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DEEP DOWN
THE HIDING PLACE
BELOW THE SURFACE
INFERNO
HURRICANE
DARK ANGEL
DARK HARVEST
DARK ROAD HOME
THE FALLS
THE STONE FOREST
SHAKER RUN
DOWN TO THE BONE
THE BABY FARM
EMPTY CRADLE
BLACK ORCHID

KAREN HARPER

DOWN RIVER



To the wonderfully independent Alaskans I met on our trip, and, as ever, to my traveling companion

through life, Don.

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Part I

Fighting the Foam

Like the dew on the mountain,
Like the foam on the river,
Like the bubble on the fountain,
Thou art gone, and for ever!

—Sir Walter Scott

Prologue

August 20, 1982

Lisa Vaughn fought to pull her wrist loose from her mother's strong hand. "No, I'm afraid. I'm going to tell Grandma. No, Mommy, no, nooo!"

They were up on the deck where everyone had done the lifeboat drill but now no one else was around. Eight-year-old Lisa loved the big cruise ship she was on in the middle of the blue sea with Grandma, Mommy and baby Jani. But Grandma was taking a nap in their cabin, and Mommy was crying. So was Lisa's baby sister, maybe because Mommy was holding her so tight against her chest with only one arm. With the other hand she dragged Lisa toward the back railing of the ship with lots of bubbling white water underneath.

Walking around the deck with Mommy and Jani, Lisa had thought it was pretty at first, all that wild water like when you swished your hand real fast to make lots of bubbles in the bathtub. But Mommy kept saying something about "Getting away just like your father did, just getting away with my girls...peace forever..."

Lisa started to cry, too, when her mother put one leg up high over the railing. Still, she didn't let go of Lisa's wrist, dragging her closer. Jani cried and squirmed. Wet-faced from her own tears, Mommy kissed her little cheek, then looked back at Lisa.

"You have to come with us, Lisa. Stop struggling!"

She gave Lisa a huge tug, trying to lift her over the rail, scraping her stomach.

"No!" Lisa shouted as she pulled back and kind of shoved Mommy away at the same time.

Lisa fell hard on the deck, so surprised and scared as Mommy, still holding Jani, fell backward, down. Lisa jumped to her feet in time to see Mommy and Jani drop and disappear, sucked into the sea by the wild white water.

*Duck Lake Lodge
Near Bear Bones, Alaska
August 20, 2008*

Despite the calm beauty of Duck Lake ten feet below the pine-tree-lined path, Lisa Vaughn felt compelled to watch the Wild River on the other side of the low ridge where she stood. Because the summer sun had warmed the snow-tipped Talkeetna Mountains for hours, the snowmelt river roared. When the temperature dropped at night, despite the fact the skies barely darkened, the river rumbled like distant thunder. She was amazed by the reddish-colored salmon as they battled the fierce current on their long journey upriver to their breeding grounds. It almost looked as if the river was bleeding.

But mostly the river awed Lisa because, exactly twenty-six years ago, she'd seen her mother and baby sister drown in the turbulent, foaming wake of a cruise ship. Since then, roiling water mesmerized her. And she had never seen anything like the rapids of the Wild River.

She pulled her gaze away and hurried along the ridge toward the cutoff to the lake landing where she and Mitch had agreed to paddle a kayak to a picnic spot. "I know you've never been in a kayak," he'd said when he suggested it, "but we'll be fine as long as you match your strokes to mine, so we don't slam our paddles together."

Match your strokes to mine. His words echoed in her head. Was it just she who was still furious about the death of their passion? Although their romance and future together had ended when they'd slammed their different goals into each other, the man still got to her in a dangerous way. This trip had to be all business for her, all about getting a promotion, not rehashing the wreck of their relationship. She'd been dreading this whole slippery situation, but maybe talking it out could help her to finally write the obituary for what she'd thought was mutual love. She let out a breath, then inhaled deeply, not to savor the fresh, pine-scented air, but to calm herself.

Mitch Braxton seemed a different man from a year ago when they'd broken their engagement and he'd left her and Fort Lauderdale for the heart of Alaska. He'd broken her heart, but she'd been so angry with him that she'd quickly patched herself back together, at least on the surface. She'd gone on with a vengeance, not looking back until her boss set up this command performance at Mitch's lodge.

Lisa had worked hard to pretend to get over her resentment of his shattering her prettily planned-out life. She had expected to be a skilled attorney, a wife, a working mother to their future children. Though she knew better, sometimes she felt that, at age thirty-four, her marital and biological clocks were not only ticking but clanging. Just when she'd thought never to see Mitch again, Graham Bonner, the managing partner of Carlisle, Bonner & Associates, had been adamant that he had a unique plan for screening the three candidates for the next senior partner of the prestigious law firm.

Graham and his wife, Ellie, insisted they were taking the three junior partners to participate in the family/corporate bonding program Mitch offered at the lodge he'd inherited in Alaska. Since they'd only arrived yesterday, all they'd done so far was walk blindfolded through an obstacle course by following vocal directions—but so much more was in store. Scheduled during the week were ziplining and whitewater rafting, all the while being observed by the Bonners to decide who would get the coveted senior partner position Mitch had abandoned.

Some of Lisa's friends had argued it was a crazy way to vet a lawyer, though it sounded like a great, free vacation. But Graham was clever and convincing. He'd learned the law-firm ropes from Ellie's father and her brother Merritt, who used to run the firm and had used it as a stepping stone to his fast-rising political career.

Come hell or high water, Lisa intended to be the new senior partner, but she knew her competitors Jonas and Vanessa were just as tenacious and ambitious. Maybe that was what the Bonners were judging them by anyway. She couldn't help but wonder if, as upset and betrayed as the Bonners had also felt by Mitch's defection, they hadn't still enlisted him to help them make the important decision. He'd always been the Bonners' golden boy. Once Lisa had even thought they were grooming him not only to take over the firm but to partner—in more ways than one—with their twenty-four-year-old only child, Claire, who was now in law school at Duke University, and would soon join the firm as its third-generation lawyer.

Stopping above another clearing where she could see the river, Lisa brushed several mosquitoes away, then put down the small plastic cooler she carried. The cooler had been beautifully packed, down to bright cloth napkins and a tablecloth by Mitch's lodge manager and chef, Christine. Like the lodge, Christine Tanaka seemed both down to earth, yet frontier elegant. Lisa had sensed something between Mitch and the striking, ebony-haired, high-cheek-boned woman, and was annoyed that it bothered her.

While Christine knew where they were going, Lisa hoped they wouldn't be missed by the others during this three-to-five afternoon break, when everyone had some private time before gathering for pre-dinner appetizers and wine.

She sprayed herself lightly with the bug repellent she'd brought along. Close to the lodge they fogged the area and the brisk breeze today kept most of the mosquitoes away. She was used to them, being from South Florida, but the Alaska version seemed especially voracious. At least, in his introduction to them yesterday, Mitch had mentioned the bug season was waning.

She forced her gaze away from the river rapids and stuffed the small spray can back in the top of her sock, then rolled her jeans back down. She wore her running shoes and a life preserver over a light jacket and T-shirt, but the day seemed warm—too warm, if she kept thinking about Mitch.

Turning back to the river, Lisa fastened the Velcro straps of her orange PFD jacket. Mitch had warned them, "No one, not even Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, if he shows up here, goes out on the lake or the river without a PFD!"

She and her colleagues had joked that an attorney, on the losing end of a lawsuit, must have named it a Personal Flotation Device, but then it wasn't a plain old life preserver. PFDs were made of sleek, contoured neoprene, a far cry from those old bulbous, canvas jackets the cruise ships had passengers wear during lifeboat drills. For all she knew, that drill had given her mother the idea to jump overboard.

If Lisa was getting in a kayak for the first time, she was going prepared. She could swim like a fish, but since her family tragedy—though she tried not to let people know—churning water not only horrified her but lured her.

She picked up the cooler and glanced back down the path toward the sprawling two-story log lodge with its four rustic cabins huddled nearby like chicks around a mother hen. No sign of Mitch yet; he was busy here, king of his realm. But then, he'd seemed to be master of his fate in Florida, too, before the dam broke and their mutual future was swept away.

She heaved a huge sigh, staring down into the river. Mitch said he'd bring the drinks, and she wondered if it would be wine. Last year, the night they had broken up, she'd snapped her wine goblet off at the stem when he'd told her he had to get out of the rat race and leave Fort Lauderdale. Her hair had bled from a puncture wound; she still bore the scar—that and too many others as she went on with

her high-flying career. That terrible night, she had tossed her engagement ring at him, and would have thrown the gold bracelet with the flying seagulls he'd bought her as well, except the clasp had stuck.

But now, when she looked back on that night, she knew she'd done things to upset him, too. She recalled Mitch's explosion when she'd told him she had volunteered both of them to testify at a state senate committee hearing. They were both under pressure then, working day and night on a high-profile money-laundering case. They'd been harassed, even stalked by someone, until Graham had suddenly taken them off the case for their safety. She was trying to find another way to keep them in what she thought of as "the local lawyer limelight." They were having drinks on the patio of her condo with its view of a golf course she'd never played.

"No way!" he'd shouted, shocking her. "I just can't take time to testify at some senate hearing! Leave that political stuff to Ellie's beloved brother, who will probably be our next senator or even president, for all I know!"

"Listen, I realize it will take time from your other cases, but it's great PR, and your name carries clout now," she'd insisted.

"I may be successful, but I'm so stressed I'm getting distracted—careless—when people's futures are in my hands. I'm scared I'll not only ruin someone else's life, but my own. Carelessness can lead to self-destruction. Sometimes I don't give a damn about things I need to care for, to control. Half the time, all I've worked for seems pointless."

"Including a future with me? Our love, our plans, both professional and personal?" she'd demanded in her best litigator's voice. "Mitch, we can have everything together, including our careers helping people, not wasting time on something pointless!"

That was when he'd dropped the bomb that he'd inherited his uncle's land and lodge and wanted to move to Alaska. He'd been meaning to find the right time to tell her. Would she change her plans to go with him?

Shocked and angry, she'd refused, accused him of being self-centered. But she saw now she had been, too. Why couldn't he understand that no urban career woman who loved luscious, lively Fort Lauderdale needed a dropout who preferred the lonely wilds of Alaska? No, she couldn't risk loving someone who suddenly claimed to be nearly suicidal, not after all she'd been through.

Now, lost in her regrets, trembling again at the memory, she frowned at the raging river. Then something happened. Somehow, it was as if her rage at her past, at her mother, at Mitch, pushed her over some psychic edge. She tumbled headlong off the path, off her feet. The cooler went flying, hit her knee. She screamed, lost her balance, then rolled sideways down the ridge.

She landed on a spruce sapling, but before she could grab it, it bent under her weight to fling her forward. In the clearing, nothing else stopped her fall. Over, over she rolled, until she slammed into the rushing river, going under. The frigid water shocked her. She gasped and sucked some in. Choked. Her sinuses burned while her skin froze.

The PFD lifted and righted her, head up, but foam crested over her. Mother with Jani in her arm fell over the rail again. The boiling foam devoured them, devoured Lisa. Had Mommy pulled her in with them? How did this happen? She was horrified for her family, for herself. Terror screamed at her in her, echoing the smashing water, clawing at her courage.

She was swept around, past jutting rocks. She pulled her hands and feet in close. She had to get out but found nothing to hold as she was tossed, whirled, pulled and yanked, bumped by boulders, cold and drowning, dragged downriver.

Though the two glasses Mitch had thrown in his backpack with the cans of ginger ale were plastic, they clanked as he walked the ridge path, their dissonant sound nearly drowned by the river's

roar. If Lisa thought he'd cart wine out here for some sort of a lovey-dovey reunion, she was wrong. This was strictly a business meeting, he told himself.

So what if he still felt he wanted her? It was a pure physical reaction from hot memories. His body's reaction to being near Lisa again was something he could absolutely handle—had to.

When he moved to Alaska, he'd needed to cleanse himself of the dirty feeling of defending clients he knew damn well were guilty. He felt guilt-ridden by his own obscenely high fees and the busy schedule that left no time for pro bono work. Pressure, pressure, pressure—and for what? Prestige? Cruising Lauderdale's canals in his boat, chasing women or raising a future family he didn't have time for? Unlike Ellie Bonner's brother, Merritt Carlisle, he didn't want the power that came from a place in national or even state politics. Back home—though this was home now—he'd been fed up with convoluted power connections in the fast-fleeting fame lane. Thank God, Alaska had helped to heal him. It was said people who came to Alaska from outside were either running from something or to something. He guessed, in his case, it was both.

He knew he had let a lot of people down when he'd come north, but helping other people's families, friends and coworkers to connect with each other was far more fulfilling than his old life. He'd continued his uncle's work here through his adventure-bonding program. At least Graham and Ellie bringing their three candidates here to decide who should fill Mitch's vacant position showed they still trusted his judgment and had forgiven him for leaving.

But golden-skinned, blonde, beach-baby Lisa Vaughn had never understood why he had to change his life, leave Florida for Alaska to keep his sanity, even if it meant changing the plans they'd made. They needed to just talk it out, this time briefly, unemotionally, objectively, then they could get back to the business at hand.

He wished Lisa well in her quest to make senior partner, but he wasn't playing favorites. He owed Graham that—Ellie, too, because her father had founded the firm, and the old man had eventually made his son-in-law Graham a full partner before he died. Graham had been Mitch's mentor, just as Mitch had tried to mentor Jonas, the candidate he actually favored, although both Lisa and Vanessa were excellent lawyers. No one worked at Carlisle, Bonner & Associates of Fort Lauderdale, Miami and Palm Beach, if they weren't. Though Mitch didn't especially trust politicians like Merritt, who had still been a lawyer at the firm when Mitch first worked there, was someone who had managed to keep his nose clean.

Just before he cut off the ridge path onto the downward spur toward the lake landing where he'd told Lisa he'd meet her, he spotted the small, white cooler Christine had said she'd given to Lisa. It was open, with wrapped appetizers, bright plates and napkins, strewn down the ridge toward the river like a hand pointing toward the water. Had Lisa seen a bear and run? No, the bear wouldn't have left the food.

He stooped and squinted down toward the river. The drop-off over the ridge was fairly open. Surely she knew to turn right toward the lake, not left. Had she fallen toward the river? Dear God, please don't let her have fallen *in* the river!

"Lisa! Lisa!" he shouted, but he knew the roar of the river would cover his voice if she wasn't nearby. She was physically fit, an outdoors girl, but the kind who loved sunny skies and sand. Beach volleyball, at which she excelled, was her sport of choice.

"Lisa? Liiiisaa!"

Holding on to a couple of spruce saplings, Mitch went down the steep bank to the river. He gasped when he saw her in the foaming water, about ten yards away, clinging to a rock on the far side. He never would have spotted her, except she wore an orange PFD that showed up like a beacon in the rapids. If she let go, she'd be a goner, because not far beyond was a narrow gorge with a hairpin turn of boiling white water, and later, a series of small falls that didn't stop the salmon coming up but

could kill her going down. Worse, exposed to water this cold, she'd go numb and hypothermic in twenty minutes, then die. His uncle had told him that feeling in the limbs went after about seven minutes, consciousness in the next seven, and life itself in the following seven or so. And a South Florida girl was hardly prepared for a snowmelt swim.

He waved his arms and shouted again but she was facing downriver and didn't see him. She was hanging on for dear life—literally.

He half climbed, half crawled back up the bank. A kayak! He needed the kayak that was on the other side of the ridge. There was no time to get help. No one at the lodge would hear him above the water if he shouted, nor could they see him from here. How long could she hold on?

He'd have to get her in the kayak without tipping it, shoot the next eddies, humps and holes to get them to a landing spot before the gorge where he could tend to her. But there was no easy way to return. They'd have to either hike back on the other side of the river or portage the kayak around the falls and ride the rapids all the way out of these mountains.

He yanked himself up from Sitka spruce sapling to sapling, digging his nails into the green moss and orange lichens. He scabbled past where she'd dropped the cooler, over the ridge, then raced down the path to the red, two-person kayak sitting by the serene lake awaiting their easy trip across to one of his favorite picnic spots. Damn, why hadn't she fallen down this side of the ridge?

His heart pounded; adrenaline stoked his strength. Kayaks weren't overly heavy, but he had to get it up the path, then over the ridge to launch it without splitting the quarter-inch plastic. Yes, two paddles in it. Two PFDs, too. He glanced once across the lake to see if his friends Ginger or Spike might be somewhere in sight, but saw no one. Ginger's little motor boat was pulled up on the shore near the lodge, but she was nowhere around.

"No one but me," he grunted as he shoved the kayak before him up the path. *Please Lord*, he prayed, *let her hang on to that rock*.

Panting, his heart pounding and muscles screaming, he got the kayak up and over the ridge, now trying to keep it from crashing down into the river and taking off without him. Sweat burned his eyes as he squinted to see if Lisa was still hanging on. Yes!

He cursed the time it took him to get the spray skirt out of the fore dry storage well and tight around him while he hung on to a sapling so the kayak didn't take off from under him. Otherwise, if too much water got in, he could go hypothermic himself, or capsize. He fought the violent pull of the water—nothing like surfing offshore in South Florida.

Mitch realized he still wore his backpack when it bumped against the kayak. He yanked it off and exchanged it for one of the PFDs in the front seat. He jammed the backpack into the well. He needed the neoprene wet suit he saw there, but no time, no time. He realized he had no helmet—hadn't put one in for a simple paddle across the lake. He was breaking the rules he'd laid out for safety, but this was life and death—Lisa's, and maybe his, too. "Be stupid and a kayak can be your coffin," he'd told more than one group of guests.

He felt a jab of anger at Lisa for being in the river, for getting them into this nightmare, when he'd thought things in his life were going so well. So well, that is, except that for the week he had to be near the woman who loved her career and her sunny spot on the planet more than she had loved him.

He shoved off, stabbing the river with deep strokes, fighting for control and balance so he wouldn't shoot past her. He prayed he could get over to her and somehow get her on board without rolling them both under. "Don't let go! Don't let go!" he shouted, though he figured the roar of the water would keep her from hearing him.

He squinted through sun and spray to locate her by her orange PFD again, and, in that instant, saw her swept away, flailing in the foam.

Lisa tried to cling to the next rock she saw, even claw her way atop it, but the water pinned her against it. She couldn't breathe. Should she let go? Try to find a flatter rock to hold?

But the choice was not hers, caught in the cold current, being twisted and turned. Her shins scraped boulders on the riverbed; she pulled her legs up and arms in for warmth, for safety, but found neither. She saw bloodred salmon streak past her in the foam, going the other way. How could they fight this water? she wondered. It might be easier going deep down.

Deep down, deeper... Mommy and Jani had gone deeper, so deep. The wet, white arms of water and death had taken them away. It would be easier that way, to let it all go, let everything go.

Lisa tried to swim for the riverbank, but each time she neared a handhold, the river snatched her away. She knew enough to try to point her feet downstream, but she couldn't control that. When her numb legs bobbed up, she saw the water had ripped off her shoes.

She was doomed. Dead. Smashed by violent fists of water... her lungs burning to get a breath. Ice water surged up her nose into her sinuses. Get your head up! Take another breath! Hold the air in!

How had she fallen in? The water had looked so beautiful, even alluring. Did something trip her? Surely no one had pushed her. Had Mother and Jani pulled her in to be with them at last? Was this just her memories turning to a drowning, screaming nightmare again?

No, this was not some awful dream where she could will herself to wake up. She had to fight. To live. *Dear Lord, help me. Help me be safe and warm.*

But the force was brutal, banging her through waves like giant fists, slamming into rocks. Like a leaf going down a storm sewer... lost at sea. Her mother had lost her mind, Grandma said, postpartum depression or some sort of mental aberration made her kill herself. Daddy's desertion of the family might have caused it, too. That's what a psychiatrist had told her once.

Mother, I didn't know. I was only a child. I knew you were sad, but if I had known you were desperate, I could have helped you. At least I could have saved Jani for Grandma to raise along with me.... Someone once said you loved me, so you wanted to take me with you. But it's wrong to kill someone who hasn't had a chance to live....

But should she have drowned, too? Why had Lisa lived when Mother and Jani died? She was haunted by a thought she'd told no one, not even her psychiatrist. When she'd yanked back so hard from her mother's grasp, did that send her over? If she had not pulled back, maybe there was a split second where her mother would have changed her mind. In that last moment, had she sent them into the wild, white water?

So confused, so dizzy, so caught in a spin of water, of fears...

Whispers, loud ones, roared all around her, wet and cold in her ears. Stop it! Stop the memories. This was real. She had to find a place to get out. If only she'd told Mitch she was sorry. Not sorry she didn't go with him, but that she still cared, still wanted him in some sort of angry way, but now all she wanted was out of this forceful, freezing water. Fingers going numb, so cold. Keep your head. Keep your courage. Don't let go! She heard a voice in her head and heart shouting, "Don't let go!"

Mitch was getting panicky. Because Lisa was in the river and his kayak was on top of it, she was moving away from him faster and faster. And she had a head start.

At times he lost sight of the flash of orange that was his best chance of tracking her in the

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