

## PROLOGUE

*The Collins Hotel*  
*Depoe Bay, OR*

Charlie flipped on the light, threw her towel on a chair, and kicked off her shoes. She had the place to herself. The cavernous room stretched before her. Warm, steamy air tinged with the familiar acrid, smell of chlorine enveloped her. The white, tiled floor was slick and wet. Walking with practiced care to the deep end, she stood at the edge of the pool for a minute, rolling her shoulders, shaking her arms out, loosening up.

She really needed this.

This week had been a real ball buster. First, the unending arguments with her grandma. Why was she so against her marrying Wade? When she told the indomitable Charlotte Collins in no uncertain terms that she and Wade were going ahead with the wedding, with or without her permission, the woman just about had a stroke.

And the hotel. They'd never agree about that. Why couldn't her grandma understand that she didn't want to run a hotel—*any* hotel? The Collins may be grandma Charlotte's whole life, but it wasn't hers. She thought she'd made that clear four years ago when she majored in Anthropology instead of hospitality. Or when she rejected her unwelcome gift last summer. But Charlotte Collins wasn't one to give up easily.

She knew her grandma saw this trip as one last chance to change her mind, but she wasn't going to budge. She was so tired of talking about it, that like a coward, she'd been avoiding her since their big blowup Sunday morning.

Monday, she'd waited until she heard grandma's Mercedes crunch down the gravel driveway before calling Wade to let him know the coast was clear. At least for a few days. They were looking forward to the break. They'd worked it all out over breakfast.

Grandma would be away at her gardening conference in Portland for most of the week. They were going to sit her down and talk about this rationally when she returned. Grandma would just have to accept that Charlie had a life of her own and it didn't include running the Collins Hotel.

All she and Wade wanted to do was live their own lives. In thirty days, they were going to a small, rural village in India, and putting their education and skills to good use. Clean water for villagers was a lot more important than clean sheets for wealthy hotel guests. Wade was a genius. His water filtration system not only cleaned water, but also had a desalinization component. They had a real chance at helping people, making the world a better place—saving lives! Why couldn't Grandma get that through her thick skull?

It was sad the way things had turned out. Growing up, they had always been close. Grandma Collins practically raised her. Her mom shipped her out to Oregon the day after her fifteenth birthday after an unfortunate incident involving a fifth of Scotch and a cute Senior named Jared. There were other reasons her mother had sent her to live with her grandma, but Charlie chose not to focus on those. Sometimes the memories were so distant and hazy, she wasn't sure they actually happened.

Besides, Charlie had loved living with Grandma Collins. She and grandma even looked alike. The first time she'd seen the family portrait over the fireplace, she did a double take. People always said the woman in the picture looked like her, but that portrait had been taken back in the forties. She was the baby in great-grandma's arms, not the southern beauty standing in back, next to her grandfather, Emerson. Same chestnut brown hair, though. Blue eyes and ivory skin. Both strong willed.

But that's where the resemblance ended. Grandma Charlotte, a true southern belle steeped in good manners and appearances, knew exactly how a lady should behave and expected her namesake to conform.

Charlie, on the other hand, was a tomboy of the first degree, preferring fishing off the rocks or exploring the vast tracts of forest that stretched for miles behind the town. She built her first treehouse when she was nine,

from scraps of lumber she hauled from a construction project behind city hall. Grandma had not been pleased, but Charlie was still her favorite.

Adjusting her swim goggles, Charlie looked out over the smooth surface of the water. Anticipating that delicious first plunge, she took a deep breath, then dove smoothly into the pool. She went deep, stretching her hands in front of her in perfect form, then scooped up just before she reached the bottom, allowing the momentum to propel her to the surface, pretending to be a dolphin or a mermaid, like when she was little. She knew it was silly, but it never failed to make her smile.

She loved the feel of water pushing against her face and along the sides of her body. Breaking the surface, she kicked off, reaching into her strokes, finding a relaxing rhythm. She'd do her twenty laps, shower off, then go back upstairs to her room. To Wade—to her future. Grandma would come around.

For the next twenty minutes, Charlie's muscles gradually released the tension she'd been holding all week. Flip-turning gracefully off the end after each lap. She was about halfway across the pool after lap eighteen when it hit. A fierce cramp like nothing she'd ever felt before, forcing her body to contract into the fetal position. It felt like someone stabbing her in the stomach. Before she could make it to the side to pull herself out, a wave of nausea gripped her and she cramped again.

*What was happening?*

She'd had a mild case of the flu a few days ago, but this felt much worse than before. She'd never have gone swimming if she thought she was still sick. Unable to reach the edge, she tried to turn herself over and float—force herself to relax until the cramp passed—but her arms and legs wouldn't work right. Within seconds, the severe cramping began again, followed by a hose of vomit and her bowels emptying violently. She hadn't eaten much all day, so it was mostly liquid.

*They'd have to drain the pool.*

She realized how odd the thought was even as she had it.

She had to get out. She struggled to get her body to obey her commands. She had to get to the side of the pool. It wasn't that far . . . She knew she couldn't swim in this condition, and was too weak to even pull herself out, but maybe she could hand-walk her way along the edge until she reached the shallow end and by using the handrail, crawl her way up the steps and lay there until she could move.

If she could just get herself out of the water.

After what seemed like forever, but was probably only a few seconds, she felt the tips of her toes dragging along the bottom of the pool.

*Thank God!*

Facing the wrong direction, she couldn't see it, but at least she knew now she was at the shallow end.

Just then, a whooshing sound announced someone's arrival as the door opened. Relief flooded through her. Probably Wade coming to join her or see what was taking her so long. Sometimes when she was in the zone, she lost track of time.

She couldn't see anything; she couldn't even call out. But surely, he'd see her.

Another spasm hit and she vomited again, unable to stop her body from folding forward, throwing her face into the water. She tried to hold her breath, but every cell in her body desperately screaming for oxygen, she found herself inhaling deeply, searching for air, but only water filled her nostrils and rushed into her lungs.

*Where was Wade?*

Just before she passed out, she thought she heard splashing behind her. With every second she clung to consciousness, she expected him to pull her to safety, but the next human touch Charlie felt was a strong hand clamped onto the top of her head, pushing her completely under. It didn't take much force. She had no fight left in her. Whatever signals her brain was sending weren't reaching the rest of her body.

Seventeen seconds later, her would-be-rescuer calmly left the way they had come in, switched off the light and shut the door, plunging the room into utter darkness.

Only a distant humming of the water pump and a slight lapping of the water against the sides of the pool could be heard. And soon even that became perfectly still.

The body at the bottom of the pool wasn't making any waves.