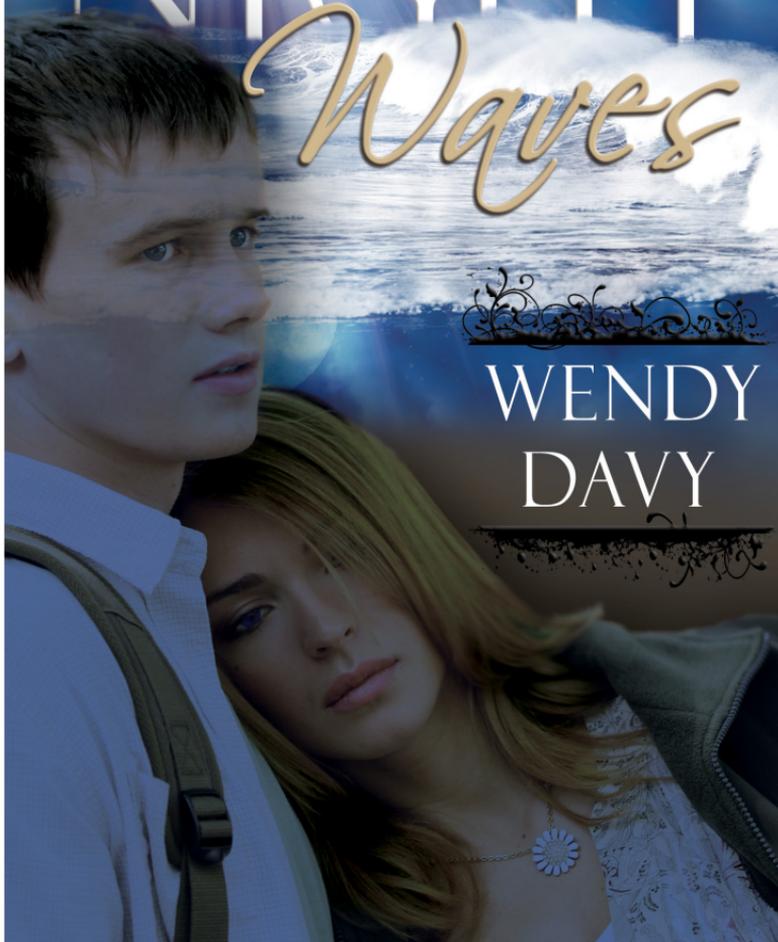


WHEN TERROR STRIKES A SMALL TOWN,
ONLY FAITH WILL CALM THE...

NIGHT

Waves

WENDY
DAVY



“Tell me what you know about him.”

“I know you don’t want to cross paths with him.”

“That’s original.” Cali flipped her long hair behind her shoulders and began tapping her right foot again. “Why don’t you tell me something I don’t know?”

Nick clenched his hands into fists and crossed his arms. Shaking his head, he said, “You have no idea what this man is capable of.”

“If you tell me, then I’d know wouldn’t I?”

He ground his teeth and sighed as his irritation grew. “It’s getting late. I’ll walk you back to your room.” He turned on his heel and picked up the water bottles, napkin and the sandwich wrapper, dumping them into the poolside trash can before facing her again.

“So that’s it? You won’t tell me anything?”

“No. I *can’t* tell you anything. Not yet.”

Cali looked away, took in a deep breath and walked past him out of the pool gate. He let her lead the way back to her rented room. Stopping in front of the door, she wrapped her arms around herself and studied her toes.

Nick slipped the key into the slot and turned it, opening the door an inch. When she moved to step inside, he caught her slender arm in his grasp. “Stop snooping, Cali. Don’t put yourself at risk.”

Her full lips tightened. “I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah? That’s probably what Serena thought, too.”

A brief flash of pain crossed her eyes before they became guarded.

“Listen, Cali, I’m only trying to keep you safe. It’s my duty to protect you.”

Renewed determination swirled in her eyes along with a spark of anger. “Yeah? Well, don’t do me any favors. It was your duty to protect Serena, too. And look what happened to her.”

Night Waves

by

Wendy Davy

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Night Waves

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For the victims of violent crime, and their families.

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Mattie and Odeon Bloodgood

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Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.

~ Nehemiah 4:14 (NIV)

Chapter One

“Go home Ms. Stevens.” Sheriff Nick Justice let out a long, exaggerated breath. “If you want to help your friend, trust me to handle the investigation.” His resolute gaze held hers without the slightest hint of contempt, but she detected a flicker of impatience run across the dark-blue depths.

Cali Stevens tightened her grip on the hard, wooden armrests of the hard, wooden chair she sat in. She had no doubt the Sheriff of Coral Isle intended the visitors in his office to keep their conversations, or as in her case, their pleas, short and to the point. She glanced around the office. Her gaze touched the bare walls, the spotless tiled floor, and his sparsely occupied desk. Only the barest of essentials earned a place there—a computer, telephone, several neatly stacked file folders, and a half-empty coffee cup. She assumed Sheriff Justice’s personality reflected the office in which they both sat. Hard, well-organized, and no-nonsense.

When she remained seated, he sat forward in

his swivel chair and pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "Listen, Ms. Stevens..." Weariness seeped through his voice.

"Cali." She hoped he might see her as more than an outsider if he called her by her first name.

"Cali." He lifted his head and braced his hands on the edge of the desk. "I assure you, we're doing everything possible to find Ms. Taylor. Now if you'll excuse me." He stood, keeping his tight gaze directed at her.

She shook her head, causing it to ache with growing intensity. "No. I won't. I came here for answers, and I'm not leaving without them."

He placed his hands on his hips. One rested directly on a set of handcuffs that he looked more than willing and able to use. A muscle in his jaw twitched, the only outward indication of his failing patience. "I understand your concern."

"My concern? Serena Taylor is my roommate, and my best friend. I've known her for over ten years. She's like a sister to me. Concern doesn't begin to describe how I feel." Her fingers started going numb from her grip on the chair, so she lessened the pressure and took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. "I just want to know where she is. I need to know she's OK."

"Regardless of what you may think, Ms. Stevens, I do understand what you want and I understand why. But, I cannot give you details of an ongoing investigation."

"I answered your questions. Now it's your turn to answer mine." She fought to keep her voice from cracking and to keep from showing any signs of weakness. "I want, no, I *need* to know what you know about her disappearance."

He hesitated before crossing the office to ease the door shut, blocking out any potential eavesdroppers. A hint of concern crossed his angled features as he turned and ran a hand over his dark,

close-cropped hair. His eyes softened as he admitted, "We believe she's been abducted." His low voice made its way across the now quiet room, filling her with terror like she had never known.

"No." She stood on shaky legs and rubbed her damp palms together as tears threatened to emerge. "Why would someone..." She let her words falter as she imagined many horrible reasons for a young, beautiful woman to be abducted. She hugged her arms around her middle. "What makes you think she's been abducted? Do you have evidence? Witnesses?" She tilted her head to the side, biting her lower lip to keep it from trembling.

Sheriff Justice remained motionless. "I can't reveal any details of an open investigation. But as I said, we are doing everything possible to find her."

Cali ignored his attempt at reassurance. "I knew something was terribly wrong when she didn't come home from her vacation. I knew she wouldn't stay on Coral Isle longer than she'd planned without calling and letting me know."

He placed his hands on his hips again, looked to the floor and slowly shook his head. After a few moments, he lifted his eyes. "I'm sorry."

His softly offered words drew her out of her panic, out of her paralyzing fear. She straightened her spine. "You sound like you've already given up on her." Lifting her chin, she filled her lungs with fresh oxygen and strengthened her voice along with her resolve. "Let me tell you something. I will not leave this island until she's found. So, if you want me to go home you'd better get busy."

He broadened his stance and dropped his hands. "Let me tell *you* something." His voice took on a tone of authority, all traces of softness instantly gone. "I don't give up. Ever. I have this investigation under control. You," he pointed a steady finger at her, "need to go home and leave the investigation to the professionals."

She lifted her chin. "I am a professional."

He scoffed as the corner of his lips turned up into a slight, mockery of a smile, "I'd hardly call an amateur reporter from Brookstone, North Carolina—grand total population of five hundred thirty-two—a professional."

Cali heard her own intake of breath as heat bruised her cheeks. She should not be surprised about his opinion; she had received the same skeptical reaction many times before, mostly from overbearing, egotistical men. She lifted her chin higher, refusing to let him intimidate her. "I'm good at what I do."

"Yes, well, *Ms. Stevens*," he pronounced her last name clearly, as if they had taken a step back into formalities, "so am I." He started to open the door but the phone interrupted him. He walked to his desk and picked it up. After answering, he placed a hand over the receiver. "Excuse me. This is important."

"Remember, Serena's important, too." Cali forced her unwilling legs to move, one step in front of the other. She opened the door and walked out without looking back. The once-clear voices of the officers and visitors in the waiting area now sounded like distant mumbles, undecipherable through the blood rushing through her ears.

She spotted the restroom across the busy office and headed directly for it. She shoved open the door and stepped inside, thanking God no one occupied the small room with the single toilet. She flipped the lock, and then willingly gave up what was left of her meager breakfast.

Several minutes passed as she ran cold water over her hands, and splashed her face and neck. Somewhat refreshed, she turned off the water and looked into the mirror. She found a distant relation to her normal appearance. Her faintly tanned skin had taken on a pallor with a sickly green tint, and it

wasn't only from the fluorescent lighting that flickered overhead. Her long blonde hair hung in tangled waves down her shoulders, looking as twisted and mangled as she felt inside.

On an impulse, she fished her cell phone out of her purse and tried calling Serena's number as she had numerous times in the past few hours. She listened to the voicemail pick up immediately, indicating the phone was still turned off. Serena never turned off her cell phone. Cold chills ran up Cali's arms at the disturbing thought.

She snapped the phone closed as the feeling of complete and utter helplessness churned her already rolling stomach. She searched through her purse for breath mints, but dropped the package three times before she managed to release two of the small pieces. She tried to calm her shaking hands, but feared the quivering was nowhere near an end.

"This cannot be happening," her voice sounded weak, echoing across the small, tiled room. Sudden anger brushed past her fears. If there was one thing she had no tolerance for, it was weakness. A new determination surged forth, along with a shot of adrenaline into her veins. She came to Coral Isle looking for answers, and she refused to leave without them, regardless of what Sheriff Justice demanded.

She swung the bathroom door open with so much force that she nearly knocked down an older woman trying to gain entrance. After giving a brief apology and holding the door open for the slight woman, Cali headed straight for the row of chairs lining the front wall. She would give the sheriff one more chance to answer her questions, and if he didn't satisfy her need to know what was going on, she would dig in her heels and do some investigating of her own. She sat in one of the gray, plastic molded chairs prepared to wait as long as necessary to speak with him again.

Sheriff Nick Justice drank the last of his cold, stale coffee, hoping the small burst of caffeine would help fight the tension headache he'd had brewing since Cali Stevens walked into his office. He already felt responsible for the missing woman, but after hearing the desperation in Ms. Stevens's voice, his sense of responsibility multiplied.

After she had left his office, his conversation on the phone had been brief, and he had spent half an hour with his door closed and head bowed in prayer. He needed guidance big time on this one. He prayed this last disappearance would not confirm his worst fears, but in his heart, he already knew the answer. A serial rapist had decided to use his small, tourist-based island as a hunting ground.

His phone buzzed, indicating Helen, the dispatch officer, wanted to speak with him. Jerked out of his thoughts, he pressed the button. "Yes?" he asked, but he had already guessed what the motherly woman intended to say.

"You need to get some lunch in you, Nick. You can't take care of others if you..."

"Don't take care of yourself," he finished. Despite his stress-induced headache, he smiled into the speaker. Helen always kept him on track. "I'm heading out now."

"One more thing..." The hesitation in her voice, an unnatural and rare occurrence coming from Helen, made Nick's heart lurch. Whatever she had to say, it could not be good. She continued in her sweet southern drawl, "Ms. Stevens hasn't left yet. She's waiting to speak with you again."

Nick didn't respond. He sat back in his chair, groaned, and ran a hand over his face. Although he could not blame the woman for wanting answers, he had a job to do, and it didn't involve letting an innocent woman put herself in danger. The sooner he convinced her to leave, the better off she would

be.

Nick stood, grabbing his pair of sunglasses from inside the desk drawer. He double-checked the pistol holstered at his hip and headed for the door. His intentions to placate Ms. Stevens in order to convince her to leave flew right out of his mind when he opened the door and locked eyes with her. A new determination glittered in the clear-blue depths, and her rigid posture spoke volumes. There would be no placating this woman.

He slipped on his sunglasses and headed out of the front door. Knowing she would follow, he held the door open so it wouldn't slam into her. As he stepped outside, the scent of the salty sea air surrounded him. It normally comforted him, but today, the heavy humidity accompanying it took away its soothing effects. The onslaught of stifling August heat made Nick's headache escalate from mildly annoying to downright nauseating. He walked to his white truck with the words "Sheriff, Coral Isle" printed in bold lettering on the side and leaned against the driver's side door, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I seem to recall asking you to leave," his abrupt words reflected his down-spiraling mood.

Cali dug in her purse and pulled out a pair of sunglasses. Perching them on the bridge of her nose, she peeked over the rims. "I seem to recall asking you for information regarding Serena's disappearance." She lifted the designer glasses higher, effectively shielding her eyes from the sun—and him.

Nick looked at her petite figure, and resisted his natural protective instinct that urged him to take it easy on her. "You're a reporter. You should know I can't give you information about an ongoing investigation." He used his gruff "cop" voice hoping to dissuade her.

"You don't intimidate me." She raised her chin

high.

Cali put on a brave show, but he caught sight of her pulse pounding at the base of her slender throat. Despite her brave appearance, she was scared, if not of him then of the circumstances she found herself in, and to be honest, she had every right to be.

“How long did it take you to drive here?”

“Three hours. Why?”

He looked to the bright, mid-day sun then back at her. “Good. That will give you plenty of daylight hours to drive back home. If you get started now, you’ll be back in time for dinner.” Nick watched a sigh heave her chest, and then directed his gaze back to a more respectable position.

“Will you at least tell me why you think she’s been abducted? Do you have evidence to support it? Was she seen with someone before she disappeared? A man?” She fired the questions in quick succession.

He shook his head. “I can’t tell you. Not yet.”

“Then what can you tell me?”

He raised his voice a notch, trying to drive home his point. “I can tell you to go home. It would be best for all of us.”

“Best for all of us? You mean easiest don’t you? Easiest for you.”

Even standing with her hands balled into fists and irritation showing through her tense facial expression, she looked as dangerous as a kitten. It was impossible to protect every single woman on the island, but he felt the overwhelming need to protect this one. This one would be a prime target for his suspect. A woman. Alone. Virtually defenseless.

He gritted his teeth and swore under his breath. “There’s nothing easy about this whole situation. And yes, you are making things more difficult. Right now, I’m hungry, hot, and have a killer headache. I suggest you get on your way before I decide to arrest you for something.”

She must have believed his threat, because she

backed away a step. "I should tell you. I never give up either. Ever." She spun on her heel and marched to her silver-blue economy car. She jerked the door open, climbed in and drove away without looking back.

Deputy Owen stepped outside and sauntered over to stand beside Nick. "She's cute." His long, narrow face held a hint of a smile.

Beautiful, Nick corrected the observation in silence as the car disappeared, heading in the opposite direction from the only bridge leading off the island.

"I had a feeling she'd show up here. When she called yesterday to report that Ms. Taylor hadn't returned home, she knew the answers to every question I asked about her friend. They must be close."

"Apparently they are. She's not leaving." His gaze sought Owen. "Find out where she's staying. I'm going to keep a close eye on her."

Another brief smile flitted across Deputy Owen's lips. "Yes sir."

Owen left Nick standing in the sweltering heat, wondering how to manage locating Ms. Taylor while keeping Ms. Stevens and the rest of the single women on his island safe.

Chapter Two

Cali blamed the blast of cold air-conditioning coming from the dashboard vents for the tears in her eyes. Admitting they came from frustration or fear, would be another sign of weakness. She swiped at the wet spots on her cheeks and focused on the road.

She drove aimlessly for several minutes, but her stomach rumbled and fatigue pulled at her, reminding her she couldn't roam around all day without a destination. She needed a place to rest, a place to settle in and devise a plan. She remembered, from glancing briefly at the map of Coral Isle, the main beach road circled the island, and various other roads created a maze of back streets through the interior.

Assuming she would find the majority of the hotels on the main beach road, which someone had unimaginatively named, *The Beach Road*, Cali fought the heavy traffic and found her way to it.

She caught glimpses of the sparkling ocean and tourist-lined beaches as she drove. Cottages, hotels and an occasional public-beach-access parking lot dotted the shoreline. Families carrying toys, towels and chairs darted across the road at various places on their way to the beach. She came to a complete stop to let one family pass. A mother carrying a squiggly child on her hip and holding an older child's

hand smiled in Cali's direction, while the father brought up the rear as he lugged a large red and white cooler across the road behind him.

Their lives appeared so normal that it seemed surreal to think of someone disappearing, someone being abducted in such a family-oriented environment. But Serena had been abducted. Cali's smile vanished, and she refocused on the purpose for her visit to the island.

She continued to search for a place with an available room. So far, she had only seen "No Vacancy" signs on each of the hotels. She passed by various shops and restaurants, and a small library that sat nestled off to the right side of the road. Numerous souvenir stores displayed brightly colored T-shirts and skimpy bathing suits, and a wide variety of floats decorated the windows.

Cali searched for miles before spotting a motel across the road from the beach claiming a vacancy. The condition of the old motel turned her initial relief into apprehension as she turned from the main road and drove slowly onto the graveled drive. She shielded her eyes from the glare of the afternoon sun and parked in front of the motel's office, which provided enough shade to see clearly through the windshield. She let the engine idle as she looked over the aging dwelling.

A bright orange neon sign stood posted in the filmy window warning guests no pets were allowed. The door to the office stood propped open by an aluminum beach chair, and a large fan blocked more than half of the entryway. Her eyes automatically darted to the long row of rooms lined to the right, searching for window air-conditioner units. Each room had one. She let out a breath in relief. With the temperatures soaring close to one-hundred degrees, combined with the humidity, she could not imagine staying in a room without bottled air.

She scanned the motel's exterior. Dingy brown