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Mystery

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Anne Greene

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Dedication

To My Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,
Who turns my water into His fine wine
as He did at the wedding at Cana.

1

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ~ Mark 11:24

Galveston, Texas

Only one thing scared Derrick Darbonne. He had no fear of fire, hurricane, sabotage, high seas, drunken roughnecks, reckless roustabouts, brawls, or hard work. But losing the job he'd slaved all his life to obtain terrified him.

He'd worked himself up from oaks draped with Spanish moss, murky alligator-filled water, and a tiny cabin on the banks of the bayou with no running water or electricity. He'd finally gotten to where he wanted to be. And now someone was trying to pin a murder on him. Some Christmas present.

Derrick crushed the schematics he'd been scanning and jammed them into his pocket. He braced his legs wide on the steel floor of the oil rig and raised the powerful navigational binoculars. A Coast Guard cutter slashed a white wedge through the sparkling Gulf waters straight toward his oil platform.

His jaw tightened, his spine stiffened, and he swallowed.

Standing beside him, Joe Bridges, the MIC—Man

in Charge—swore.

If Derrick had been a swearing man, he would have joined Joe. Instead, he gripped the navigational binoculars tighter. "Third time this week. If I had anything to hide, I'd jump ship." He smacked his hard hat so thoroughly his ears rang. "Thought so! That guardsman is a female." Here was a Coastie bearing down on him with the authority to shut down the operation. The men would be out of work just in time for Christmas. What pretense to investigate the murder was the Coast Guard using this time?

Derrick lowered the binoculars and frowned. "She looks familiar."

"Ever since you arrived for the routine inspection, Cajun, the Coast Guard's been on our backs." Scowling, Joe thrust out a hand for the glasses. "Then there was the murder. That's the reason the big boss's keeping you out here again, so long."

"Don't I know it! I'm looking for a murderer and a saboteur. Probably the same guy." Derrick slapped the binoculars into Joe's hand and tried to lighten his foreboding with a jabbing tease. "Now I've got to get the Coast Guard environmental crew out of your hair."

"Rib me, will ya?" Joe repositioned his yellow hard hat over his bald head and shook a work-hardened finger. "I'll bet you I can get that Coastie to go for me and my shiny head before she goes for you and that Cajun accent of yours. Loser pays a hundred bucks."

"You want us to distract her with our masculine charm so she won't sniff out any violations that could shut us down?" Derrick surveyed the rig's two-hundred-foot deck looking for any OSHA or EPA trouble the Coast Guard might use to give a citation.

Sunlight slanted off the metal plates causing enough glare to hurt his eyes. He didn't like Joe's plan.

"You got it." Joe grinned.

Derrick gave a tight smile. He slid his gaze to the roughneck inside the glass-enclosed room, jiggling the joy sticks and pushing the buttons that worked the rig's floor. The big man hooking a new drill in place beneath the five-hundred-foot drilling tower wore his safety equipment. No problem there.

Derrick flicked his gaze over the new hire, the eighteen-year-old from Galveston. The kid's long blond hair straggled from beneath his yellow hard hat. He was bent over washing sludge and mineral oil through sand to clean out the last drop of hydrocarbon before reusing the sand. Kid was a hard worker, already adept at his job. No laws broken. No environmental procedures shortcut.

The rest of the roughnecks and roustabouts worked steadily. None violated safety measures. No oil spills or pipe breaks had occurred. The hole drilled through the sea bottom was clean and not yet exceptionally deep. They should hit oil soon. Joe Bridges had a salty vocabulary, but the boss man ran a tight rig. So why suddenly all the anonymous phone calls about regulation problems? Had to be the murder.

Derrick needed to come up with answers.

"Alamo Oil pays you a hefty salary to make sure things run smooth on all two hundred of its rigs." Joe's voice sounded more than a little jealous.

"Don't I know it." Derrick ran a hand over the stubble already growing after his close morning shave.

"Alamo doesn't want to fork out any stiff fines or lose any drill time because of environmental pollution, safety violations, mismanagement, or accidents. So

make sure that Coastie's distracted." Joe winked. "And don't mention the murder. We've trampled that ground too many times with the Coast Guard already."

"Right." Derrick rubbed the back of his neck. An uneasy feeling kept nagging him about the murder. Nothing he could put a handle to, but—too many clues led directly to him. Once the Coast Guard put the puzzle together, they'd come looking for him. He grunted. How *had* his personal helmet wound up grasped in the dead kid's hand?

Joe swore loud enough that the crew cleaning sand looked up. He lowered his voice. "That Coastie's gonna cause trouble. I feel it in my bones." His eyes, shadowed under his hard hat, looked wary. "We gotta keep her thinking about us, not her job." He handed the binoculars back.

Derrick frowned. "I think you're just hard up for a date. You want a girlfriend to share Christmas with."

"Whatever!"

As the Coast Guard cutter pulled alongside their offshore rig, Derrick focused the binoculars on the trim figure in her blue uniform. He'd not seen many women in the Guard, and none that looked so curvy...wow, hotter than a Louisiana mudbug boil. He loved that spicy crawfish dish. Dread inside his gut heightened. Sweat beaded his forehead. He got tongue-tied around women. "This can't be good!"

"Yeah. The broad's probably a—"

"It's Amber Meredith!" Derrick fumbled the expensive binoculars, made a grab for them, and caught them just before they hit the deck.

"You know her? Not fair. Since you know her, you pay me two hundred bucks if I win." Joe thrust out his hand. "Toss me those binoculars before you break

them."

"She's my landlady." Derrick mentally rolled his eyes at the MIC's ridiculous betting.

"Your landlady's a Coastie?"

"Yeah. Crazy, eh?" More sweat broke out between Derrick's shoulder blades and ran down his spine, wetting his flame retardant work shirt. His legs felt shaky so he leaned his hip on the inside rail that protected the perimeter of the huge drill. "So that's where Amber's been. She left for college but never said a word about the Coast Guard Academy."

"Probably didn't want to scare you. You're not going to chicken-out on this bet. You owe me two hundred smackers if I get her phone number and you don't get a date."

"No way. I don't bet about women." Derrick worked up a weak smile.

"You big lummo. You're scared of a woman Coastie. She's got you shaking in your work boots." Joe's grin spread from ear to ear. "Never thought I'd see you scared of anything."

Derrick crossed one ankle over the other, and erased all emotion from his face. "You got me wrong, man."

"Yeah?" Joe winked. "Prove it by getting that date. I'm breaking for lunch." He hung the binoculars strap around his neck, turned and walked toward the stairway that led down into the interior of the rig. "But if I get her number and you don't score a date, you owe me two hundred smackers."

"No bet." Derrick made his voice stern, but Joe just grinned and shook his head. Derrick sighed. Now, he was forced into getting a dinner date. If he didn't, Joe would spread the word that he was a *cheyrette*. And he

was no wimp. On an oil rig, to do his job properly he needed to be tough and respected. Derrick stepped away from the huge drill, now back in full operation, grinding its noisy way into the sea bottom. He leaned over the railing to look two hundred feet down at the cutter throwing out her anchor just off the rig's port side. Two guardsmen lowered a launch. The trim Coastie, sun glinting on dark blond hair peeking from beneath a peaked blue hat, stepped down into the small boat. Another Guardsman followed. A burly man.

From where Derrick stood, the launch's outboard motor sounded like a child's toy. The small boat drove directly to the rig's sea-level elevator that rose through all five stories to the top deck.

The clanging elevator gears shuddered into action. Derrick whipped out his handkerchief, pushed back his hard hat, and swiped his forehead and neck. Bad as his day started, it was falling fast into a disaster nosedive. After Danny's murder, cops and guardsmen swarmed the rig all week, getting tangled in the Christmas decorations. Then they'd had two days' peace. So now why, after the initial investigation into the murder, did the authorities send two more Coasties? He arrived at the elevator just as the doors shrieked open. Derrick braced his legs and steeled himself.

What else had the Coast Guard dug up that tied him to the murder? Were enemies from his past catching up to him?

2

"I hate elevators." Amber Meredith wrinkled her nose at the burly, middle-aged boatswain mate who followed her inside. "This one's large enough to hold a Coast Guard squad, Stan, yet there's no air conditioning in this steel trap. It's really hot for December."

The brawny guardsman grinned. "You claustrophobic?" He lounged against the wall at her side.

"In a big way." The four gray walls and sliding iron grate skated her nerves into panic mode. She twisted her Academy ring and felt reassured by the mammoth obstacles she'd already overcome. During her Plebe initiation, she'd suffered through the hood-over-her-head and being left in the four foot by five foot windowless dungeon, and she'd get through this. Her heart hammered, and not just because the walls closed in. Last week a young man who'd turned out to be the grandson of one of the stockholders had been murdered. Danny Magruder had probably ridden this very elevator. Horrible things seemed even worse at this sacred time of the year.

"Someone wants us to find the murderer as much as we want to find him." Amber blew out a breath. "This is the ninth time this week our Marine Environmental Response unit has been called out to

check on reported violations and unreported accidents.”

“Yep.” Stan nodded. “Some anonymous caller wants us to find something on this rig.”

“So, I’ll look for any environmental issues and you check out anything that seems suspicious in regard to the young man’s murder.” Amber put a finger to her lips. “But be cautious, the murderer might still be aboard.”

“Yes, ma’am. And you stay alert.”

“Right.” Amber straightened her cover over her short hair, and stiffened her shoulders. She wouldn’t flub her first mission, even if she were only assisting the Commander. She had to help find the murderer. Her commander wanted her to use these environmental issues to give Stan an opportunity to nose around the rig. She had to prolong her investigation long enough to give him time to search the rig’s bunkroom and interview three of the men.

The elevator doors slid open. A tall, muscular man faced her, back to the sun, face in silhouette.

Amber stepped out, grabbed a breath of fresh salt air, turned her chin up to the sunshine and the cries of seagulls, and then looked directly into the gaze of—her tenant.

“Derrick?” She hadn’t expected to meet him so soon.

He didn’t answer.

The elevator doors swished closed behind Amber.

She’d overheard her renter talking with Granny about his job as Alamo Oil’s troubleshooter. He seldom spoke to her, and seemed to keep his distance. Since Derrick was the Guard’s number one suspect, she’d hoped to confront him to gauge his reactions to her

questions. But she'd wanted to seek him out—to be psyched and ready to quiz him.

"Mr. Darbonne." She conjured up the crisp tone she practiced in front of her mirror. "I am here to investigate a complaint of an oil spill on your rig."

He took a step backward. "No way. Your crew's been out here—"

"Yes, we have." She gazed up into Derrick's chiseled, tight-lipped, perspiring face. Even wearing his safety glasses and hard hat, the man was gorgeous enough to make any woman's toes curl. His brown eyes avoided her. Beneath the Alamo Oil decal, wavy dark hair peeked under the edge of the hard hat. Derrick's high cheekbones, well-defined jaw, and square chin looked exotic, showing his Cajun origins. And she loved his accent. Who could blame her heart for beating faster? Two years he'd been her renter, but he might as well have been a Martian for all she'd gotten to know him.

Twenty-five and proud of the Coast Guard emblem on her lapel, she thought she'd outgrown her youthful reaction to her boarder, but her acute sensory awareness of the tall man told her otherwise.

She'd get over it. Absolutely, men didn't fit into her five year plan. But Christmastime always made her vulnerable. All the carols about baby Jesus and the manger, all the gift giving and families getting together, all the love that seemed to float in the air this time of year just made her more susceptible. Besides, this man was a suspect in a murder case. She'd have to polish her armor.

"Mr. Darbonne." Resolution made her voice edgy. "I'm here to protect the vital marine ecosystems and I request an extensive tour of your rig. We've had yet

another complaint.”

“Who filed the complaint this time?” Derrick’s Adam’s apple worked up and down his masculine, tanned throat. She pulled her cover on more securely and smoothed her short hair which was blowing in the breeze that almost kept the deck from feeling like a broiler plate.

“I’m not at liberty to say.” She had a job to do. She had to help the investigative team discover the murderer. Her reputation depended on it. “Like it or not, I’m here to inspect the rig.” She kept her voice business-like.

“Uh, Miss...” Derrick began.

Amber ignored the sparks invisibly exploding between her and Derrick. But that deep voice with that Acadian accent warmed her all the way from scalp to fingertips.

“Miss...?”

Like he didn’t write her name on his rent check every month. She sniffed. She wasn’t about to help him.

His gaze darted to the emblem on her sleeve and he cleared his throat. “Ensign.” Derrick pushed his hard hat forward, took another step back, and waved an arm toward the busy rig. “Go ahead. Inspect.”

A shorter, muscular man with MIC on his hardhat hustled toward them from the direction of the steel staircase, and grasped Derrick’s upper arm. “Take charge, man.”

Amber hid the smile tugging her lips.

Derrick jerked his arm away and glared at the MIC, but spoke to her. “I’ll escort you down to the oil and gas separation room. You’ll see we don’t have a leak.” He nodded toward the elevator and pushed the

button.

She heaved a deep breath. Oh brother, the elevator again.

"Oh, Ensign, do you have a card?" The nice-looking MIC smiled and held out a wide, muscular hand. "I need your phone number when I make out my log." He took the card, but held on to her hand. "I'd take you on the tour myself, but Derrick outranks me."

She smiled, pulled her hand away, dug into her regulation shoulder bag and took out a card. "This has the Coastguard number and address." She handed him the card.

He glanced at it. "Amber Meredith. Nice name. And is this your personal number at the bottom beneath the office number?"

"Yes, that's right. But that number is for emergencies only."

The MIC's grin showed white, straight teeth. "You'll be hearing from me." He gave Derrick a thumb's up. "You owe me, bro."

"Dirty work, Joe." Derrick mumbled.

Suspicion tickled the nape of Amber's neck. What was going on between the two men? From the glances they gave each other, she suspected it had to do with her. Her back stiffened. She was not here to be the butt of some joke between men who were old enough to know better.

Stan gave her a raised-eyebrow look before she preceded him into the elevator. She filed inside, the men behind her and kept her eyes fixed on the iron grillwork.

One, two, three...she counted the floors moving ever so slowly past. Going down towards the bowels of the oil rig made perspiration bead on her forehead.

Five levels down the slap of waves battering the outside steel walls closed in on her. If she had a paper bag to hyper-ventilate into, she'd be gasping into it.

Derrick motioned for her to follow him. She trudged after his six-foot frame through a submarine-like corridor.

She could do this. Body stiff, she forced her feet to move.

Derrick opened a steel door and jerked a thumb for her to follow. "This is the oil and gas separation room." He coughed and seemed to struggle with a lump in his throat. "If there was a leak, it'd be here."

Huge pipes coiled over her like the arms of a giant octopus. The narrow, confining passageway forced her to creep through sideways. Eerie red light illuminated the area. She clasped the straps of the shoulder purse holding her collection vials until her nails bit into her palms.

Stan nudged the small of her back. "I'm going up a few floors for a look around. I'll meet you at the galley."

She nodded. Her heart beat savagely. She couldn't breathe. Yet, she forced her feet to move forward. She had to give Stan time to search and interrogate.

God, please give me strength.

The corridor narrowed. The ceiling all but touched the pipes above her lowered head. A few feet ahead Derrick doubled over duck-walking, snaking deeper and deeper into the bowels of the rig.

Jaw set, she pushed one foot ahead.

3

An hour later, Derrick still found it hard to unglue his tongue. He concentrated on responding coherently to her questions as Amber followed him through the rig. No nonsense, she took samples of ocean water from various depths around the drill and every pipe leading up from the sea bottom.

This couldn't be just another investigative follow-up to an anonymous tip. He had to pump her, find out what the Coast Guard had uncovered about the murder. They had to be looking at him. The boatswain was probably interrogating the two guys who'd roomed with Danny Magruder. Yet, he couldn't get his mouth to formulate a question.

When they passed Joe as they headed to the bunk rooms, the rig boss glared and looked red-faced enough to explode. Joe would dig into him for giving Amber the run of the rig and guiding her into levels aboard the station that had nothing to do with marine ecology. A thought flashed across Derrick's mind. Was Joe hiding something? He rubbed the prickle growing along his jaw. *Pas d'affaire!* No way! Joe was one of the good guys!

Yet, Derrick didn't see he'd had any choice. He'd never been easy in a woman's company. Hadn't had much practice. Much? None! Been too busy fighting his way to the top.

And this woman could get him into trouble with his boss at corporate. No matter how she tried to cover-up, she had to be investigating the murder. A word from her and half the Coast Guard stationed in Galveston would swarm aboard and arrest him. Christmas in a jail cell sounded more than grim, and then to celebrate the following year, his Christmas present from the State of Texas would be a cell on death row.

This constant surveillance meant they had some lead on Danny's murder. Guardsmen singled him out to question at all hours of the day and night, so he figured someone set him up and set the police on to him. Suspicion pounded his head like a migraine. This murder and the accidents had grown personal, like some hare-brained, crazy retribution. Someone was out to get him. And he had a long list of enemies. He jutted his jaw. Since he appeared to be number one suspect, finding the killer was up to him. And he probably didn't have much time.

Derrick knuckled his burning eyes. He'd been awake over thirty-six hours and hadn't found a thing. The big boss expected results yesterday. Derrick always completed the dirty jobs that had to be done. But his gut told him this problem aboard The Mission Bell was different. He felt really bad for the dead kid, but how did he tie into this? He'd only met Danny once. Though he was a major shareholder's son, he'd seemed like a good kid.

Derrick tightened his jaw and escorted Amber down the outside stairs and back to the mess hall. He glanced at his watch. Chow time.

The boatswain's quick steps intercepted them. Where had the nosy Guardsman been all this time?

Joe marched over to meet the three of them and threw Derrick a baleful look. "Inspection over?"

"Yep." Derrick pulled off his hard hat, dangled it between his fingers, and finally met Amber's large, warmly beautiful, hazel eyes. "Um...you hungry? We could eat." It was already dinner time and the trip back to Galveston aboard the fast cutter would take Amber a good forty-five minutes to an hour. What rank would she need to reach before she rated a copter?

Her lively, heart-shaped face lit up. "Oh—"

"You must have stacks of work ahead of you." Joe glanced at Derrick, a gleeful gleam in his blue eyes. "Best you leave now. I'll be in touch." He flashed his best grin, turned and strode into the mess hall.

The boatswain shouldered Amber toward the door. "We're due back. My old lady's expecting me home for dinner."

Derrick frowned and stepped forward. "You could—"

"We can't stay." Amber's soft hand on his arm stopped him. "We've completed our inspection." Her dark fringed hazel eyes gazed up into his. "You'll receive my report online as soon as I key it. The original goes to my commander, of course." She gave him a searching look full of unasked questions.

Her gaze rocked him to his toes. She thought he was guilty.

Derrick gnashed his teeth and took charge of the resentment clogging his thinking. He nodded, and pressed the elevator button to sea level. He stepped inside behind Amber and her burly Guard buddy, and they sandwiched themselves among a noisy, off-duty work crew on the way to their crew boat, Galveston, and Christmas vacation.

The whole lot of them jostled off the elevator. The work crew disappeared in a cloud of chatter and clatter of feet.

Except for the boatswain, he was alone with her. He had to move fast. She walked toward the edge of the rig where the Coast Guard cutter was tied, so he sped up to keep pace with her.

"Um...I've been living at your house for two years now and um...thought maybe we should get to know each other. Want to go out for coffee some time?"

How lame was that!

She stopped short. The look she gave him radiated suspicion.

His neck grew hot and his ears burned. What had the anonymous complainer reported about Mission Bell this time...about him in particular?

The boatswain laughed, but he walked on alone to the cutter.

She tilted her head and didn't say anything.

"Coffee shop? Some morning before work?" He swallowed hard.

An impish look and dimples playing around her mouth made him bolder. "Or, dinner at the Blue Crab? You like seafood?"

"Dinner sounds nice."

He slapped the side of his head. "But I'm stuck on this rig for another week." He took a deep breath. "How's Friday at seven, one week from tonight?"

"Do you need it in writing? To win your bet I mean?" Her eyes twinkled.

Cover off, both hands grasping the cutter's

vibrating rail, and hair blowing in the breeze, Amber raised her face to the wind, her mind on Derrick. As long as she had known him, she'd thought him aloof. He hadn't stayed in his rented rooms much, always taking a chopper from one rig to another and staying two-week shifts. And she'd been away from home in school. So, he was a stranger.

"You made a date with the Cajun dude, huh?" The grin on Stan's broad, rugged face made her stomach curdle. She jammed her hands on her hips and faced him.

"What better way to investigate the Cajun than by having dinner together. You said you didn't learn anything new today. I'll get Derrick to talk about himself, fill in the blanks. Then I'll get him to discuss life aboard the rigs. I'll find some clue as to why Danny Magruder was murdered." She sighed. "And possibly a lead on who did it."

"Could be dangerous for you. The CMR said the industrial accidents started happening the day Darbonne stepped aboard the Mission Bell." He squinted at her. "Then, the murder."

She braced herself on the plunging deck. "The troubleshooter is hiding something. And he isn't very good at it." She took a deep breath. "It's my duty to find out what." She had to deal with Derrick, somehow make him reveal what he'd hidden, despite the fact that he was her tenant, and worse because when she was near him, her overloaded awareness of him jammed her thinking. "If he's guilty, I'll put him behind bars."

"I'll have your six. You're not going on that date without a shadow."

"When he's on shore, he lives in my house. I don't