

THE CAROLINA COAST SERIES

Sea Glass Castle



a novel

T. I. LOWE

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Sea Glass Castle

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To my daughter, Lydia Lu.
Dare to declare your own destiny.

*We are pressed on every side by troubles,
but we are not crushed. We are perplexed,
but not driven to despair. We are hunted
down, but never abandoned by God. We get
knocked down, but we are not destroyed.*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:8-9

1

Darkness was a gift that hid most anything Sophia Prescott wanted to keep at bay—the ruins of her marriage, the still-fading scars, and the inner debris of her self-worth, which had been scattered about so severely that she was pretty sure there was no hope of mending it. The shadows graciously did their part to shroud life, even if it was for only a brief period on Mondays. Every Sunday her parents kept her two-year-old after church, overnight, and until nightfall on Monday. During this time of seclusion, Sophia kept to the shadows and let herself fall apart before having to pull herself back into a presentable form for her son. Collin deserved her whole. Not broken.

But Mondays she broke.

Hunkered down underneath a thick quilt, Sophia pried her eyes open when the soft click of the door closing caught her sluggish attention. Knowing what was coming, she braced herself for the fight, fisting the blanket in both hands and squeezing her eyes shut.

A few forceful tugs and straggling grunts came from the other side of the blanket before the darkness was snatched out of her grasp. Blazing light poured in through the windows as the little sprite fluttered around the room to open even more curtains.

“Stop it, Opal!” Sophia screeched. “Too bright!” She buried her head beneath the pillow, hoping to escape the light and whatever her busybody friend was up to.

“Nonsense. It’s a beautiful summer day. One that begs for you to be outside enjoying it. Come on. Let’s go be one with nature.” Opal jostled the bed.

Sophia lost her grip on the pillow, opening her eyes just in time to see it fly across the room. “I live on a golf course. Nothing I want to go be *one* with,” she grumbled, sitting up to fix her best friend with her best glare.

Opal’s sparkling green eyes never dulled of their merriment. At the moment, they appeared to be holding a measure of amusement too. “There’s beautiful landscaping on this golf course. Don’t let my dad hear you sassing about his place.”

“I’m paying him rent for this condo, so I can sass about it all I want.” Sophia rubbed her eyes, wishing when she reopened them, the darkness would be back. But she knew Opal Gilbert Cole too well. There was no other option but to go along with her. “What do you want?”

“I want lots of things.” Opal grinned, twisting her golden-red curls into a messy bun, the blonde tips flickering every which way. “But I’ll settle for you helping me solve a mystery today.”

“It’s Monday. Shouldn’t you be working?” Sophia watched as Opal began rummaging through her armoire. It was a plain white piece of furniture that went along with the coastal theme of the condo. She was pretty surprised when moving in to find the place without Opal’s signature written all over it, but since it was a rental property, Opal’s family wanted to leave it more generic. The town called her the furniture fairy, and she deserved that title and then some given the way she could work magic into old pieces and turn them into something new.

Opal was known to use that magic on people as well, so Sophia was wary about the attention she was receiving all of a sudden. She stared at the bathroom door and contemplated locking herself inside to avoid whatever was about to go down.

“Bless This Mess isn’t open to the public on Mondays. You know that. And there aren’t any urgent furniture orders to work on.” Opal tossed a pair of burgundy tights and a gray- and orange-striped T-shirt dress onto the bed, two things Sophia had never paired together. It wouldn’t be happening today, either. “Besides, I have other pressing business.”

“What are you talking about?” Sophia crossed her arms when Opal pointed to the pile of clothes. “I’m already dressed for the day.”

Opal’s eyes narrowed and coasted along the plain black shirt and yoga pants Sophia was wearing. “Black has never looked good on you. It even washes out those teal eyes.” Opal tsked, like she had any room to judge wardrobe choices.

With a condescending look, Sophia flicked a hand toward Opal’s psychedelic halter top, which made her dizzy just looking at it, and her bright-blue Bermuda shorts. “Are you kidding me right now?”

Opal pranced around in a circle, pausing to shimmy her backside. “At least I don’t look like the living dead. I’m groovy, baby!” She gave it her best Austin Powers impression. The Sand Queens had watched the late-nineties movie repeatedly back in the day.

That almost pulled a smile to Sophia’s pinched lips. *Almost.* “Opal, stop talking in loops and spit out whatever harebrained idea you have for the day already.” She fell back on the bed and huffed. “Or better yet, don’t and say we did. Be sure to lock the door behind you.”

“No, seriously.” Opal reached over and began yanking on Sophia’s arm until she gave in and sat up on the edge of the bed. “Someone moved in next door and I’m a little weirded out about it. I need you to come over and tell me what your instinct says.”

“My instinct stinks anymore,” Sophia muttered, dropping her gaze to her hands, resting in her lap. For the first time in years her nails were bare of acrylic and polish. And for the first time in years she had no desire to do anything about it.

“Only thing stinking is your breath. Phew!” Opal wrinkled her nose and nodded her head toward the bathroom. “Do me a favor and go fix that.”

It took another long stretch of time before Sophia was persuaded to go wash the funk out of her mouth and to run a brush through her tangled hair, and she refused to change her clothes. If Opal was dragging her out of the condo, it would be in the black shroud of gloom. After sliding on a pair of giant sunglasses and an equally giant sun hat, Sophia dragged her feet all the way to Opal’s van and wondered how she avoided tripping over her bottom lip in the process.



“I’m so tickled the Sand Queens are back together!” Opal scooted around the table on her back deck and grabbed a glass of lemonade. The summer day was warm and sunny, with a breeze carrying laughter from beachgoers and squawking from seagulls.

“Me too,” Josie agreed as she tucked a wayward wave of white-blond hair behind her ear. “Two months is too long to go between meetings. I’m glad I talked August into giving me the afternoon off from the camp.”

“Your husband knows how important we are to you,

so of course he'd give you some time off," Opal said in that reassuring tone, the one that was trying to relay a hidden meaning.

Sophia caught the meaning but chose to ignore it. Yes, it was she who had stood up the other two, but tough. That was life. And for the past several months—closer to a few *years*—life had served her a platter brimming with unfairness.

"Sophia, aren't you glad to be spending time with us today?" Josie asked in that small voice that never really suited her.

Sophia looked at Josie's long, paint-stained fingers where they rested on her forearm. "Nothing against the two of you, but I'd rather spend my Monday alone. . . . I have a lot on my mind." Yes, the warmth of the sun and the softness of the breeze felt good on her skin, but that was neither here nor there.

"Oh, I bet. Are you considering signing Collin up for the preschool program at the church this fall? I heard Momma talking with you about it after Sunday school yesterday." Opal took a sip of her drink and gave Sophia an innocent look that was really her meddling expression.

Sophia let go of a long sigh and decided not to call her out on it. Instead, she gave the excuse "He has to be potty trained before they will accept him."

"That's easy enough." Opal shrugged. "YouTube some tutorials and go get him one of those tiny toilets."

"I'd rather he decide when he's ready. So far there's no interest." Sophia tucked her left thumb underneath her ring finger and couldn't contain the cringe at finding it bare. It was a habit she had formed right after Ty slid the flashy engagement ring onto her finger. Touching the back of the ring had always offered comfort and a reminder of promises. She was still struggling to grasp

that the wedding ring—and the promises—no longer belonged to her.

“I’m sure you want to help Collin along. The preschool would be a great opportunity for him to interact with children his age. And it would allow you to get a job.” Josie smiled but seemed uncertain. She wasn’t nearly as good at meddling as Opal.

Sophia narrowed her eyes at both women, wondering what their game was. “I have alimony and child support and a nice severance package. I don’t need a job.”

Ty’s PR team had been quick to get most of his dirt swept under the rug, and the lawyers even quicker to finalize the divorce. Sophia had only been required to sign nondisclosures about the abuse allegations that prevented her from ever speaking about it publicly, and that was fine by her. She agreed after they added a clause that Ty had to undergo anger management counseling and could have only supervised visits with Collin.

“That’s hogwash. Never has your strong backbone stood for someone else taking care of you and—”

Before Opal could carry on her rant, Josie piped in. “But a job would be a great reason to get out of the house and be around adults. Plus, you’re too talented not to be out there doing something with yourself.”

Sophia had recently endured not only the demise of her marriage, but also the demise of her career. When Southeastern Public Relations had to choose between a replaceable consultant and their star athlete, the decision to let Sophia go was more than easy.

“Really? Southeastern seemed to think I’m nothing more than a grunt worker who somehow deserved to be beaten up by her famous husband for catching him in bed with another woman.” Sophia growled and slammed her glass down, sending a fountain of pale-yellow liquid

sloshing onto the table. That didn't release enough of her pent-up anger, so she added stomping her feet against the sandy deck and another growl.

Sophia's intuition had always been spot-on. She was an ace at using that skill for the betterment of others and keeping the firm's clients out of hot water. Herself, not so much. It didn't do her a darn bit of good when it came to the bronze-haired Adonis with his lustrous skin tone and that aw-shucks smile. Ty Prescott's stunning facade had fooled her right along with the masses. Months had passed since Ty had completely removed his mask while taking a part of her soul with it, yet she was still dealing with the wreckage. She was so mad at herself for allowing it to happen in the first place. The worst part was that she'd failed not only herself but also her son.

"Then why are you allowing their opinion such power if you don't believe it to be true?" Opal asked, knowing exactly what button to push. "You sure have been acting like you believe it."

For months, Sophia had allowed circumstances to dictate her self-worth. The only days she had any hope of turning things around were the days she could make her baby smile, and that wasn't nearly as often as it needed to be. A saying her grandmother shared once flickered through her thoughts as she pounded her fists against the arms of her Adirondack chair. "*Never underestimate the power of a good ole hissy fit.*"

The haze of despondency cleared momentarily as Sophia had herself one glorified conniption. "I'm not a nobody! I have just as much talent as that giant schmuck running around a dumb field with a ball! I want to slap that smirk off his lips! I want to show him he didn't break me!"

Opal nodded exuberantly. "This is good!"

"What?" Sophia snapped back, hot tears cascading

down her flushed face. She caught Josie echoing her question on a much more subdued whisper.

“You’re alive!” Opal fist-pumped and jumped up and down. “She’s alive! Hallelujah!” She turned back to Sophia and shook her by the shoulders. “For a hot minute I thought you’d turned into a robot.” Opal giggled, followed by Josie snickering, and that had Sophia snorting. And it escalated to an outlandish round of laughter.

And that was Opal for you. Always twisting and turning a touchy situation until she could figure out how to defuse the tension. It was one of the reasons Sophia loved her so much—and also the reason she wanted to pinch Opal’s little button nose half the time.

“Y’all, I’m sorry . . . I’m just having a hard time getting my act together.” Sophia shook her head. “I never thought I’d let a man manipulate me or lay a hand on me out of anger.”

Josie moved over and knelt in front of Sophia’s chair. “I sure wish you had confided in us about what was really going on.”

“I was embarrassed. Still am.” Sophia watched Opal join Josie in front of the chair, their wall of support causing a heaviness to press against her chest. Clearing her throat, she whispered, “It didn’t happen that many times, but it was enough to leave a lasting effect. Made me doubt my strength and character. I hate being weak.”

“One time is way too many times.” Opal squeezed Sophia’s knee. “But who says you’re weak?”

The question had Sophia coming up short, so she only responded with a halfhearted shrug.

“You are the owner of your self-esteem. Don’t let circumstance dictate it. Show Ty and everyone else you’re still that crazy-smart, fiercely driven woman who lets no one and nothing get the best of her.”

Josie bobbed her head in agreement. “Opal’s right. You’ve achieved everything you’ve ever set your mind to. You are the former reigning Miss Sunset Cove, you were the captain of the cheerleading squad, valedictorian of your graduating class, you formed Beach Preserve Coalition for your senior project when the rest of us only took the time to write a research paper—”

“Oh! I love that charity.” Opal’s face lit with admiration, mirroring Josie’s. “Girl, you got the entire town *and* my daddy, the senator, on board with keeping our beach a litter-free, healthy environment.”

They were doing what the Sand Queens did best: lifting one another up when life tried beating them down by redirecting the focus to all of the good and positives.

Sophia’s tears of anger transformed into tears of appreciation as she leaned forward and hugged both wonderful friends God had blessed her with for as long as she could remember. Even though she was a year ahead of them in age and school grade, their bond had always been ironclad.

After the three women hugged it out and resettled in their own chairs, Sophia finally asked, “What was all that talk about a mystery neighbor?”

“There’s no mys—”

“I think a vampire moved in last night.” Opal was quick to cut Josie off, but Sophia dismissed it when she processed what the silly woman had just spouted off.

“A vampire?” She wiped the last of the tears from her cheeks and rolled her eyes at Opal’s absurd words.

“Yes. Possibly two of them.” Opal leaned toward Sophia and Josie in a conspiring fashion and glanced around. She nodded her head to the cookie-cutter, saltbox-style beach house to the right of Opal’s. Instead of the orange-sherbet paint job, it was whitewashed with dusty-blue shutters.

“A moving truck showed up late last night. I saw two men slinking around in the dark, and they kept at it until sunrise. Then all went eerily quiet over there.”

Sophia pulled her sunglasses down the bridge of her nose and looked for any sign of life. A nice set of outdoor furniture had been placed on the back deck and a beach bike was propped against the side of the house, but nothing looked amiss. She slid the shades back into place and was about to look away when the curtain at the kitchen window fluttered, revealing a hint of a shadowed figure. Sitting up taller and angling her head to the side, she whispered, “Someone’s in the kitchen.” She heard Opal gasp and Josie snort.

All three leaned over the railing, like that would actually get them close enough to see more clearly. Sophia knew they looked like a bunch of nosy rubbernecks, but she kept leaning until a loud boom ricocheted from the neighboring house. Three sets of feet cleared the deck as squealing burst from each of the women.

“What was that?” Sophia whisper-yelled, ducking down behind the deck railing and clutching her pounding chest.

“See!” Opal crouched beside her. “I told you something’s not right with him.”

“How do you even know it’s a *him*?” Sophia narrowed her eyes and glanced over to find Josie settling back into her chair, obviously the only sane one out of the bunch. She stood and followed suit.

“I already told you. It’s two guys and I saw them hauling in things last night. One of which was a long box.” Opal stretched her arms as wide as they would go while her eyes bugged out. “I’m pretty sure it may have been a coffin.”

Josie snorted again. "Get up from there, silly, and knock it off."

Opal stood and dusted the sand off her brightly colored shorts. "I'm serious. That house has been sitting there vacant since Mrs. Clark vanished last year—" Her eyes rounded again. "Oooh! The neighbor did it!"

"With the candlestick in the dining room!" Josie interjected with a thick coating of sarcasm.

"I have the weirdest friends," Sophia muttered, propping her cheek on the palm of her hand and slouching against the side of the chair.

Josie disregarded the jab and said to Opal, "You know Mrs. Clark went to live with her sister in Florida."

"So they say . . ." Opal's words trailed off as she jabbed a finger toward the house. "She could have been holed up in the basement all this time."

"Your husband oversaw the renovations to the house just last month. To be sure, Linc would have noticed an old lady tied up somewhere." Josie rolled her eyes and picked up a cookie from the plate. She gave it a cautious sniff. "You didn't bake these, did you, Opal?"

"You know Linc doesn't let me near the oven. Momma made them." Opal drummed her fingertips against the table while eyeing next door. Suddenly she jolted in such a spastic manner that it caught Sophia's waning attention. "The curtain moved again!"

Sophia blinked slowly at her friend before moving her sights over to next door. All she could see were shadows moving past the windows. They appeared to be drifting about in no particular direction. Much the same way she was doing as of late.

"I think we need to go over there and check things out."

“We’re doing no such thing,” Josie ordered while swiping two more cookies and handing one to Sophia. “Seriously, Opal, that’s enough. You keep on and I’m calling Linc to come get ahold of you.”

Sophia sniffed the cookie out of habit since it came from Opal, finding only the delicious aromas of vanilla and chocolate chips. She took a bite and chewed absently, realizing her sluggish attention was missing something. From Opal’s outlandish behavior over the new neighbor and Josie’s snorting responses to it all, clearly she wasn’t catching on to whatever was happening. But she didn’t care enough to try figuring it out.