day at the station.

“Rissi, Mason.” Noah lifted his chin in their direction. “I’ve got an assignment for you.”

Her and Mason? They’d worked a case his first day on the

team, but Finn had joined them for most of the investigation. This would be the two of them . . . alone. A mixture of elation and fear sifted through her.

“Great.” Mason set down his lemonade.

“We’ve got a death out on the *Dauntless*.”

“The offshore oil platform?” Mason asked, swiping a drop of lemonade from his bottom lip.

Stop staring, girl. So he’s jaw-dropping gorgeous. So you share a past. Still, staring is plain rude. Despite not having a mother to teach her, Rissi knew, or at least had come to learn, her manners.

Noah laid his napkin across his lap. “You two need to determine if the death was an accident or if foul play was involved. Helo is leaving from Textra Oil’s copter hub in forty-five. I need you both on it.”

Mason pushed back from the table. “No problem.”

“Great,” Noah said. “You’ll be joining the head of operations, a commercial diver, and the deceased’s replacement on the company copter.”

Rissi took one last bite of her taco before setting it down. She dabbed the corner of her lips with a napkin. “They aren’t wasting any time in replacing the deceased.”

“The deceased’s name is Greg Barnes. I talked to the head of operations, Bob Stanton, and he said they needed to replace him ASAP.”

“Must be an important position.” She reached for her glass and took a final sip.

“You’d think,” Noah said. “But Bob said the main reason they need to replace him fast is they’ve been working with a skeleton crew.”

Mason’s brows pinched as he stood. “Why?”

“Several guys didn’t show up for their three-week rotation transport out,” Noah said, popping a fry in his mouth.

“I know why they didn’t show up for that copter ride out

there.” Tom Murphy leaned toward them from his table situated to their right.

“Why?” Mason asked, moving around to the back of Rissi’s chair. He held it out for her as she stood.

She glanced over her shoulder at him and smiled. “Thanks.”
He nodded.

Tom, one of Wrightsville’s most colorful fishermen, crooked his index finger, drawing them in. “That rig’s cursed.”

“Cursed?” Caleb chuckled. “You can’t be serious?”

Tom wagged his finger. “It’s no laughing matter, young man.”

“I’m sure it’s a good story, Tom,” Rissi said. No reason not to be polite. “But I’m afraid we’ve got to catch a copter ride.”

Tom shrugged and turned back to his food. “It’s your lives at stake.”

“What do you mean?” she asked before they passed his table, unable to stem her curiosity.

“You’ll see.” He smiled, his right incisor missing. “Henry’s curse is real.”

“Henry?” Why was she letting herself get sucked into this?

Tom let out a high-pitched chuckle. “Oh, you’ll learn all about Henry.”

“Shall we?” Mason said, gesturing to the wooden ramp leading down to the gravel parking lot.

Excusing themselves, they moved down the ramp. Mason leaned in. He smelled of the ocean and warm spice. He whispered, “Did that guy seriously just cackle?”

She nodded, strangely curious about the old man’s ghost story.

“I thought people only did that on *Scooby-Doo*.”

She let out a slip of laughter.

“I wouldn’t be laughing,” Tom called after them as they rounded the ramp on his side of the deck. “You two be careful out there, you hear? It’s a dangerous place to be. Just ask the men on board.”

THREE

“Well, that was interesting,” Mason said, walking on Rissi’s left into the parking lot. Almost as interesting as the fact he was headed for his first assignment alone with Rissi.

“I carpooled with Emmy today,” she said, “so I guess you’ll be driving.”

“No problem.”

She glanced around the lot. “Where’s your car?”

He lifted his chin at his Triumph Bonneville parked less than three feet away.

She angled her head, her gaze flitting over his motorcycle. “Nice ride.”

“Thanks.”

“I can give you a ride,” Caleb said, sidling down the ramp and stopping less than a foot away. “No need for you to ride on *that*.”

Mason dipped his chin. “*That*?”

“On the back of a bike,” Caleb said, his broad shoulders square. “It’s gotta be more comfortable for Rissi in a car.”

Rissi looked up at Caleb, who if Mason gauged right was six-three or possibly six-four. Either way, he towered over her.

“I’ll be fine, but thanks,” she said with a soft smile. “It makes more sense to head with Mason to the helipad.”

The muscle in Caleb’s jaw flickered in the restaurant’s front

floodlight. He shuffled, his boots scattering a few pebbles. “Okay. Be careful.”

“Always,” she said.

Caleb’s gaze shifted to Mason. “Take good care of her.”

“Always,” Mason said.

Caleb nodded and headed back up the ramp for the restaurant’s deck seating.

Mason opened the right saddlebag and pulled out a yellow-and-orange helmet. He handed it to Rissi. “For you.”

“Thanks.” She flipped her hair over her shoulders and slid the helmet on.

“Let me take a quick look.” He stepped closer to inspect the helmet. It needed to fit right. “Just a small adjustment.” He pulled the straps taut, his fingers grazing the supple skin along her neck.

“Is it okay?” she asked, blinking up at him.

“Ye—” He cleared his throat. “Yes. You’re good.”

“Great.”

He grabbed his helmet off the gas tank, slid it on, and straddled the bike. Rissi followed suit and adjusted to fit around him. His throat constricted, every nerve ending in his body sparking.

Focus, man. Precious cargo.

“Ever been on a bike?” he asked.

“Definitely. I’ve ridden with Logan. No one can be as crazy as him. He drives like he’s a MotoGP rider.”

Mason laughed. “Good description.”

“You’ve already ridden with him?”

“He showed me the best back roads in the area last night. We had a blast.”

She chuckled. “I hate to imagine.”

Mason turned the ignition, and the bike rumbled beneath them.

Reving the engine, he eased out of the gravel lot. Reaching the pavement, he rolled on the throttle, and the bike flew.

Rissi clasped hold of him, her hands hugging his waist. He took a sharp inhale, praying she didn't feel him quiver beneath her touch.

They crossed the bridge connecting Wrightsville Beach to Wilmington, and he fully twisted the throttle. Wind pressed against his visor. Salt infused the air circulating around them.

Twenty minutes to meet the helicopter. They were cutting it close. Thankfully, his ride with Logan had shown him a good number of shortcuts around town. Ridgely Way, in particular, held some wicked turns and would shave a good five minutes off their drive.

Signaling, he made the turn. "Hang on!" he hollered over his shoulder.

She shifted, securing her arms about his waist, resting her elbows atop his hip bones.

He swallowed. Maybe this wasn't the best idea. He needed to focus on the corkscrew ahead. Praying for focus and pure thoughts, he pressed the left handgrip and shot through it.

Rissi's hold remained firm, but her sweet, unbridled laughter lit up the night.

Now, if he could just shake the weight lodged in his gut—the one telling him they were headed for a completely different kind of danger.