



DEADLY CURRENTS

HIDDEN BAY

ELIZABETH GODDARD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HIDDEN BAY, BOOK 3

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To my husband, Dan,
who brought me to the Pacific Northwest
so I could fall in love with the wild,
breathtaking beauty of the rugged coastline,
misty forests, and snowcapped peaks.

It is not down on any map; true places never are.

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

1

The sea never gives back what it claims . . .

The sea never gives back what it claims . . .” Her father’s voice echoed through her thoughts, gritty and sharp—like the wind whipping around her and the salt cutting into her cheeks early on this Monday morning. Cressida Valentine stepped back inside the wheelhouse where Captain Everett “Salty” Malloy stood at the helm of the *Mariner’s Gambit*—an older-than-time fishing trawler.

Next to Malloy, she curled her fingers around the binoculars and peered at the dense marine fog chasing them along the Washington coast. Uneasiness pressed down on her as she scanned the mist-veiled horizon. Her father had spent his life chasing secrets buried in waters too deep and too dark to trust.

And here I am, chasing them too.

Out of the white rolling cloud, a speedboat emerged, and it headed straight for the *Mariner’s Gambit*, startling her. “Looks like someone’s coming toward us,” she said.

“Let me see those.” Malloy took the binoculars she offered—they were his, after all—and peered through.

Then he swore under his breath. Gave her an apologetic look. “Sorry.”

His reaction wasn’t a good sign. “Who is it? What’s going on?”

Captain Malloy handed the binoculars back, then stepped to the helm. Despite the early morning cold, sweat beaded his temples, his knuckles white on the wheel. A man on a mission to escape?

“Doesn’t matter.” The tension in his jaw said otherwise.

“What do they want?”

He didn’t answer.

Not good enough. Cressida grabbed his arm. “Captain—”

“Not now.” He shrugged out of her grip and shoved the throttle forward, and the *Mariner’s Gambit* groaned as it accelerated, slicing through the swells. “I need to get away from them.”

“In this?” She bit her lip, regretting the question. They’d traveled between five and ten knots around the Olympic Peninsula from Port Angeles because fishing trawlers were built for endurance, not speed, Malloy had informed her.

Granted, the old trawler had been updated, boasting modern electronics and “smart” instruments on the dashboard. A necessity, he’d said, since he and his thirty-something son, Dax, were the only ones to crew the sixty-five-foot fishing and sightseeing charter vessel.

He didn’t respond to her comment.

“Why is that boat headed straight for us?” She peered through the binoculars again, hoping to see if Malloy had put more distance between them.

“I don’t want to find out.” He suddenly turned the wheel, and the boat veered hard to port, into a fifteen-foot swell, throwing her sideways against the wall. She lost sight of the pursuers.

“This can’t be happening,” she whispered.

But it was.

She wanted to trust Malloy, to believe him, but he wasn't making it easy.

Her mind raced through the possible scenarios and outcomes—the good and the bad. When the trawler suddenly decelerated and the rumble of motors dimmed, Cressida looked out at the fast-moving fog. “We’re slowing down?”

“They gave up the chase.”

“I’m impressed. I didn’t think the trawler had enough speed to escape.”

“I only had to beat them to Hidden Bay. They wouldn’t have followed me in. But that’s not what happened.”

The roar of another engine sliced through the chaos. Cressida turned toward the horizon—and froze. A massive Coast Guard cutter loomed in the distance, its white hull cutting through the waves. Relief washed over her, so sudden it left her knees weak.

Malloy exhaled sharply. “The *Kraken*.”

“I’m sorry . . . what?” Visions of a mythical creature rising out of the ocean depths, long tentacles flailing, emerged in her mind.

“That’s what they call her—the *Kraken*.” The ghost of a grin tugged at the corner of Malloy’s mouth. “And she’s on our side.”

Cressida clutched the railing on the wall as the cutter closed in, chasing their pursuers into the eerie fog. Over the last year, she’d traveled the world to research and finish her deceased father’s book about shipwrecks, ghost ships, and the maritime folklore surrounding them.

Dad had been on the *Mariner’s Gambit* too, with Captain Malloy at the helm giving him a tour of the Washington coast. That’s why Cressida had been willing to pay Malloy the ridiculous amount to charter her out of Port Angeles, through the Strait of Juan de Fuca, then down the stunning

rocky coast to Hidden Bay. She'd wanted to take the same path Dad had taken before he suddenly cut his research trip short. He'd traveled to DC for an alleged emergency, the details of which he conveniently left out of his journal notes. He hadn't returned to finish his research.

Or his book.

With thoughts of her father's untimely death, her heart edged into a dark place, which she couldn't afford if she was going to finish Dad's manuscript.

"Captain Malloy. I paid you well for this service. I need to know what is really going on. Your pursuers were obviously known by the authorities or else they wouldn't have chased them."

He grunted in reply. A nonanswer. Fine. She got up and took in the scene with his binoculars again, searching for the Coast Guard cutter, but both vessels had disappeared into the fog, which was now rapidly gaining on the *Mariner's Gambit*.

By tomorrow, she'd be in Hidden Bay. Her maritime historian father had already completed most of the research, but Cressida had to go to each place and look for herself because she couldn't write the book that he'd wanted to write without personally experiencing the atmosphere of each location where various sunken shipwrecks remained. Of the three million sunken ships, her father had chosen a select few. In his manuscript, he'd focused, too, on ghost ships—those vessels that had floated aimlessly on the ocean, the crew mysteriously lost.

All the vessels had one thing in common—maritime legend that fascinated her father.

This last vessel was a more recent abandoned, crewless boat—*Specter's Bounty*. Dad had come to Hidden Bay for his research.

For this charter, she'd requested that Captain Malloy take

her to Cape Disappointment at the mouth of the Columbia River—which was around a hundred nautical miles south of Hidden Bay—then return to Hidden Bay, where she would release the charter. Her trip on the *Mariner's Gambit* was almost over. On one hand, she would be relieved to finally be at her last destination. On the other hand, she hadn't gotten much out of this man who had spent time with her father.

The threat of the chase over, she relaxed, though maybe she shouldn't have. "Now that's out of the way, we can get back to the tour."

Another grunt. "I'm cutting the trip short."

"What? Why?" She looked out the window and realized they were approaching the bay, not just traveling past on their way south.

"It's not safe. Told you I didn't want to take more than two days from the start. I agreed to this for your father's sake. I was sorry to learn that he died." His ominous tone left her confused.

Suddenly, the atmosphere in the wheelhouse had shifted.

"And I had hoped you could tell me more."

"I told you all I could."

What did that mean? That he knew more and was holding back? Or that he'd told her everything? She'd learned that too many questions shut him down.

He continued navigating toward the marina but stopped and dropped anchor out in the bay. "The pier isn't going to work. We'll take the skiff."

"So that's it?" she asked. "You're dropping me off here?"

"This is Hidden Bay. Your destination." He squinted. "I'm not leaving you empty-handed."

"How's that?"

"See that bunch of boats out in the middle of the bay? They call themselves pirates."

He couldn't be serious. "And why would I want to talk to pirates?"

He snorted a laugh. "They're not *real* pirates. That's just what they call themselves. They're liveaboards." Again, he gestured at a group of vessels sprawled in the bay, far from the actual marina and dock. "You'll want to talk to Diggins, specifically."

Diggins?

"Just a heads-up in case you were expecting to see fancy yachts instead of derelict boats. This particular group can't afford to live on land, so they live in the water. They were anchored in Puget Sound, but some of them got run off and moved to Hidden Bay, where they're welcome to stay."

"Why are you referring me to this Diggins?"

"You asked about the *Specter's Bounty*."

"And you didn't know anything."

"Didn't say I didn't know anything. I said I hadn't seen it. And if I had, the Coast Guard would have, too, and ended the story."

"What *do* you know, then?"

"I know you should talk to Diggins."

"Did you send my father to Diggins?"

"He didn't ask about the *Specter's Bounty*. He didn't ask anything. Mostly let me talk."

"And you don't talk much."

He lifted a shoulder, his face blank. Yeah, he was holding back.

Dad had worked in a museum for a reason. He wasn't an investigative reporter like Cressida before she'd been black-listed from working as such, thanks to her mother. How had Dad learned so much for his book?

"Can you tell me—was it real or not? Or is it just a ghost story?" Her job was to get as many answers from the locals as possible. She wasn't letting Malloy go without asking.

“I sound like a broken record. Talk to Diggins.”

His son, Dax, was sweeping the deck and gave a brief glance up at the wheelhouse. He’d avoided her, and now his father was being short with her. Rude, even. That boat racing toward them had clearly left him unsettled.

Cressida didn’t like the idea of taking the skiff—the water looked pretty rough, even in the bay. Regardless, in her cabin, she gathered her things—a duffel, laptop case, and her shoulder bag—then met Malloy and Dax above deck. She descended the ladder and settled in the much smaller vessel. Dax lowered her items, handing them down into the skiff. From the deck, he crossed his arms and watched her.

Settled in the boat, Malloy turned on the motor. With his deep frown, he looked nothing like the smiling fifty-something man who’d been only too happy to take her money. Once at the pier, he tied off the small boat. “I’ll walk you to the dock. This is where I dropped your father,” he said.

“Any last words that he said to you?” She had to give it one last try.

His only response was the familiar grunt as he assisted her off the boat and onto the pier then handed off her things. Next to her, he lumbered across the rickety boards, passing between a few other fishing vessels and a couple of older cruisers. The wooden slats clanked as she and Malloy walked side by side up what looked like a recently rebuilt dock. Off to the right, she took in the Bayfront Chandlery, which looked like it also offered groceries, and next to that was a dilapidated warehouse. Weirdly, no town had built up around the marina like one would expect. On the other side of the chandlery stood a partially collapsed dock and a burned-out structure.

The fog had caught up with them and hovered around the older dock, wrapping around the building destroyed by

fire and turning it into an eerie setting worthy of a chilling horror flick. Foreboding goose bumps crept over her skin. This was her last stop on her research trip. She wouldn't be chased away by today's earlier scare or tales of a ghost ship and its missing crew.

At the end of the pier, she stopped and faced Malloy. "How do I contact Diggins when he lives out on the water?"

"Mavis at the chandlery can help you." He leaned in. "I wasn't joking when I said it's not safe."

Before Cressida could process his words or ask him a question that he probably wouldn't answer, he turned and walked away. Still, he called over his shoulder, "Watch your back."

Creepy much? She watched him hurry back to his boat, then head out to the bigger trawler anchored in the bay. Good riddance. Adjusting her duffel, laptop case, and sling bag, she glanced at her surroundings.

So this is Hidden Bay.

About a hundred yards of sand-pebbled beach met high cliffs that spread a few miles in either direction, carving out a crescent-shaped bay of several miles. She made her way to the Bayfront Chandlery, concerned it wouldn't be open yet. It was just before seven in the morning. Cressida's cell got no bars, and she wasn't even sure if a rideshare was available here. She entered the chandlery, and a young female clerk named Kit assisted her. Mavis wasn't there. Kit called for a ride to pick Cressida up and take her to the Cedar Trails Lodge, where she wasn't due until tomorrow night. She could sleep in the lobby if she had to. Cressida asked the clerk to store her duffel and computer case so she could walk the beach while she waited for her ride. She kept her shoulder bag containing her wallet with her.

On the beach in the early morning hours, she took in what promised to be an indescribable setting, but with the fog growing thick and suffocating, she couldn't see much—

only a few people strolling the beach. While the bay water was relatively calm, beyond the crescent edges the ocean violently bashed the rocks on the shore.

She didn't want to get too far from the marina, so she perched on a rock to relax and listen to the waves. Maybe she couldn't see everything, but the sounds were calming.

It was too quiet.

Her father's voice echoed once again in her head. *"It's not the storms that sink sailors, it's the calm before them."* A reminder that she shouldn't let her guard down.

Footfalls sounded behind her, approaching too fast and close. She jerked around. "What are you—"

A man gripped her wrist and twisted her arm behind her. He covered her mouth before she could scream. She tried the maneuvers she'd learned, techniques to free herself if she was ever attacked, but against the thick, ropy muscles on this man twice her size and weight, her defensive skills did nothing.

Pain ignited in her head when he grabbed her hair and dragged her out into the ocean, then dunked her. Could no one on the beach see what was happening? Had the fog interfered?

Her heart pounded violently, consuming what little oxygen she'd gulped into her lungs before going into the salty, cold ocean. She tried to punch his vulnerable parts, but his arms were so long, he prevented her from reaching.

Play dead.

Just . . . be dead. She fought until she thought she might actually suck in seawater. Her lungs burned, then she gave up as if dead.

And floated.

Letting the ocean take her, she drifted along with the waves washing in, then back out, then in again. Salt burned her eyes as she peered underwater, searching . . .

His boots kicked up sand. He was still there. A few more heartbeats and she would die if she didn't breathe.

She had no choice.

And he finally disappeared, so she lifted her head to the side, sucked in oxygen, then once again let the ocean carry her. Her body drifted with the current, back and forth, slowly toward the shore, until she washed up onto the beach.

Like a lifeless body.

Play dead. Let him think she'd drowned. Had this ever worked before? If he wanted her dead, he could have shot her, but why do that when she could just drown and that would be the end of her story? No investigation required.

Limbs numb with cold, pebbles cutting into her palms and arms, she crawled forward on the wet sand. Gut and lungs heaving, Cressida coughed up brackish seawater, then she let herself remain in the sand, unmoving.

Tears leaked from her eyes to mingle with the grit and salt water clinging to her face. Grateful that the ocean had spit her onto the beach, she couldn't fight back the pure terror still racing through her.

Let him believe she was gone. Let the danger be gone.

2

Straddling his Ducati Supersport S, Detective Braden Sanders leaned into the curve as he ascended the steep hill, the motorcycle roaring beneath him. The rainforest was a blur of green streaks as he raced along the two-lane highway. At the crest, he throttled forward, feeling the machine's power vibrating through him. Descending the other side, edging over the legal limit, he thrust his knee out to maneuver the switchback that carved into the foothill.

Just the rush of adrenaline he needed to hammer out the indignation coiling around his chest. At this speed, nothing else mattered except the snaking road before him.

Until he was forced to slow behind a line of vehicles. It was summer and tourist season, after all, and those thoughts he'd wanted to avoid found their way in, bombarding him.

Keep her secret, she'd said.

For the sake of the country, she'd said.

Right.

While Braden was working as a special agent with Diplomatic Security Services, he'd had the fortune, or misfortune, depending on how you looked at it, to work with a very elite and powerful figure in the State Department.

Octavia Dane had offered him a chance at life, and he'd

taken it. In return, all he had to do was move to the Olympic Peninsula and work as a detective in a small county. He'd gotten the job quickly enough and suspected she'd made those arrangements.

Once again, he tried to ignore thoughts of Octavia and focus on nature. He steadied his breathing and concentrated on the asphalt, the lines, the curves, the trees to his right, the glimpses of ocean to the left. That hundred-foot drop about thirty yards ahead where the marine fog hovered, not quite rising to the highest elevations yet.

He never dreamed he would be sent to the middle of nowhere USA. This peninsula at the edge of the United States might as well have been the edge of the earth—mountains, a rainforest, one road in and out. A coastline he could not believe. And the vast Pacific Ocean. In fact, Cape Flattery, part of the Olympic Peninsula, was the most western location of the contiguous United States. And one of the most stunning places he'd seen.

At first, he'd thought he'd been sentenced to a kind of prison in such an isolated place with large swaths of zero cell service. Eventually, he'd come to appreciate it. Loved the region so much he didn't want to leave. But too many factors outside this dream world would eventually pull him far from here. Besides, he wasn't here for his personal enjoyment.

He had a purpose. A mission for which he was here to wait for instructions. Hence, he was working as a detective.

As his cover.

For months now.

To complicate matters, Octavia warned him that he should watch for something unexpected. How was he supposed to do that while he worked as an actual detective? She offered no additional information, so Braden was beyond suspicious of what this could mean.

Coming from behind, a siren alerted him to move over.

Lights in his mirror signaled a disturbance. He moved to the right and let the county cruiser pass him along with the line of cars in front of him.

If County Deputy Trent Riker realized Braden was the guy on the motorcycle he'd passed, he didn't acknowledge him. Braden should have turned around and headed in the other direction—he had the day off—but curiosity got the best of him, so he followed the cruiser, taking a side road that descended quickly down the cliffside to the Hidden Bay Marina. At the bottom of the hill, Braden navigated the Ducati up to the cruiser and parked right next to it, then hopped off. After removing his helmet, he set it on the bike. Trent was already rushing north on the beach, away from the marina. Braden followed, weaving, hopping, and climbing between and over large chunks of driftwood. The morning fog was waning, burning off earlier than usual.

Trent turned to look at who'd followed. The deputy nodded to Braden, then continued hiking forward. An ambulance swerved into the marina parking lot behind them.

“What’s going on?” Braden called after Trent.

“A woman washed up on the beach,” Trent said.

Washed up? “A woman . . . dead or alive?” He hated how crass the words sounded.

“Alive as far as I know,” Trent said.

Beyond the cluster of driftwood logs, Braden continued to follow Trent, watching his footing on the precarious rocky, pebbled beach. The EMTs were going to love carrying someone across this rough terrain.

Trent called over his shoulder. “It’s your day off. I’ll handle it.” The older deputy believed he had deserved the detective position, but Braden had taken it.

“I’m here. I might as well assist.” Did investigators ever truly get days off?

When Braden had worked for the State Department, he

was always on call. And then always called upon. In this sparsely populated county, the complex investigations weren't common. Most of the peninsula was home to reservations where tribal police oversaw their jurisdictions with dedication, working closely with county law enforcement to ensure justice for all. Braden's burden here was light, and nothing at all like the high-stakes drama he'd experienced working as a DSS special agent.

No matter where he worked, justice for all felt like a lofty, unreachable goal at times.

A wave rushed up the beach, crawling forward and nearly saturating his now sandy motorcycle boots as he continued following Trent.

Without a dedicated law enforcement marine unit in Hidden Bay, the county sheriff's office handled any water-related incident as it came up and if necessary. No official harbormaster either, which could explain much of the neglect. Decisions were made by Mavis and her crew at the Bayfront Chandlery, and for any major incidents, of course the Coast Guard was called in.

After weaving between the piles of massive white tree trunks—driftwood brought in by the Pacific and left to bleach in the sun—up ahead, he finally saw the woman.

Wrapped in a blanket, she huddled on one such driftwood log, along with a couple in their late sixties, early seventies. Beachcombers? Friends or family? The man sitting with the survivor stood when he spotted officers from Timberbrook County approaching.

“We were starting to wonder if we should just take her someplace warm,” the guy said.

That would have been a good idea, but Braden kept that thought to himself.

“An ambulance is here.” Trent gestured over his shoulder. “EMTs will be here soon.”

Surprising Braden, the woman rose, the blanket falling from her shoulders. Her long hair looked dark since it was wet, but he could still make out the bright-red tones against a freckled face. She looked familiar to him, unsettling his thoughts.

The woman lifted her chin. “I don’t need an ambulance. I just need to report”—she forced the words out through strangled tears—“I was attacked and left to drown. My stuff was stolen.”

Trent went right to work. “I’m Deputy Trent Riker, and this is Detective Braden Sanders. What’s your name, ma’am?”

“Cressida. Cressida . . . Valentine.” She looked at Braden—not Trent—and her striking light-green eyes flashed.

For a moment, Braden couldn’t breathe.

How about Cressida Valentine *Dane*?

“If you don’t mind,” she said, “Deputy Riker, I’d prefer to talk to the detective.”

Cressida stepped up to Braden, determination set in her beautiful eyes, but in them he saw an abysmal sadness. He might have fallen for her—just a little—the first time he’d seen her photo in her mother’s office. She stared, waiting for his reaction. He’d better start acting like the professional he was. But Braden wanted to tell her everything.

I know your mother. She sent me here to investigate.

He didn’t know what, but now . . . He still didn’t know anything except Cressida was the unexpected surprise he’d been looking for. Of that he had no doubt.

And here you are.

He couldn’t tell her a thing because he was bound to keep her VIP mother’s secret.

Octavia Dane held all the power, had all the connections, had the impossible means to secure the experimental drug he required . . .

If he wanted his niece to live.