



Lowcountry
Hearts

HER
Island
Summer

NICOLE CRONE

Chapter 1

Sarah Andrews' brow furrowed as she closely examined a sea turtle nest on one of Tybee Island's sandy beaches. *The eggs should have hatched by now*, she thought. She furiously scribbled notes on her tablet as the sun hid behind an ominous-looking cloud on the horizon. Frowning, she looked upwards at the darkening sky. For a moment she thought the glaring structure on her left had hidden the sun, but nope, it looked like a storm was brewing.

Sarah resigned herself to the fact that the occupants of the nest wouldn't be hatching any time soon as she reached for her floral tote holding notebook upon notebook of scientific data. The twenty eight year old's work at the local marine rehabilitation center was very rewarding, and she was so thankful for the opportunity to land her dream job. From the time she was a young child, she'd wished for nothing more than to help the sea life surrounding this quaint coastal community. After completing her biology degree, she landed an internship at the local center which specialized in sea turtle rehabilitation. Sarah cried happy tears on the day when Lauren Boatman, the center director, offered her a paying position.

She loved living on Tybee Island, and working here was a dream come true. When Sarah wasn't at work, she was able to shop at adorable multi-colored boutiques, eat at delectable seafood restaurants, and visit a variety of historical sites. Her favorite hobby was visiting beaches off the beaten path, just like this one. The warm sand and sun-kissed breezes filled her cup like nothing else.

Sarah dusted the sand off her legs as she looked at the sky once more. Her stomach pinched. Deciding she better hurry, she slipped on her flip flops and began jogging in the

direction of her jeep. A strong wind gust suddenly knocked her to the ground, and a passel of notebooks scattered out of her bag. Sarah quickly began gathering her material as she looked at the angry ocean waves off of Georgia's coastline. The brooding sky began to swirl as her insides clenched all the way down to her toes. A gasp escaped her lips. A tornado had dropped out of the clouds and formed a water spout right before her eyes!

She looked to the left and right quickly, trying to decide where to take cover. The only building around was the large, half-built condo to her left. She glared at the structure, hating everything that it stood for. How this high rise was approved on her tiny island, she never knew. It detracted from the hometown feel of Tybee, as well as took away the habitat that Loggerhead Sea Turtles used for nesting. Sarah quickly realized this condo was her only place of refuge. She jammed the final notebook into her bag and made a run for it. Sarah was almost there when she once again lost her footing. Her breath caught in her throat as a strong hand closed around her arm and pulled her into the dark building.

"It'll be alright. I've got you!"

The deep voice of a man sounded muffled as the waterspout made landfall onto the wide beach. The structure groaned beneath the pressure of the storm, and Sarah was forced to the ground by the mysterious stranger. His breath felt hot on her skin, and she trembled underneath him. She didn't know what was worse, the storm surrounding them or being protected by a strange man. Sarah quivered with fear as she covered her head with her hands. Her brown hair whipped in the strong wind, and she felt like in any minute they would take lift off. She shrieked as a piece of debris struck the pair before a wall buckled next to them.

Sarah listened closely as the roaring winds began to subside. She gasped for air as dust filled the tiny space which had been made smaller still due to the imploding wall. Sarah pulled her t-shirt over her mouth to prevent sheet rock dust particles from entering as she squinted in the dim light. Her head ached, and when she touched her temple she realized it was wet with blood.

“Are you okay?” The masculine voice echoed loudly into her ear. This time she realized it sounded vaguely familiar. His breath tickled her cheek. She squirmed as the man’s body lifted away from hers, and she scooted a few feet away into a pile of broken glass.

“Colby, is that you?”

A cough rang into the confines of the broken building. “Yep, it’s me.”

Sarah held her aching head as her eyes slightly narrowed. She commanded herself not to cry as she bit her bottom lip. Colby Mansfield was her rescuer? *Of all the rotten luck.* He was the last person she wanted to see.

Colby had been her childhood friend while growing up on the barrier island, and they even dated for a few months before leaving for college. But things were different now. He betrayed her trust when he stood against her during a town council meeting almost one year ago. Sarah couldn’t fathom how the once thoughtful boy who grew up on Tybee would want to hurt both the beaches and animals that depended on the wild spaces on the island’s pristine coast. Colby didn’t have Tybee’s interests at heart when he begged the town council to approve his monstrosity of a condo. She was completely dumbfounded when the council members actually went along with it.

“You.” Sarah’s voice was quiet, but firm. “I can’t believe out of all people, you were the one to pull me to safety, Colby.”

“Gee, what a nice way to say ‘thank you,’ Sarah.”

She squinted to make out his features in the dim light. Through the air thick with dust particles she made out his sandy hair and piercing blue eyes. His bronzed arm reached out to her before he thought better of it, and snatched it back quickly as if touching an open flame.

She sighed. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m actually glad you were here today. I’m not sure if I would’ve made it otherwise.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think we’ve ‘made it’ quite yet. I’m afraid this building might completely buckle at any moment.” He slowly stood to his feet. “By the way, you never answered my first question. Are you okay?”

Sarah gently motioned towards her injured head. “I...I was hit with something and my head is bleeding.”

Colby frowned. “Let me see.”

He pulled his smartphone from his pocket and turned on the flashlight feature. He aimed it directly at Sarah, causing her to close her eyes. She winced as he gently prodded her forehead.

“We need to stop the bleeding quickly. Also, did you realize that you’re sitting directly in a pile of glass?”

She looked down and realized he was right. Sarah slowly lifted herself away from the shards before realizing too little too late that some had penetrated through her khaki shorts. She gingerly began pulling them out as she heard a loud ripping sound.

Sarah’s eyes shot towards Colby. He was tearing her tote bag apart! “What are you doing? That’s my favorite bag!”

He smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry Sarah, but I need to make a bandage for your head injury. This is the best thing I could find."

Of course Colby would tear apart her beloved tote bag. He obviously didn't have a problem destroying anything on this island. Her breathing ragged, she decided to voice her complaint before she lost her nerve.

"While I appreciate your creativity, ruining my favorite bag isn't the answer. It was my grandmother's and cannot be replaced." Her eyes flashed in the darkness. "You don't mind destroying things, do you? You have had no problem ruining our natural coastline to make a few dollars."

He reached out to her, and tied a strip of fabric around her forehead. His hands felt strong and steady, just as she remembered.

"Sarah, I'm sorry for tearing your bag...it's the best option we have. I had no idea it was a family heirloom." Colby paused briefly. "And I don't appreciate being accused of 'ruining our natural coastline.' Building a single condominium complex doesn't fall into that category. You definitely haven't lost the dramatic flair you were known for when we were younger."

She shook her head fiercely, telling her nerves to calm down. Now wasn't the time to be angry. But there was one thing for certain...Colby certainly knew how to make her blood boil!

"You always know the right thing to say in a difficult situation, don't you?" Her words were clipped as she rubbed her aching back. "Your inconsiderate attitude reminds me of the council meeting we attended when this condo was approved."

Colby gently placed a finger over Sarah's mouth. "Shh...do you hear that?"

She shook her head, and then strained her ears to listen for the elusive sound. The building creaked around them, and the twisted steel towards her right began to sway gently.

“We need to find a way out of here as quickly as possible. This structure hasn’t been properly secured to withstand winds of this magnitude. I’m thankful I was able to pull you into this closet before the storm reached us.”

Sarah didn’t realize that they were in a closet, but upon careful examination she realized he was right. Apparently, the lower reception area of the condo had been basically completed. Colby rose to his feet, and she realized that he was walking with a slight limp. In her fear and anger, Sarah hadn’t thought to ask how he was doing. She felt a strange awareness surrounding them.

“Hey...I’m sorry for being harsh earlier. In all the excitement, I forgot to ask how you’re feeling. Have you been injured?”

He grimaced. “I’ve been better. My leg hurts, but I don’t have time to worry about that now. We need to find a way to escape this death trap as soon as possible.”

Colby reached the closet door and pushed with all of his might. It didn’t budge. He turned towards a beam of light that drifted in from a broken portion of wall. She chewed on her lip as he evaluated the situation. Sarah had a sinking suspicion they were stuck for good until someone else came to their rescue.

“What happens if we cannot find a way to escape?” Her voice rose a few octaves. “What then?”

He shot a wry smile in her direction. “Calm down, Sarah. I’m sure everything will work out. In the meantime, I’ll continue to look for an escape route.”

She jumped to her feet, wanting to help. *We have to get out of here.* Suddenly, the space began to spin and Sarah held onto a piece of twisted metal to steady herself. Colby was by her side in an instant. She grasped his arm as he lowered her gently to the floor. She cringed because his touch comforted her.

“Whoa now, you need to sit back down. I’m not sure how much blood you lost from the gash on your forehead, and I can’t have you passing out on me.”

“Why do you care?” Her voice came out in a whisper as she squeezed her eyes shut.

He bent down to her level and tilted her chin towards his. “Believe me, I care a lot.”

Tears clouded her vision as she listened to Colby lie to her face. Sarah could hardly believe this was the same man she grew up with, and even dated. Her mind slipped back to happier times. He used to be so caring when they fished among the reeds for hours during high tide. She even talked him into making spartina grass baskets with her once when they were twelve-years-old. The four months they dated before college were some of the best of her life. Their whirlwind romance had made Sarah feel happy and whole.

They went their separate ways during college, since Sarah was offered a scholarship opportunity at the nearby University of Georgia Marine Extension Office that she couldn’t refuse. The program was very rigorous, and she felt like she couldn’t put her best effort into schooling *and* a relationship. She’d almost lost her scholarship because she was completely distracted by him. And without that scholarship, she wouldn’t have been able to pursue her dream. It was one of the hardest decisions she ever made.

In the end, it was for the best. Sarah winced at the recollection.

When Colby returned to the island after completing his degree, she realized the outside world had hardened him to the joys of simple island living. She'd made the right choice by breaking it off with him. Wildlife conservation was her life, and it obviously wasn't important to him. He was a partner at the most successful construction business on the island now, and he fought to allow the construction of this condominium without hesitation.

She opened her mouth to give him a piece of her mind when the sickening sound of twisted metal was heard overhead. Colby rushed to her side and pushed her into a corner as the walls began to shake again. Sarah screamed as small pieces of sheetrock pelted her body and blackness surrounded them.

Thank you for reading this sample of Her Island Summer. I hope you enjoyed it! - Nicole Crone

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