



CAPE REFUGE

By Terri Blackstock

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The air conditioner was broken at City Hall, and the smell of warm salt air drifted through the windows from the beach across the street. Morgan Cleary fanned herself and wished she hadn't dressed up. She might have known that no one else would. The mayor sat in shorts and a T-shirt that advertised his favorite beer.

One of the city councilmen wore a Panama hat and flipflops. Sarah Williford, the newest member of the Cape Refuge City Council, looked as if she'd come in from a day of surfing and hadn't even bothered to stop by the shower. She wore a spandex top that looked like a bathing suit and a pair of cutoff jeans. Her long hair could have used a brush.

The council members sat with relaxed arrogance, rocking back and forth in the executive chairs they'd spent too much money on. Their critics—which included almost everyone in town—thought they should have used that money to fix the potholes in the roads that threaded through the island. But Morgan was glad the council was comfortable. She didn't want them irritable when her parents spoke.

The mayor's nasal drone moved to the next item on the agenda. "I was going to suggest jellyfish warning signs at some of the more popular sites on the beach, but Doc Spencer tells me he ain't seen too many patients from stings in the last week or so –"

"Wait, Fred," Sarah interrupted without the microphone.

"Just because they're not stinging this week doesn't mean they won't be stinging next week. My sign shop would give the city a good price on a design for a logo of some kind to put up on all the beaches, warning people of possible jellyfish attacks."

"Jellyfish don't attack," the mayor said, his amplified voice giving everyone a start.

"Well, I can see you never got stung by one."

“How you gonna draw a picture of ’em when you can’t hardly see ’em?”

Everyone laughed, and Sarah threw back some comment that couldn’t be heard over the noise.

Morgan leaned over Jonathan, her husband, and nudged her sister. “Blair, what should we do?” she whispered. “We’re coming up on the agenda. Where are Mama and Pop?”

Blair tore her amused eyes from the sight at the front of the room and checked her watch. “Somebody needs to go check on them,” she whispered. “Do you believe these people? I’m so proud to have them serving as my elected officials.”

“This is a waste of time,” Jonathan said. He’d been angry and stewing all day, mostly at Morgan’s parents, but also at her.

His leather-tanned face was sunburned from the day’s fishing, but he was clean and freshly shaven. He hadn’t slept much last night, and the fatigue showed in the lines of his face.

“Just wait,” she said, stroking his arm. “When Mama and Pop get here, it’ll be worth it.”

He set his hand over hers—a silent affirmation that he was putting the angry morning behind him—and got to his feet. “I’m going to find them.”

“Good idea,” Morgan said. “Tell them to hurry.”

“They don’t need to hurry,” Blair whispered. “We’ve got lots of stuff to cover before they talk about shutting down our bed-and-breakfast. Shoot, there’s that stop sign down at Pine and Mimosa. And Goodfellows Grocery has a lightbulb out in their parking lot.”

“Now, before we move on,” Fred Hutchins, the mayor, said, studying his notes as if broaching a matter of extreme importance, “I’d like to mention that Chief Cade of the Cape Refuge Police Department tells me he has several leads on the person or persons who dumped that pile of gravel in my parking spot.”

A chuckle rippled over the room, and the mayor scowled.

“The perpetrator will be prosecuted.”

Blair spat out her suppressed laughter, and Morgan slapped her arm. “Shhh,” Morgan tried not to grin, “you’re going to make him mad.”

“I’m just picturing a statewide search for the fugitive with the dump truck,” Blair said, “on a gravel-dumping spree across the whole state of Georgia.”

Morgan saw the mayor’s eyes fasten on her, and she punched her sister again. Blair drew in a quick breath and tried to straighten up.

“The Owenses still ain’t here?” he asked.

While Morgan glanced back at the door, Blair shot to her feet. “No, Fred, they’re not here. Why don’t you just move this off the agenda and save it until next week? I’m sure something’s come up.”

“Maybe they don’t intend to come,” the mayor said.

“Don’t you wish,” Blair fired back. “You’re threatening to shut down their business. They’ll be here, all right.”

“Well, I’m tired of waiting,” the mayor said into the microphone, causing feedback to squeal across the room. Everybody covered their ears until Jason Manford got down on his knees and fiddled with the knob. “We’ve moved it down the agenda twice already tonight,” the mayor went on. “If we ever want to get out of here, I think we need to start arguin’ this right now.”

Morgan got up. “Mayor, there must be something wrong.

Jonathan went to see if he could find them. Please, if we could just have a few more minutes.”

“We’re not waitin’ any longer. Now if anybody from your camp has somethin’ to say . . .”

“What are you gonna do, Mayor?” Blair asked, pushing up her sleeves and shuffling past the knees and feet on her row. “Shut us down without a hearing? That’s not even legal. You could find yourself slapped with a lawsuit, and then you wouldn’t even have time to worry about jellyfish and gravel. Where would that leave the town?”

She marched defiantly past the standing-room-only crowd against the wall to the microphone at the front of the room.

Morgan got a queasy feeling in her stomach. Blair wasn’t the most diplomatic of the Owens family. She was an impatient intellectual who found her greatest fulfillment in the books of the library she ran. People were something of a nuisance to her, and she found their pettiness unforgivable.

Blair set her hands on her hips. “I’ve been wanting to give you a piece of my mind for a long time now, Fred.”

The people erupted into loud chatter, and the mayor banged his gavel to silence them. “As you know, young lady, the city council members and I have agreed that the publicity from the 20/20 show about Hanover House a few months ago brought a whole new element to this town. The show portrayed your folks as willin’ to take in any ol’ Joe with a past and even exposed some things about one of your current tenants that made the people of this town uncomfortable and afraid. We want to be a familyfriendly tourist town, not a refuge for every ex-con with a

probation officer. For that reason, we believe Hanover House is a danger to this town and that it's in the city's best interest to close it down under Zoning Ordinance number 503."

Blair waited patiently through the mayor's speech, her arms crossed. "Before we address the absurdity of your pathetic attempts to shut down Hanover House just because my parents refused to help campaign for you—" Cheers rose again, and Blair forged on.

"Maybe I should remind you that Cape Refuge got its name because of the work of the Hanovers who had that bed-and-breakfast before my parents did. It was a refuge for those who were hurting and had no place else to go. I think we have a whole lot more to fear from an ex-con released from jail with a pocketful of change and no prospects for a job or a home, than we do from the ones who have jobs and housing and the support of people who care about them."

Morgan couldn't believe she was hearing these words come out of her sister's mouth. Blair had never sympathized with her parents' calling to help the needy, and she had little to do with the bed-and-breakfast. To hear her talk now, one would think she was on the frontlines in her parents' war against hopelessness.

"Hanover House is one of the oldest homes on this island, and it's part of our heritage," Blair went on. "And I find it real interesting that you'd be all offended by what they do there out in the open, when Betty Jean's secret playhouse for men is still operating without a hitch."

Again the crowd roared. Horrified, Morgan stood up.

Quickly trying to scoot out of her row, she whispered to those around her, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't know she was going to say that. She didn't mean it, she just says whatever comes to her mind –"

"Incidentally, Fred," Blair shouted, "I've noticed that you don't have any trouble finding a parking spot at her place!" Blair added.

The mayor came out of his seat, his mouth hanging open with stunned indignation. Morgan stepped on three feet, trying to get to her sister. She fully expected Fred to find Blair in contempt— if mayors did that sort of thing in city council meetings— and order the Hanover House bulldozed before nightfall.

"She didn't mean that!" Morgan shouted over the crowd, pushing toward the front. "I'm sure she's never seen your car at Betty Jean's, have you, Blair? Mayor, please, if I may say a few words . . ." She finally got to the front, her eyes rebuking Blair.

Blair wouldn't surrender the microphone. "And I might add, Mayor, that your own parents were on this island because of Joe and Miranda Hanover and that bed-and-breakfast. If I remember, your daddy killed a man accidentally and came here to stay while he was awaiting trial."

The veins in Fred's neck protruded, and his face was so red that Morgan feared the top of his head would shoot right off. "My daddy was never convicted!" he shouted. "And if you're suggesting that he was the same type of criminal that flocks to Hanover House, you are sadly mistaken!"

Morgan reached for the microphone again, her mind already composing a damage-control speech, but her sister's grip was strong.

"After my parents inherited the bed-and-breakfast from the Hanovers," Blair said, "they continued their policy of never harboring anybody illegally. You know that my father works with these people while they're still in prison, and he only agrees to house the ones he trusts, who are trying to turn their lives around.

Hanover House gives those people an opportunity to become good people who can contribute to society . . . unlike some of those serving on our city council."

Again, there was applause and laughter, and Morgan grabbed Blair's arm and covered the microphone. "You're turning this into a joke!" she whispered through her teeth. "Mama and Pop are going to be mortified! You are not helping our cause!"

"I can handle this," Blair said, jerking it back.

Morgan forced herself between Blair and the microphone.

"Your honor . . . uh . . . Mr. Mayor . . . council members . . . I am so sorry for my sister's outbursts. Really, I had no idea she would say such things."

Blair stepped to her side, glaring at her as if she'd just betrayed her.

"But I think we've gotten a little off track here. The fact is that Hanover House doesn't just house those who've gotten out of jail. It also houses others who have no place to go."

Art Russell grabbed the mayor's microphone, sending feedback reverberating over the room. "I don't think Cape Refuge is very well served by a bunch of people who have no place else to go."

"Well, that's not up to you, is it, Art?" Blair asked, her voice carrying over the speakers.

"If I may," Morgan said, trying to make her soft voice sound steady, "the question here is whether there's something illegal going on at Hanover House. And unless there is, you have no grounds for closing us down."

The crowd applauded again, but Sarah, the swimsuit-clad councilwoman, dragged the microphone across the table. The cord wasn't quite long enough, so she leaned in. "If there aren't any dangerous people staying at the bed-and-breakfast, then how come 20/20 said Gus Hampton served time for armed robbery and didn't even complete his sentence? And how come your

husband was at the dock fighting with your parents just this morning, complaining about Hampton? I heard it myself. Jonathan didn't want you working there around Hampton, and he said it loud and clear."

Blair's eyes pierced Morgan. "Why didn't you tell me this?" she whispered.

"It wasn't relevant," Morgan hissed back, "since I didn't think you'd be the one speaking for us."

The council members all came to attention, their rocking stopped, and they waited for an answer. "If there isn't any danger at Hanover House," Sarah repeated, "then how come your own family's fighting over it?"

Blair tried to rally. "Well, Sarah, when Jonathan gets back here, you can ask him. But meanwhile, the question is simple. Do you have the right to shut down Hanover House, and if you do try to close it, are you financially able to handle the lawsuit that's going to be leveled at this town . . . and maybe even at each of you individually?"

"They can't file a lawsuit," Fred said, his face still red.

"Watch us," she bit out. "And the chances of your reelection would be slim at best, since the people of this town love my parents.

Most everybody in this town has benefited from their kindness in one way or another."

The crowd applauded again, and cheers and whoops backed up her words. But Morgan realized that it wasn't the cries of the people that would decide the fate of Hanover House. It was those angry members of the city council, sitting there with their hackles up because Blair had insulted them.

"Some call that kindness, others call it naiveté," the mayor said. "They'll believe anything anybody tells them. Just because some convict claims he wants to change, doesn't mean he will."

"Thank goodness they believed your daddy," Blair said, "or you might not be sitting on this island in some overpriced chair!"

As the crowd expressed their enjoyment again, Morgan pressed her fingertips against her temples and wondered where her parents were. If they would just rush in right now and take over the microphone, she knew they could turn this around.

While the mayor tried to get control of the crowd again, Morgan looked fully at Blair, pleading for her to surrender the mike and not do any more harm. But Blair's scathing look told Morgan that her sister was in this to the end. The burn scar on the right side of Blair's face was as red as the mayor's face. It always got that way when she was upset, reminding Morgan of her sister's one vulnerability. It was that imperfect half of her face that kept her unmarried and alone—and it had a lot to do with the hair-trigger temper she was displaying now.

“Order, now! Come on, people—order!” the mayor bellowed, banging his gavel as if he were hammering a nail.

The sound of sirens rose over the crowd’s noise, cutting across the mayor’s words and quieting the crowd. Those on the east side of the building, where Morgan and Blair stood, craned their necks to see out the open window, trying to figure out where the fire trucks and police cars were heading. As one after another went by, sirens wailing and lights flashing, Morgan realized that something big must have happened. The island was small, and the sound of sirens was not an everyday occurrence. But now the sound of several at once could not be ignored.

When the front doors of the room swung open, everyone turned expectantly. Police Chief Matthew Cade—whom friends called simply “Cade”—stood scanning the faces, his skin pale against his dark, windblown hair. His eyes fell on the sisters at the front of the crowd. “Blair, Morgan, I need to see both of you right away.”

Morgan’s eyes locked with her sister’s for a second, terrors storming through her mind.

“What is it, Cade?” Blair asked.

He cleared his throat and swallowed hard. “We need to hurry,” he said, then pushed the door open wider and stood beside it, watching them, clearly expecting them to accompany him.

Whatever it was, Morgan realized, he couldn’t or wouldn’t say it in front of all these people. Something horrible had happened.

Melba Jefferson, their mother’s closest friend, stood and touched Morgan’s back. “Oh, honey.”

Morgan took Blair’s hand, and the now-silent crowd parted as they made their way out. Cade escorted them into the fading sunlight and his waiting squad car.

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