

## Chapter 1

**T**he sea wall marked the beginning. Cassie had first glimpsed the ocean there, back when she was nineteen, while her jaded college friends told stories about their past beach vacations. They didn't know she came from a place with asphalt seas, so she pretended the ocean was just as familiar to her. But she was captivated that very first day, tasting the briny sea air blowing in off Vineyard Sound. It cleansed her of the grime of the past.

Now, ten years later, the ocean was her life's work. She'd earned the right to watch the waves lap against the pitted stones of the seawall. The sea still held power, even if it couldn't wash away guilt as easily as the pangs of adolescent shame. Today the ocean was only itself, changeable and rich with unseen life. She was on her own to do the work of forgetting.

She felt a tug at her arm. "I'm coming," she said, her eyes straying back to the dark water.

Erin tapped her foot, her blonde hair streaming behind her in the salt breeze. "The music's started. You can come back here later."

That was the best thing about the ocean. It was always there when Cassie wanted it. A long summer in Woods Hole stretched ahead of her, time she could devote to the research she loved. She shrugged off her wistful mood and stepped carefully down to the sidewalk. "You're in a hurry to get there."

"I promised Scott I'd be there early to help him learn the dances."

"Scott?" Trust Erin to have already found a man, even though she'd only been there a few days. "Another summer romance? You haven't mentioned him."

“I barely know him. And maybe you’ll meet somebody.”

Cassie laughed. “With you there? Not likely. Besides, what would I do with a man? He’d just be in the way of work.” Men were usually too dazzled by Erin’s lithe beauty to pay attention to Cassie, which suited her perfectly.

They followed the rhythmic lure of fiddle music down Water Street, past the library of the Marine Biological Laboratory. Bright lights spilled through the open doors of the Community Hall. The swirl of contradancers inside chased away any serious thoughts.

There were some familiar faces among the dancers, other researchers from the Marine Biological Laboratory and grad students returning for summer seminars. Since the New England folk dances were taught on the spot, anyone could join in. The contradances were a social center of Woods Hole, one of the few places where scientists, townspeople, and tourists could cross paths.

Cassie danced first with a gangly young grad student from the neurophysiology lab, a newcomer to the MBL. The dance was a vigorous one, and she threw herself into it, enjoying the complex patterns and laughing at her partner’s jokes about his inexperience. Erin, partnered with a good-looking man sporting a dazzled smile, moved past Cassie down the line of dancers.

Despite the crowded room, Cassie chanced upon Erin again when the music ended. The windows of the historic clapboard hall were wide open, and Cassie welcomed the cool sea breeze on her arms after the energetic dance.

“So was that Scott?” Cassie teased.

“Yes.” Erin’s faint blush gave her away. “He invited me to have lunch with him tomorrow. Will you come, too? I told him I’d bring a friend along.”

Given some of Erin’s bad experiences with men, Cassie could understand her caution. “I can come to make sure he meets my standards for your boyfriends, but I imagine I’ll be a third wheel.”

“Of course not. It’ll be fine.” Erin had a faraway look Cassie hadn’t seen for some time. She hoped this time it was warranted. Erin deserved some good luck for once.

Then Erin’s eyes widened. “Oh, God. Is that who I think it is?” She didn’t sound happy about the new development.

Cassie craned her neck to see the entranceway where a broad-shouldered man with wavy brown hair was paying the entrance fee. She didn’t need to see his face to recognize him, even after three years. Her stomach tied in a knot. What was Rob doing in Woods Hole? Did he know she was there? She

clenched her hand until her fingernails bit into her palm. Even if he knew, he wouldn't care. He hadn't even bothered to say goodbye to her when she left Chapel Hill. "Yes, that's him," she said grimly.

"Do you want to leave?"

Erin's tentative voice provided the challenge Cassie needed. She wasn't going to let Rob Elliott chase her away. "No. I'm going to find a partner for the next dance." Preferably one that would make Rob think she'd never given him a second thought in the last three years.

"Good for you."

Cassie looked around quickly. Most of the dancers were already partnered for the next dance, but she spotted a tall man standing alone in the shadows by the front of the hall. She set out purposefully towards him. He didn't look like a scientist, given that his clothes matched and had the air of being recently purchased. Even in chinos he gave off the air of being formally dressed. Not her type, but still, one dance with a tourist wouldn't kill her, and it was better than letting Rob see her being a wallflower.

As she came up to him, the man's classic good looks gave way to a certain ferocity of expression. Cassie hesitated for a moment, but Erin was watching, and she wasn't going to admit to losing her nerve. Although the man seemed oblivious to her presence, she asked, "Do you have a partner for the next dance?"

For a moment he said nothing, and, had Cassie been more timid, she would have been cowed by the look he gave her. "I'm not planning to dance, thank you." His lips barely moved when he spoke.

She was suddenly conscious she was still wearing her lab clothes and no makeup. But she hadn't gotten where she was by giving in to her insecurities. "If you've never tried it before, it's easy to pick up. Everyone here was a beginner once."

"I don't think so." He scanned the hall as if looking for someone.

His refusal stung, leaving her with the unpleasantly familiar feeling of having been judged and found wanting. She reminded herself that *he* was the one violating the unspoken rules of the contradance by refusing her. She hadn't done anything wrong. She was tempted to make a response as curt and rude as his had been, but she had higher standards for her behavior. "Never mind, then."

He turned piercing dark eyes on her for a moment, then looked away, apparently dismissing her existence.

Something about his eyes struck her, but she had no intention of exploring what it was. One rejection was enough, and she still needed a refuge from Rob. There was one place she'd be safe. Rob wouldn't try anything in front of Jim Davidson, their old grad school advisor. He was sitting out the dance, looking a little winded. *He* would welcome her company.

"Hey, stranger." She slid into the folding chair next to his.

"Cassie!" Jim said warmly. "I was hoping you'd be here. I have something to show you." He rummaged in his pockets, then handed her a folded paper with a flourish. "It's the latest spawning data. We just got the numbers in."

"Finally!" Cassie unfolded the sheet and ran her finger down the columns of figures, glad to have a distraction. She whistled silently. "Are you sure of these?"

"We've double-checked everything. In case you've forgotten, the results you came up with four years ago are on the back."

"Forgotten? I still see those numbers in my sleep. But this is worse than you expected, isn't it?"

"Much. I'm not happy about it, but it's going to make a hell of a research paper. Maybe even show up on the mainstream news, for the five minutes most people can bring themselves to care about species we're fishing to extinction."

"It's impressive data." It was years since she worked on the project as one of his grad students, but the excitement of it still touched her. She did a quick calculation in her head. The ramifications would be far-reaching. But it wasn't her project anymore. Reluctantly she handed the data sheet back.

Jim gave her a pointed look. "I'm looking for someone to write it up for publication."

The temptation was so strong she could almost taste it. "Me? Jim, that's sweet of you, but shouldn't this go to one of your students?"

"They have their own projects, and you *know* this study. You were there at the beginning. You want to, I know it." So Jim still knew how to play on her passion for her work.

"But you deserve the credit."

"I have plenty of publications." Jim glanced around the hall and lowered his voice. "It could help you, Cassie."

"I still have plenty of time to get my publications in. I can make it, even if I didn't get publishable results last summer."

Jim patted her arm. "I didn't mean it that way. I know you can do great re-

search. You wrote the best dissertation I've seen in years. But anybody can run into a string of bad luck, like last year's floods, and the tenure clock doesn't stop ticking. An extra paper could give you some leeway."

It was charity, and she knew it. But so much depended on her getting tenure, and she'd love the chance to work with Jim again. "All right. Thanks."

"Don't thank me. I'm getting a top-notch author out of it."

"You old flatterer. I'm going to tell Rose you were flirting with me." She elbowed him in the side.

Jim's devotion to his wife was well-known. "You do that."

But a familiar figure was approaching them. "Jim, I finished the initial setup, if you..." Rob's voice trailed off when he saw Cassie.

Cassie plastered a pleasant smile on her face. "Hi, Rob. Welcome to Woods Hole." This was her turf, and she wasn't going to cede it to Rob.

He looked as if he didn't know what to say. "Uh, hi. Want to dance?"

How typically Rob, at least typical of him since their breakup. No pleasantries, no 'nice to see you, how have you been.' She couldn't imagine he really wanted to dance with her. She put on her best professorial look and said, "Not now, thanks. Jim's filling me in on his spawning project."

"Some things never change. See you in the morning, then, Jim." Rob ambled away toward a redheaded woman who was apparently more inclined to dance. Cassie watched as they took hands in the line of dancers.

"Sorry." Jim seemed suddenly interested in his shoes. "I was going to warn you about that."

Cassie was well-practiced at looking assured when she felt nothing of the sort. "No need. I don't have any problems with Rob."

"He won't be here the whole summer, just a couple weeks, if that's any consolation. And he isn't involved with Lisa anymore."

"It doesn't matter." Cassie ignored the stab of pain. Like it or not, she would have to get used to seeing Rob, especially if she wrote the paper with Jim. It would hurt, but there wasn't anything new about that. But the spawning results were amazing. She was already thinking of how to present them.

ALTHOUGH THE START OF THE season was a few weeks away, tourists already clogged Water Street, the sole thoroughfare through the town of Woods Hole. The low blast of a ferry horn announced the arrival of another crowd of visitors.

“Erin, this has to be quick. I have a lot of work to do.” Years of friendship had taught Cassie that men came before work for Erin.

“Even you have to eat lunch, Cassie, and I want you to meet Scott.” Erin placed her hand behind Cassie’s elbow and urged her on.

There was nothing wrong with a sandwich at her lab bench, like every other day, but meeting Erin’s latest crush was important, too. Cassie needed to check him out before Erin became too involved. “Is he from the MBL or the Oceanographic Institution?”

“Neither. He works at Cambridge Biotechnology.”

An industry scientist, then, rather than a researcher. It could be worse. Cambridge Biotech was reputable, at least. “What does he do there?”

Erin scuffed her feet against the curb. “He’s the president.”

“He’s what?” Cassie stopped dead in the middle of the sidewalk. “And you’re dating him? You applied for a job there!”

“He doesn’t know that. I don’t want him to think I’m using him to get a job. And we’re not really dating. Not yet, anyway.”

Cassie forced herself to keep walking. Erin had been hurt by men too many times, and this was asking for trouble. “What’s he doing in Woods Hole if he’s with Cambridge Biotech?”

“He has a summer house here, and he came to a lecture at the MBL. That’s where I met him.”

The town drawbridge, raised to allow passage of sea-faring boats to and from the inner harbor, blocked their way. Cassie was glad for the brief respite. They waited with the other pedestrians behind the safety barrier as the boats, a pleasure craft and an MBL tug, left the harbor for the dark waters of Vineyard Sound.

When the bridge creaked down, they made their way across to the rambling, grey-shingled restaurant on the opposite shore of the narrow channel. The Dock of the Bay Café, with its unpretentious atmosphere and view over the harbor entrance, was one of Cassie’s favorites. She wondered if it would be up to the standards of the president of Cambridge Biotech.

Cassie opened the screen door and stepped onto the worn wooden floor of the restaurant. No men sitting alone. Scott must be late.

A fragment of conversation drifted past her from the nearest table. “It won’t be so bad. You might even have a good time,” one man said to the other.

“I doubt it,” replied a deeper voice. It was the man from the dance, the one

who turned her down. "You don't know who they are or where they're from. They could be groupies. Or criminals." His tone suggested the two were equivalent.

Erin came in behind Cassie. With a bright smile, she addressed the first speaker. "Scott, it's so nice to see you again."

Cassie now recognized the deeply tanned man with curly hair. She stiffened as she realized what the subject of their conversation had been. So Scott's friend didn't like having lunch with two little nobodies from nowhere. Used to more elite society, no doubt.

"Hi, Scott." Erin drew out the chair opposite him. "This is Cassie."

He shook her hand. "Nice to meet you, Cassie. This is my friend Calder."

The tall man beside him rose to his feet. "A pleasure." He sounded like it was anything but.

Cassie watched with amusement as he shook Erin's hand without any evidence of enthusiasm. When he turned to her, she smiled sweetly up at him and said, "Oh, yes, we've already met."

"We have?" he asked, taken aback and clearly none too happy about the possibility.

"Oh, yes," she said mockingly. "You're the one who goes to dances even though you don't want to dance."

He continued to look puzzled for a moment, then his brow cleared. "The dance last night, you mean. I wasn't there to dance; I was just looking for Scott. I needed to...ask him something," he said, his voice declaring the subject closed.

Cassie raised an eyebrow, finding no evidence of apology or regret in his tone. "Well, to each his own." Unable to resist temptation, she leaned forward and said conspiratorially, "And for the record, Erin would be the groupie, so I must be the criminal element."

For a fleeting moment he looked uncomfortable. "What's your crime, then?"

She lowered her voice dramatically. "I murder microscopic organisms and steal their secrets." Little did he know. She walked around the table to the empty seat by the window. Maybe if the great and powerful Calder understood she wasn't looking for a boyfriend, it wouldn't be so bad. "I hadn't realized anyone was coming with Scott."

"I arrived last night." He seemed more interested in the menu than any-

thing she had to say.

Scott turned to Erin as a young waitress came to take their order. “What do you recommend?”

“I’m having the gorgonzola salad, but the best thing here is dessert. They make wonderful pies.”

Calder was the last to order. “I’ll take the white marlin.”

He might as well have used a cattle prod on Cassie. “Did you know white marlin is a threatened species?”

“No, I didn’t. In that case I’ll have...what would you recommend?” Calder turned his dark eyes on her.

His piercing gaze made her oddly uncomfortable. It was a relief to look down at the menu. “The striped bass and the mahi-mahi are fine, though mahi-mahi won’t be local. Any of the shellfish. Not the cod.”

“*Cod* are endangered?”

“Threatened, not endangered. Overfishing is a major problem.”

“I’ll go with the bass, then.” He handed the menu to the waitress.

Cassie felt guilty about the sharpness of her tone. Snob or not, it wasn’t Calder’s fault Erin decided to arrange this ridiculous meeting. If she had thought twice before opening her mouth, she wouldn’t have said anything. “Thanks. I realize it doesn’t make a difference when the fish is already dead, but I hate seeing it.”

“I’d rather not support that kind of thing.” He checked his watch.

So much for a peace offering. If he wanted to be aloof, that was fine with her. She turned her attention to Erin, who was explaining the history of the restaurant to Scott.

There was a brief silence when the subject was exhausted. Calder seemed to have nothing to say for himself. Cassie wasn’t fond of small talk herself, but she couldn’t sit there silently through the whole meal. “Scott, Erin tells me you have a summer house here.”

“Yes. I’ve always wanted one, and this year I finally gave in.” Scott had a charming smile. For Erin’s sake, Cassie hoped the charm was more than skin-deep.

“Is it here in town?”

“Just outside, on Penzance Point. Do you know where that is?”

Of course Scott’s house would be in the most exclusive part of Woods Hole. No doubt the president of Cambridge Biotech could afford it easily. His sum-

mer house probably cost enough to fund half the research at the MBL. She wondered if she could plead a heavy workload and leave early.

“This is my tenth summer here, so I know my way around pretty well.” Cassie paused as the waitress set a bowl of fisherman’s stew in front of her.

“The views are stunning. Have you been out there?” Scott asked.

“No.” Cassie shelled a mussel with the ease of long practice. Penzance Point was privately owned; there was a guard on the road to keep out riff-raff like her.

Calder carefully moved his french fries aside with his fork. “So you don’t live here year-round?”

Cassie’s smile had an edge to it. “No, I’m a college professor. I come to the MBL every summer to do my research. I’ve had my own lab here since I got my Ph.D. Before that I was working with one of the senior researchers, studying species of fish threatened by overfishing.” To her satisfaction, she could see Calder taking stock of her again. What had he thought she did, waited tables for a living? It was a good thing he didn’t know the rest of her background. He would probably run a mile if he knew the truth. She looked out the window to avoid his eyes, pretending interest in a sailboat coming up the channel.

“You’re interested in fish populations?” Scott asked.

“That was my grad school research. Now I’m looking at the effects of fertilizer run-off on the ecology of the salt marsh.”

“Salt marsh? Sounds messy.” Scott sliced into his lobster tail.

Erin said, “Careful, Scott. The salt marsh is Cassie’s one true love.”

Cassie laughed. “That’s right. It’s calm, peaceful, and more reliable than a man. It’s always there when I want it, and it won’t waste my time when I’m trying to get tenure.”

Calder crossed his arms, but Cassie thought he looked more amused than anything else. At least now he wouldn’t expect anything from her. Maybe she could relax a little.

“You do research too, don’t you, Erin?” Scott refilled his water glass from the pitcher on the table.

“Yes, I’m helping Cassie with her study.”

Calder paused, his glass half-way to his mouth. “I thought Scott said you were in biotechnology.”

Erin cast a distressed look at Cassie. “I am. I’m taking the summer off from

my dissertation research. Cassie and I worked here as undergraduates, and I wanted to do it one last time before I started teaching full-time.”

Two lies in one sentence, but Cassie could understand why Erin didn't want Scott to know her real reason for being in Woods Hole. And a year ago the part about teaching would have been true, before Erin decided she was better suited for a job in industry than academia.

“Well, that's Woods Hole for you.” Cassie gestured toward the window with her fork. “Half the population has a doctorate. There are probably enough advanced degrees in town to sink a battleship. You'd better be careful about how you talk to any odd looking old men muttering to themselves, because they just might be a Nobel laureate. It's a world unto itself, like summer camp for grown-up scientists. One little town, and it has the MBL, the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, the National Marine Fisheries, and a half a dozen other research groups.”

Erin, no doubt grateful for the change of subject, began to tell stories of amusing Woods Hole encounters. The moment of tension passed, and Erin and Scott chatted as they ate, with occasional additions from Cassie.

Cassie noticed Calder was watching her. She wondered how far he would take his silent withdrawal. Scott and Erin were managing fine on their own. “So, are you always this talkative, or is it just the company?”

This time his dark eyes didn't move from her. “When I have something to say, I'll say it.”

Cassie opened her eyes wide in a mockery of being impressed. “Well, if I have to carry the conversation all by myself, I hope you don't mind hearing about the life cycle of *Pagurus longicarpus* and the impact of algal overgrowth on the population. In detail.”

To her surprise, a faint smile curved his mouth. “I'm sure it will be fascinating.”

So he did have a sense of humor. Unexpectedly Cassie wanted to smile back. Just then she heard a burst of giggling from behind the counter. Several of the young women who worked in the restaurant congregated there, looking at their table. One of them pointed at Calder, sitting with his back to them.

“You have a fan club.” Cassie gestured with her head, grateful for the distraction from her awareness of him.

His smile disappeared as if it had never existed. “Damn it. Scott, I'm going back to the house before there's a scene.”

“Come on, Calder, they’re not doing anything. Just ignore them.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Calder snapped.

“If you get up and walk out of here by yourself, that *will* make a scene. Finish your lunch.”

“I’ve had all I want.” He tossed his napkin on the table.

Cassie, dismayed by his sudden shift of mood, noticed Erin’s unhappy look. At least this could give her an excuse to leave. “I’m done, too, and I need to get back to the lab. Maybe Calder and I could go part way together, and you two could take your time.”

Scott’s face brightened. “That won’t be so bad, now! Is that okay with you, Calder?”

Calder gave a grim nod and pushed back his chair. Surprised by the speed with which this was happening, Cassie fished out a ten-dollar bill from her pocket and tossed it on the table.

Scott tried to hand it back to her. “My treat.”

Cassie shook her head. “Sorry. I pay my own way.”

“No, please, this was my idea.”

“Scott, it’s been a pleasure to meet you. Let’s not spoil a budding friendship with an argument.” Cassie hoped her smile took any sting from her words.

This seemed to disarm him, and she followed Calder outside. He strode off down the street at a pace she had to work to keep up with. Apparently he didn’t plan to offer an explanation for the scene in the restaurant. So much for wondering if she might have misjudged him. Her first impression of him had been correct. It was disappointing.

They walked most of the brief length of the town in silence before he finally said, without looking at her, “Thank you.”

“Not a problem. This is where I turn off. My lab’s down here.”

“I’ll walk you there.” He didn’t sound particularly pleased with the prospect.

“There’s no need. It’s out of your way.”

He paid no attention. Rather than argue pointlessly with him, Cassie followed his lead, glad it was only a block away.

“This is it. Take care.” It was hackneyed, but it was more polite than saying ‘goodbye and good riddance.’

He stopped between her and the building. “I suppose you knew all along.”

“Knew what?”

His lips thinned. "Who I am."

Cassie's temper began to simmer, but for Erin's sake she didn't let it show. It wouldn't do her friend any good to have Cassie argue with Calder. "Look, I have no idea what you're talking about, I have no idea what went on back there, and I suspect I'm just as happy that way."

When he didn't respond, she flashed him a quick, if somewhat less than genuine, smile. "This is it, my home away from home," she said. "Enjoy the rest of your day." She turned and walked into the building before he could make any reply.

As she ran up the stairs, she didn't see him standing and looking after her, contemplating the rarity of a woman who couldn't seem to get out of his company fast enough. Perversely, he found himself wishing she would look back, but she never did.