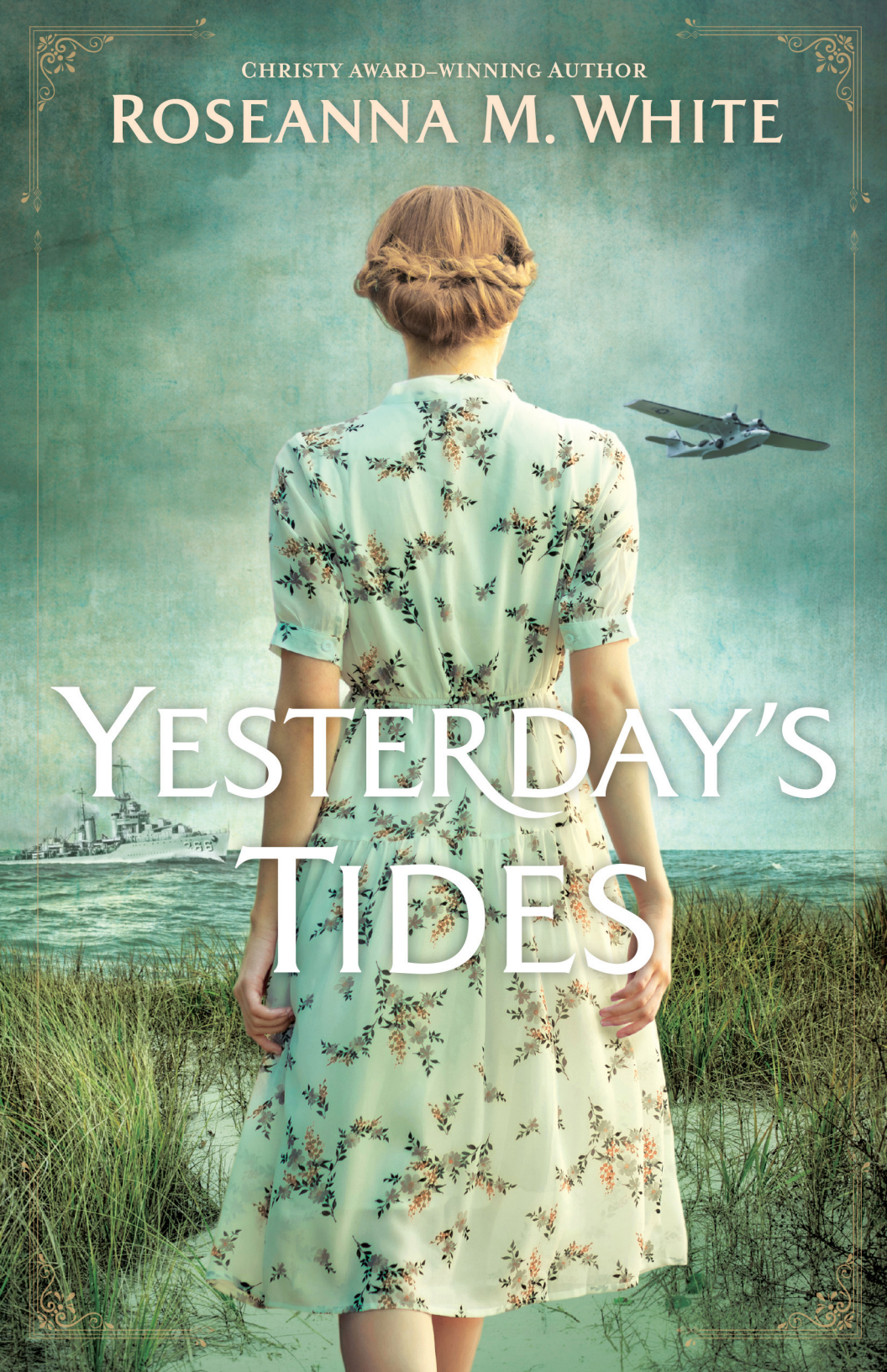


CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

ROSEANNA M. WHITE

The background of the cover is a painting of a woman with her back to the viewer, standing on a grassy beach. She has reddish-brown hair styled in a braid and is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved dress with a delicate floral pattern. In the distance, a large naval ship is visible on the left, and a biplane flies in the sky on the right. The overall color palette is muted, with greens, blues, and earthy tones.

YESTERDAY'S TIDES

YESTERDAY'S TIDES

Books by Roseanna M. White

LADIES OF THE MANOR

The Lost Heiress

The Reluctant Duchess

A Lady Unrivaled

SHADOWS OVER ENGLAND

A Name Unknown

A Song Unheard

An Hour Unspent

THE CODEBREAKERS

The Number of Love

On Wings of Devotion

A Portrait of Loyalty

Dreams of Savannah

SECRETS OF THE ISLES

The Nature of a Lady

To Treasure an Heiress

Worthy of Legend

Yesterday's Tides

YESTERDAY'S TIDES



ROSEANNA M. WHITE



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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To Aunt Pam,
who loved Ocracoke long before I discovered it.

1



TODAY

MAY 11, 1942

OCRACOE ISLAND, NORTH CAROLINA

The first light of sunrise turned the water of the Pamlico Sound to gold, the clouds to rose, and the dark to morning, promising Evie Farrow that today would be just like yesterday. Just like tomorrow. Just like every other day on this tiny island in North Carolina's Outer Banks. She could fight it, or she could embrace it.

But there was fighting enough going on in the world, and Evie had always preferred the way of peace. So she drew in a long breath filled with her favorite perfume—yeast, sugar, and cinnamon—and slid the still-warm sweet rolls into her basket. She paused one moment more to stare out the window of the kitchen, toward the view of the sound that had always, always soothed her. Later, she'd walk its shores. Perhaps even circle around to where the Atlantic joined its

tamer sister with heightened waves and currents. She'd take her familiar path. She'd search for shells and sea glass. She'd pray for everyone she loved most.

Too many of them were on the other side of that ocean now. Too many of them were caught up in the war that made the ocean a harbinger of enemies instead of friends. But then, they had always been capricious, those waters. They stole as often as they gave. But she loved them.

A light hand touched her arm, and Evie spun around, smiling at Grandma See, who held out a cup of steaming coffee. Evie touched her fingertips to her mouth and then lowered them away from her in the second sign she'd ever been taught. *Thank you.* She slid her fingers into the familiar handle and lifted the mug for a fortifying sip.

Grandma See smiled, too, and made a series of quick hand movements. Her usual morning greeting: *Time to race the sun.*

Evie chuckled and leaned over to smack a kiss onto the familiar feathery-soft cheek. "I'm going, I'm going." No need to sign those words—though Grandma See wouldn't hear them, she could read them well enough, and knew to expect them. It was their daily script.

With the basket's handle looped over her arm, Evie stepped out into the spring morning. Just as she had done yesterday, just as she would do tomorrow. Walked the familiar path toward the Coast Guard station, as she'd done every morning for the last six years. As she would likely do for six more, for ten more.

Forever.

She drew in a long breath and reminded herself, again, that she'd chosen this. Chosen to make Ocracoke not half her home, but her whole home. She'd chosen to relegate her other ties to visits and holidays.

So why did she find herself missing so much lately?

A silly question. How could she not? The biggest part of her heart was stuck an ocean away.

“Morning, Miss Evie.”

Evie’s gaze swept over, upward a few feet, to where her closest neighbor stood on her porch, her own mug of coffee in hand. Evie frowned. Miss Marge wasn’t usually out this early. “Morning, Miss Marge. How’d you sleep last night? Your back still bothering you?”

At the mere mention, the old woman rubbed at her lower back and heaved a sigh even the doves on the newly strung electrical wires probably heard. “Gave up—you know I ain’t much these days. Figured I’d sit out here on the pizzer for a little while, then maybe stretch out on the couch. You hear them noises last night?”

Evie didn’t slow her pace, but she did change her trajectory and aim for the porch’s steps, shifting her coffee to her already-burdened arm so she had a free hand. Ever since Mr. Mack had died last year, Miss Marge was always hearing noises, and she refused to believe they could all be from the antics of the neighborhood’s feral cat colony. “Nothing out of the ordinary.” She reached into the basket and pulled out one of the cinnamon rolls, sticky with icing.

That sticky icing on her fingers was one thing that *would* change, and soon. According to the report on the radio last night, sugar would soon be rationed. Then what would she offer to the boys at the station? She’d have to get creative. Or start bringing them something savory instead. Thanks to the local chickens and hogs, she had plenty of eggs and bacon. Her garden would soon be producing vegetables. Her lips twitched as she considered what they’d say if she showed up with a lovely French quiche instead of pastries.

“Here, Miss Marge. Something to enjoy with your coffee.” She handed over the roll with a smile.

Miss Marge's eyes lit up, making Evie chide herself for letting three days slip by since her last baked good-laden visit. The lady didn't get around well enough anymore to spend much time on her feet in the kitchen. "Well, I do thank you, Evie girl. You inn ladies are the best bakers on the island." She closed her eyes and held the roll under her nose for a long whiff. Then opened them again, worry within the rheumy depths. "You be careful walking alone, now. Won't be hardly daylight under the trees yet, and there are Germans in those woods, you know. Pretty young thing like you can't be too careful."

Evie frowned and reached out to tuck one of Miss Marge's wispy gray curls back under her faded kerchief. Last month it had been an escaped bobcat supposedly prowling the woods, having swum to the island from . . . somewhere.

There was no use arguing with her—or trying to reason her into seeing that there could not possibly be Germans here. No point in reminding her that Ocracoke was probably the safest place in the world to live—and that Evie was hardly a "young thing" anymore. She may still have three years to go before she hit thirty, but she'd lived enough life to feel as ancient as the live oak at the corner, gnarling its way heavenward.

No point in saying any of that. But she'd be whispering an extra prayer for sweet Marge as she walked. "I'll be careful. And I'll stop by again later, okay? You try to get some rest after your breakfast."

Armed with Miss Marge's nod, Evie left the porch and returned to the road, picking up her pace now to make up for the detour. She always tried to arrive at the Coast Guard station in time for the shift change, so both groups of men were there.

A hum found her throat as she walked, "Sunrise Serenade"

seeming an appropriate companion as daylight won a few more degrees. She saluted a few more early risers with her coffee mug, though the greetings they would shout later in the day remained unsaid in deference to the sleepyheads around. A few fishermen—stragglers, those—were hurrying toward the docks that wreathed Silver Lake. A few housewives were scattering corn for their chickens. But mostly she had the walk to herself.

Her to-do list wanted to crowd her mind, all the things she had to tend for the sake of the inn: checking the reservation book, sending out reminder postcards, maybe placing a few advertisements in mainland magazines to try to get more guests, like Stanley Wahab was doing for his new hotel. Then she had to make up some more sachets of yaupon tea for the two checking out today to take home with them, air out the garret room for next week's hunting party—if they came—and hopefully still find some time to spend in her studio.

But all those thoughts were for later. Now was for the sweet silent prayers of morning. The call of the birds. The ever-present lap of water on shore. The distant rumble of . . . thunder?

She paused and looked out toward the horizon, but the clouds were only puffy, isolated things that she could see. That didn't mean a storm wasn't just over the horizon, of course, but the meteorologist had predicted clear skies today. Which meant it might *not* be thunder. It could be something far more sinister—and increasingly familiar.

Her prayers tripping over themselves now, Evie turned her stroll into a run. From hard-packed road to loose sand, up the weather-worn wooden steps, and into the Coast Guard station a few minutes later, Evie dashed. She slid her now-empty mug onto the porch banister and came to a panting

halt inside the doors, where the expected well-ordered bustle was indeed underway.

She nabbed one of the Coasties by the arm. "Herb! Was that an explosion?"

"Hey, Evie." Rather than stop, Herbert O'Neal took her hand and tugged her along with him. "Must have been. Torpedo Junction living up to its name. We're preparing for a search and rescue."

Evie's stomach tied itself into knots. She bit back the words that wanted to spring up—*Be careful! There are German U-boats out there!* They were unnecessary, and if she gave them utterance, she'd sound like Miss Marge. These men were trained to be careful . . . and were well aware that it was the U-boats wreaking such havoc on their shipping lanes. Lately, it seemed like at least once a week the islanders were hearing those rumbles, sometimes seeing plumes of smoke from out at sea.

Who had died this time? What ship lost? One of theirs? Or had one of the ships that England sent over to help protect America's vulnerable East Coast struck a blow against the Krauts this time?

And how many of the Coast Guardsmen would come back from this mission? Thus far the U-boats hadn't targeted the Coast Guard cutters, but could they really assume they never would? In the best of times, theirs was a dangerous job. No one knew that better than she did.

In *these* times . . .

Herb was sending interested glances at her basket, so she opened it up again so he could snatch a roll. He was part of the daylight shift, which meant he'd be on the cutter heading out to investigate the explosion. He'd need all the fortification he could get.

She wouldn't let herself say *Be safe*. But she did give him a tight smile and said, "Go with God, Herb."

He nodded. "Always. You be praying, Evie girl."

"Always." Even when it didn't seem to help. Always the Lord was with these men, she knew that—but He didn't always deliver them safely home again. Sometimes He took them Home instead.

She tried to remember that it was better for them. That they died with a purpose. She tried to remember her great-grandmother's voice as she whispered her own prayers, beads in hand, assuring Evie that death was just a veil between heaven and earth. A curtain. So thin, so delicate. Not something to fear, because the life after was just as real—far *more* real—than the life now.

Sometimes those words were easier to cling to than at other times, like this. When she wanted to know that all these men who were friends and brothers and fathers and grandfathers to her would be here still tomorrow, clamoring for their breakfast.

She slid her basket onto the usual table and then stepped out of the way as the horde of hungry Coasties descended. They all mumbled their thanks around full mouths as they took off again for their various tasks.

Evie drifted over to the station keeper, who stood, silver-haired and back straight as ever, looking out the broad windows with binoculars raised. "Any idea who it is out there, Liam?"

First Class Boatswain Mate Liam Bryan didn't even glance down at her. "Morning, Evie. Hard to say." When she sighed, he lowered the binoculars and sighed along with her. "We didn't intercept any Maydays. Must have happened too fast. Blasted U-boats."

She folded her arms, clasping hands to opposite elbows.

Feeling the warmth from the palm that had been cradling her coffee seep into her skin made her that much more aware of how frigid the waters would be, should any of her friends fall into them. Not quite winter-cold, but a far cry from end-of-summer warm. "If there's anything I can do, let me know."

Liam angled a crooked grin down at her. "Well now. You've got friends in high places overseas, don't you? Ask them if they can get Hitler in line."

She snorted a laugh and let her hands fall to her sides again. "Gee, why didn't I think of that?"

"Always were a thoughtless little thing." He added a wink and reached out to tweak her nose, like he'd been doing since she was a tot. "I'll never forget the first time your mama brought you here. The way your brother was into everything, but you . . . You just climbed up on Johnson's lap and snuggled right in, like he wasn't a bear that kept us all in line from sheer terror."

Evie let her lips tug up. "Teddy bear, maybe."

"With *you*, maybe." But he chuckled and shook his head, then sighed. "I miss those days right about now. When we only had the weather and the currents and the shoals to worry over. Accidents. Not this."

They'd had another war, too, in those days. But it hadn't touched them here on Ocracoke like it was doing now. Not most of them.

A shudder coursed through her. Not every islander had remained unscathed from that Great War. She'd been too young to really remember much of it directly, but the stories still haunted the inn like the Howard Street Ghost was rumored to haunt the Howards.

She took a step back. "I'd better get out of the way and back to the inn. The guests will be up soon, wanting breakfast."

Liam nodded. “We were all talking last night after the rationing announcement. Most of us won’t have much call for our sugar allotment. Figure we’ll send them your way, if you keep delivering it back to us in the form of pastries.”

“Well now.” She gave him a grin and executed a perfect naval salute. “You have yourself a deal, sir.”

When she reclaimed her coffee cup from the railing a minute later, empty basket now on her arm, the morning was already bright and steady, that magical gold of dawn faded. Every day, she marveled at how quickly it turned from rainbows and fire to regular light.

Another metaphor for life, wasn’t it? She’d had her flash of fire and gold, too, but that was long gone. Now it was day. An island day that would have its clouds and its sun and eventually its dusk and night. Nothing out of the ordinary, no matter how splendid and special that daybreak had seemed.

That was all right. More than all right—it was what she had chosen. An everyday life. An island life. One in which she would shine as brightly as she could for her neighbors, for her family. She’d gather her shells and sea glass. She’d pray those bits of ocean into baubles and jewelry. She’d do what she could to make life a little sweeter for the people around her. She’d live until she didn’t anymore.

Reaching up, she touched a hand to the necklace she always wore. The blue-green glass, the swirls of silver, the circle of white gold. The reminder of her flash. Of her yesterday.

A few minutes later, as she turned onto the lane toward the Ocracoke Inn again, a shadow settled over her spirit so completely that she came to a halt, breath balled up in her chest. She looked around for whatever had cast it, but it couldn’t be blamed on a cloud or a tree branch getting between her and the sun.

It wasn’t physical.

Struggling to pull air into her lungs, she rubbed a hand over her chest and let her vision go unfocused. It had been years—*years*—since she'd felt this, at least this strongly. This urgency, this darkness. This warning. As a child, it had come upon her all too frequently, but with age and its doubts and its reason, it had lessened. Weakened.

She squeezed her eyes shut, and that was all it took to be back in her great-grandmother's arms, to hear her whispering prayers for protection over her. To see the worry in Mama's eyes as Evie cried over what no one else could see. To feel the warm surety of her brother's fingers woven through hers.

"Lord Jesus . . ." For a long moment, that was all she could say, a cry, a call that lingered on her tongue. Then she managed, "What is it?"

She opened her eyes again and spun around. Miss Marge's porch was empty, as were the electrical lines overhead. No people, no doves, not even any feral cats slinking around to beg a few scraps from her. There were just live oaks and creaking cedars and wild olives, sand and saw grass and certainty.

Something wasn't as it should be. Something more focused than the war that was devouring the world. Something that meant danger for those she loved.

Drawing in a deep, salt-air breath, she straightened her spine and lifted her chin. Hurried back toward the inn. She'd arm herself with prayer, like all the women in her life had taught her.

But she wouldn't forget Daddy's lessons either.

2



F^{*ire.*} Everywhere there was fire—above him, below him, around him, within him, eating him from the inside out. Sterling Bertrand dove into the roiling water, but even then it seemed he couldn't escape the teeth of hell. Fire still roared, belching its way to the surface, using what had once been a ship as its weapons.

He sputtered his way back to the top, unable to make any sense whatsoever of what he was seeing. “Tommie! *Tommie!*” He tried again to make his arms slice through the waves as they'd done so many times before, but his left side wouldn't obey him. And the waves swirled around him, making it impossible to know which way to go. Which was up or down or left or right. Where, in that mass of flames and groaning metal that had once been called the HMT *Bedfordshire*, his friend might be.

Sterling dove under one more time, but his arm still wasn't cooperating, and even under the water, his skin burned. He could see nothing, hear nothing above the roar in his ears.

Where was the crew? The men he'd eaten with, the ones he'd joked with the night before? They had to be here, somewhere, but he couldn't get close enough to make out any of them.

He surfaced again, and clarity lashed over him like a whip for one chest-pummeling second: If he didn't get back into his dinghy now, *he* would die, too, just like his friend. Just like Tommie's crew. He would already be dead if he hadn't been in the small motorized boat, ready to surreptitiously make for the shore. And his strength wouldn't hold out much longer. If he let the Zodiac drift away, he'd spend the rest of his life trying in vain to swim after it.

No. The clouds in his soul fought against that truth. He couldn't leave Tommie and his men to die. He couldn't go about his business. He couldn't abandon them to preserve his own life—how could he? It was his fault. His fault the *Bedfordshire* had been right there, right now. His fault, then, that it was now a sinking ball of fire.

A wave lifted him, pulled him away from the wreckage, sent him within arm's reach of his Zodi, as if that water was the very hand of God, telling him clearly what he was supposed to do. Still, Sterling choked on a cry. No words came out, but all the grief in his heart did.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. *He* was the one who was supposed to be taking the stupid risk with this "mad plan," as Tommie had called it. To be dropped by the *Bedfordshire* so many miles off the coast of the Outer Banks of North Carolina in nothing but a dinghy, all in the hope of tracking down a German agent that logic said could not possibly be there, even if rumor and gut instinct told Sterling he had better look into it.

"*As foolhardy as ever, I see,*" Tommie had said the other night in Norfolk, where Sterling had tracked down his old friend to ask the favor. He'd looked long into his glass, tossed

back the last draft of beer, and laughed. “*I suppose if I don’t help you, you’ll charm someone else into it. All right, then. I’ll drop you into the Atlantic—and say a prayer, too, that you make it to the islands.*”

Sterling wrapped his not-screaming arm in one of the Zodi’s structural ropes and used it to pull himself back into the raft. It took every last bit of his energy. He lay there, gasping and panting, staring up at the sky for an eternity. Blue, but for where the smoke, black as sin, billowed into the air.

He’d teased his old friend about the *Bedfordshire* just yesterday. It was a fishing trawler, that was all. Never meant for wartime work. It, like too many men, had simply been drafted into His Majesty’s service—but putting a fancy *HMT* in front of its name didn’t change its nature any more than welding guns to its deck did. The *Bedfordshire* had been meant to protect America’s vulnerabilities, but the sad truth was that it was no match for a U-boat’s torpedoes.

And that’s what had ripped the world apart five—ten, twenty?—minutes ago. He’d no sooner looked up from his compass, ready to signal his old friend to cut the towline between the Zodiac and the trawler, than he’d seen it—that terrifying line burrowing through the water.

He’d spun back toward the boat. He’d opened his mouth to scream a warning. He’d seen, one more time, that grin of Tommie’s. And then it had all exploded.

His fault. All his fault.

He managed now to hook his good arm over his face, though it hurt enough that he regretted it. What was he going to tell Barb? Barb who, heaven help them all, had discovered before Tommie shipped out that she was expecting. What about that son or daughter who would never know their father? How was he ever going to meet his friend’s child and admit that he’d watched their father die and hadn’t been

able to do a thing to stop it? Had in fact been the reason the *Bedfordshire* was in the path of that U-boat?

Then another reality struck: He couldn't. Because he couldn't admit to anyone that he'd ever been on the *Bedfordshire*. As always, his own naval uniform was back at home in London, packed away. Rank and insignia classified. His whole life, classified. As far as anyone could ever know, he was never even on American soil, much less begging his old friend for a tow up the coast. Officially, he didn't see that torpedo or the explosion or Lieutenant Thomas Cunningham vanishing in fire and smoke.

When he opened his eyes again, it was to the sun beating down on him, warming him, burning him. He sat up, groaning at the agony of it, and looked wildly around. No wreckage. No smoke. No flames.

Nothing to tell the tale but his own anguish.

Where was he? He looked around the Zodi for his compass, his chart, his sextant, but there was nothing. *Nothing*. He was adrift at sea, and he didn't even know whether it was morning still or afternoon, to judge by the sun.

"Think, old boy. Think." He scrubbed his right hand over his face and braved a glance at his left side.

His shirt had burned away, leaving only charred bits of fabric behind, stuck in mottled, angry red flesh, despite his time in the ocean. That didn't bode well. He clenched his teeth and tried to tug at the largest piece of cloth, but the pain made his vision swim.

Better stop that, lest he pass out again. He needed his wits about him. He couldn't save Tommie or the rest of the crew, but he couldn't let their deaths mean nothing. His mission couldn't be abandoned. He had to get to shore. Had to track down Gustav Mansfeld. Had to stop him.

Because if one of Hitler's most elite SS officers was really

hiding in the forests of the Outer Banks, then it could mean utter ruin for every ship off the East Coast, as surely as it had for the *Bedfordshire*. He could be gathering key intelligence. He could be signaling to U-boats off the coast at set times. He could be undermining England's strongest ally before she even had time to mount a fleet of her own.

That's right, Sterling. Focus on the mission. Focus. Focus.

It only took him a moment to set up an impromptu sundial, and then a few minutes to track the movement of the shadow and thereby determine time of day and east and west. Which at least gave him a direction to point his dinghy. Convincing the motor to start again took more effort—the thing looked as though it had taken some shrapnel and had no doubt flooded in the same wave that sent him overboard and all his instruments to Davy Jones's locker to begin with. But eventually it coughed to life.

He pointed himself to the west. Should he aim it a bit north too? He'd initially been launching himself for Hatteras Island. That was where all his research said Mansfeld was likely to be, if indeed he had infiltrated this island chain. But the torpedo had struck before they were parallel with Hatteras. He'd been about to cut the towrope, yes, but that was because he hadn't wanted any of the crewmen to know where he was actually going. He'd intended to head west and then north when out of visual range of the *Bedfordshire*.

In theory, he could and should still do that. In practice, he was none too certain his spluttering engine would hold out for that long.

West, then. Simply west. Whatever land he saw first, he'd aim for it. And then pray the locals didn't shoot on sight.

As long as the engine, whining though it was, continued to propel him over the water, he managed to focus on it and where he was going and ignore the fact that his side was still

on fire. Perhaps the flames were invisible, but he could feel them feasting on him. He could sense the darkness closing in again. He beat it back, blinked, shook his head. *Focus. Focus.*

Then, just as a bit of land emerged from the sea, the injured motor gave one last splutter and died.

Silence must feed fire. Because the moment the sound died, his resistance crumbled, too, and the flames roared over him again. With them came everything else, everything that had brought him here.

He saw his mum as he'd seen her last, so tired from years of struggling to provide for him and Ruby, to supplement the pension they'd been drawing since Father died in the last war. Tired, but proud of him. Proud of him, but fearful. So afraid that he, like the father he could barely remember, would be taken from her.

He tried to blink through the haze, tried to form a prayer with parched lips. Not for his own sake—for Mum's. She deserved better than this. She at least deserved a telegram to let her know it if he died, deserved to hear the empty words about him going out as a hero, fighting Hitler.

But she wouldn't receive that, because it would be months before anyone even tried to raise him. Months before they'd realize he'd vanished. And even then, there would be the questions—was he dead, or had he gone radio silent?

They'd warned him of this risk of the intelligence game. He'd signed on anyway. Because, at the time, he'd told himself Mum would understand. That it was worth it. He'd signed on because he'd wanted to see that gleam in Ruby's eyes as he whispered to her what he wasn't technically supposed to tell anyone else.

And oh, how they'd gleamed. For a moment, he half expected her to leap out of her wheelchair and claim that she'd come with him. As if they'd let her—and as if she could ever

leap again. But he was always expecting it, somehow. A mind that moved as quickly as hers surely couldn't be bound by those paralytic legs forever.

He'd told his superiors during the recruitment process that he wasn't bound to his family, felt no compunction about leaving them. That they would never distract him from his mission.

Truth and lies both, those. They wouldn't distract him, they never distracted him. They helped him focus. His love for them, his desire to get back to them, simply fueled him to do the best job he could do. But his love for them, the desire to guarantee they remained safe and well and in a land free of Hitler's tyranny, meant he'd sacrifice his life if he had to in order to preserve theirs.

Now all he could do was give them to God. Give himself to Him too. The Lord had always felt just out of reach, but not now. Now Sterling was all too aware of how close He was. How heaven was there, beyond that blur of his vision.

He tried to call to mind his sins, to ask forgiveness for them, but they were a blur too. All his mental eyes really wanted to focus on were the shining things. Mum. Ruby. The way old Mrs. Higgins would press a hot cross bun into his palm every Easter season and remind him of what it meant. The way the voices of his neighbors turned into something more beautiful than they rightly should when lifted up together in song on a Sunday morning.

Forgive the smudges, Lord, I beg you. But was it really so bad to focus on the light, bright things instead? He hoped not. Because that was all he could manage as he collapsed back to the rubber bottom of his boat and let the currents take him. *Mum. Ruby. Grandmum.*

And then another twist of his heart. *Barb and the baby.* She, at least, would get word someday soon. Someone would

realize that the trawler had gone missing, put two and two together. Someone would knock on her door, that horrible letter in their hands, and she would press a hand to her lips as tears surged to her eyes. She would grip her rosary in that way she always did when feeling overwhelmed her. She would put a hand on the rounding of life in her stomach and mourn that her little one would never know the man she so loved.

But she was strong. She'd keep marching forward for the little one's sake. She would smile for the baby, and she would tell him or her about Tommie as the years stretched out. Just like Sterling's own mum had done for him and Ruby.

Father. He'd see him soon, as he hadn't done in so many years. This fire would turn him to ash, and the Lord would wipe those smudges from his soul, and he'd hear the angels sing, and they'd put to shame his neighbors.

If he strained his ears, he could hear them even now. They sounded like birds and ocean waves. He let them serenade him as the blur took over his vision. Cocked his head a bit as the accompaniment changed in pitch. Not only water lapping against the sides of his Zodiac but water lapping now against something else. Something bigger. And the wind, the wind joined in, along with a strange rustling, like grass blowing.

An abrupt jolt sent fresh pain slicing through him, and Sterling opened his eyes with a hiss. Above him, where he expected to see sky and scuttling clouds, he saw branches, green with fresh leaves.

But it must be one of the trees of heaven, because there, too, was an angel. A face of perfect beauty that no one on earth could ever attain, her hair a golden halo of curl and wave falling to her shoulders. Eyes as blue as the sky—though they didn't look all that welcoming. Had the fire not purified him enough yet?

He tried to lick his lips, to moisten them, but his tongue felt as dry as his lips. “In . . . heaven?”

The angel lifted golden brows, and a new sound invaded his peace. A click he knew all too well. When he blinked, the barrel of a gun was between him and her perfect face. “No—the Ocracoke Inn. And most guests choose to arrive by the lane.”

Focus. He didn’t need to call it down this time—it crashed back on him, bringing with it all the pain and the horror and the weight of his mission. He lifted his hands, though his left one screamed in protest. “I’m an Englishman. An ally. A naval officer.”

But he was in civvies, as he always was. Or had been, before the fire turned them to smoldering ash. For the first time in his career, he found himself wishing for his uniform, for its neat, orderly rank there on display. Maybe then the angel would soften.

As it was, she didn’t look impressed, and her smile was the strangest contrast to the pistol she kept leveled at his face. “Swell. We have a long history of serving Englishmen here.”

Funny how that didn’t sound the least bit welcoming.