

# *The Beach Escape*

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“Ahhh. There you are, sweetheart.” Grant’s voice was calm, offering Molly a sense of easiness she hadn’t felt a moment ago. He steered the boat in a wide arc around the smaller fishing boat and jutted his chin out in the direction of where he was looking. Between the waves and the reflective surface of the water, it was hard to see anything, and Molly could barely make out the form of the turtle.

“I’m going to try to get in front of her.” They slowly inched forward. “The best way to load her on this boat is using the steps on the back of the hull.”

Molly kept her eyes on the sea turtle the entire time. It was hard to tell from their distance what was wrapped around the turtle’s middle. A rope, maybe? What she could tell was that the turtle was definitely stressed. Her movements were slow and labored and she floated on the surface, sticking only her head underwater.

“So, I’m going to need your help.” Grant tossed the words out casually, as if he were about to ask her to hold a door for him or pick up a pen he’d dropped.

“Okay.” The word drawled out because she, on the other hand, was a lot more hesitant. Being on the boat in the middle of the ocean and rescuing a wild sea turtle weren’t just outside of her comfort zone. They were in a completely different galaxy. But she wasn’t one to sit on the sidelines when it came to animals, no matter what galaxy she was in.

“How do you feel about getting in the water?”

“Umm...” Molly stared at the deep emerald water surrounding them. She swallowed hard. He wanted her to get in that? Like she said, this was a whole other galaxy.

Sure, she didn’t mind “swimming” in the ocean when she was at the beach and only went waist deep, but that was different. She could see the bottom there. Big fish didn’t usually hang out in the shallow water near the shore. Out here, though? This was their stomping ground, so to speak. And the water they were in was so deep that there was no way she could see the bottom, no matter how clear it was.

“Or you can steer the boat and I can get in,” Grant suggested.

“You want me to steer your boat?”

He shrugged. “Sure. There’s nothing to it.” He motioned to the wheel and the controls next to it. “All you do is keep it pointed the right direction and use the throttle to ease the boat forward or backward to keep it from knocking into the turtle. Or, you know, me.”

Molly glanced from the ship’s wheel to the turtle in the water, fear sloshing around in her belly like a couple of rogue waves.

Since she didn’t like option A or B, she wanted to choose C. She wasn’t sure what that would be, but she was confident it didn’t have anything to do with taking a dip in Jaws’ backyard or figuring out how to control this huge boat when there were lives at stake.

But since there were two jobs that had to be done and only two people there to do them, she was stuck choosing between a bad idea and a worse idea. “Guess I’m going swimming.” She stared at the waves slapping against the side of the boat and hoped she was making the right call.

“You’re going to be great.” Grant smiled. It was the authentic, encouraging kind that was almost as tangible as if he’d wrapped his arms around her, calming some of her jitters. “Plus, you’ll get to put that life jacket to good use.”

Molly gave the straps another firm tug. “Not really something I wanted to put to use, but I’m willing to go to extreme measures for a sea turtle.”

“A woman after my own heart.” There was a twinkle in his eye that gave her a dash of courage.

She followed Grant down to the aft deck and slipped out of her shorts and flip-flops, setting them on the bench. At least she’d thought to wear a swimsuit.

Grant opened one of the storage boxes and pulled out what looked like two hefty pool noodles with blue mesh connecting them. She’d used something similar as a soft stretcher when they’d had to move one of the larger marine animals at the zoo. “Swim out to the turtle, load her on the stretcher, then I’ll come down to the steps and help you lift her aboard. There’s nothing to it.”

Molly took the stretcher and stared out at the water in front of her. “Right. Nothing to it.”

“I’ll get you as close as I can. When I cut the engine, jump in. You’ve got this.”

She tucked the stretcher under one arm and braced herself against the side of the ship as she walked down the wide stairs that were built into the starboard hull. *Dream Catcher* slowly inched closer to the turtle. The waves splashed up over the last step, and she clutched the railing.

She wasn't sure she had this. She was way out of her depths, no pun intended. Her heart raced and her palms were so clammy that her grip was slipping. But there was a turtle who needed help, and the only way she was going to get that help was if Molly pushed aside her fears and did what had to be done.

The motor stopped, and Grant yelled down, "All clear."

That was her cue. With a deep breath, she lowered herself so she was sitting on the step with her legs dangling in the cool gulf waters. "Here goes nothing," she whispered as she pushed herself off the safety of the boat and into the middle of the ocean.

