

PROLOGUE

Ronnie

Staring out the bedroom window, Ronnie wondered whether Pastor Harris was already at the church. She assumed that he was, and as she watched the waves breaking over the beach, she questioned whether he was still able to notice the play of light as it streamed through the stained glass window above him. Perhaps not – the window had been installed more than a month ago, after all, and he was probably too preoccupied to notice anymore. Still, she hoped that someone new in town had stumbled into the church this morning and experienced the same sense of wonder she had when she'd first seen the light flood the church on that cold day in November. And she hoped the visitor had taken some time to consider where the window had come from, and to admire its beauty.

She'd been awake for an hour, but she wasn't ready to face the day. The holidays felt different this year. Yesterday, she'd taken her younger brother Jonah for a walk down the beach. Here and there, were Christmas trees on the decks of the houses they passed. At this time of year, they had the beach pretty much to themselves, but Jonah showed no interest in either the waves or the seagulls that had fascinated him only a few months earlier. Instead, he'd wanted to go to the workshop and she'd taken him there, although he'd stayed only a few minutes before leaving without saying a single word.

On the bed stand beside her lay a stack of framed photographs from the alcove of the small beach house, along with other items she'd collected that morning. In the silence, she studied them until she was interrupted by a knocking at the door. Her mom poked her head in.

“Do you want some breakfast? I found some cereal in the cupboard.”

“I'm not hungry, Mom.”

“You need to eat, sweetie.”

Ronnie continued to stare at the pile of photos, seeing nothing at all. “I was wrong, Mom. And I don't know what to do now.”

“You mean about your dad?”

“About everything.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

When Ronnie didn't answer, her mom crossed the room and sat beside her. "Sometimes it helps if you talk. You've been so quiet these last couple of days."

For an instant, Ronnie felt a crush of memories overwhelm her; the fire and subsequent rebuilding of the church, the stained glass window, the song she'd finally finished. She thought about Blaze and Scott and Marcus. She thought about Will. She was eighteen years old and remembering the summer she'd been betrayed, the summer she'd been arrested, the summer she'd fallen in love. It hadn't been so long ago, and yet sometimes she felt that she'd been an altogether different person back then.

Ronnie sighed. "What about Jonah?"

"He's not here. Brian took him to the shoe store. He's like a puppy. His feet are growing faster than the rest of him."

Ronnie smiled briefly, but it faded as quickly as it had come. In the silence that followed, she felt her mom gather her long hair and twist it into a loose ponytail on her back. Her mom had been doing that ever since Ronnie was a little girl. Strangely, she still found it comforting. Not that she'd ever admit it, of course.

"I'll tell you what," her mom went on. She stood up and went to the closet and put the suitcase on the bed. "Why don't you talk while you pack?"

"I wouldn't even know where to start."

"How about at the beginning? Jonah mentioned something about turtles?"

Ronnie crossed her arms, knowing the story hadn't started there. "Not really," she said. "Even though I wasn't there when it happened, I think the summer really began with the fire."

"What fire?"

Ronnie reached for the stack of photographs on the bed stand and gently removed a tattered newspaper article sandwiched between two framed photos. She handed the yellowing newsprint to her mother.

"This fire," she said. "The one at the church."

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**Illegal Fireworks Suspected in
Church Blaze**

Pastor Injured

Wrightsville Beach, NC - A fire destroyed historic First Baptist Church on New Year's Eve, and investigators suspect illegal fireworks.

Firefighters were summoned by an anonymous caller to the beachfront church just after midnight, and found flames and smoke pouring from the back of the structure, said Tim Ryan, chief of the Wrightsville Beach Fire Department. The remains of a bottle-rocket, an airborne firework, were found at the source of the blaze.

Pastor Charlie Harris was inside the church when the fire started, and suffered second-degree burns to his arms and hands. He was transported to New Hanover Regional Medical Center and is currently in the intensive care unit.

It was the second church fire in as many months in New Hanover County. In November, Good Hope Covenant church in Wilmington was completely destroyed. "Investigators are still treating it as suspicious, and as a potential arson at this point," Ryan noted.

Witnesses report that less than twenty minutes before the fire, bottle rockets were seen being launched on the beach behind the church, likely in celebration of the new year. "Bottle rockets are illegal in North Carolina, and are especially dangerous considering the recent drought conditions," cautioned Ryan. "This fire shows the reason why. A man is in the hospital and the church is a total loss."

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When her mom finished reading, she looked up, meeting Ronnie's eyes. Ronnie waited, and with a sigh, she began to tell a story that, even with the benefit of hindsight, still felt utterly senseless to her.