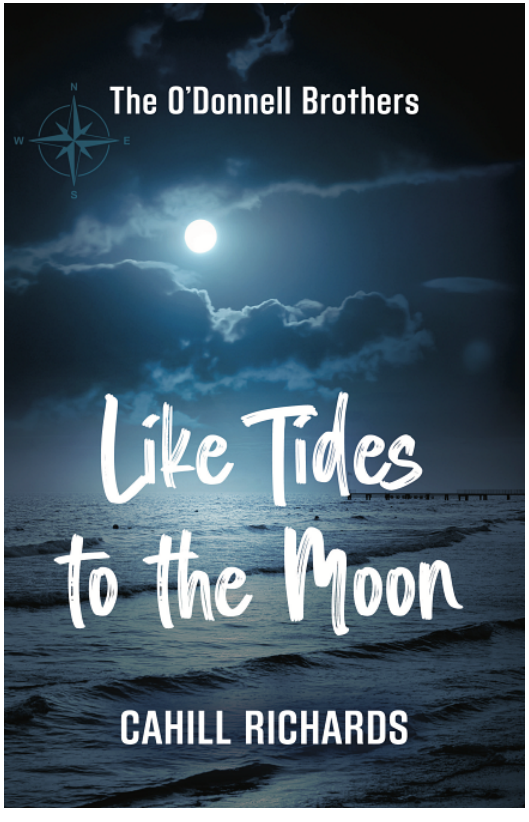

Patrick is drowning in grief. Allie is desperate to escape. When fate pulls them together, love becomes both the storm and the shore.

The O'Donnell Brothers: Like Tides to the Moon
By Cahill Richards

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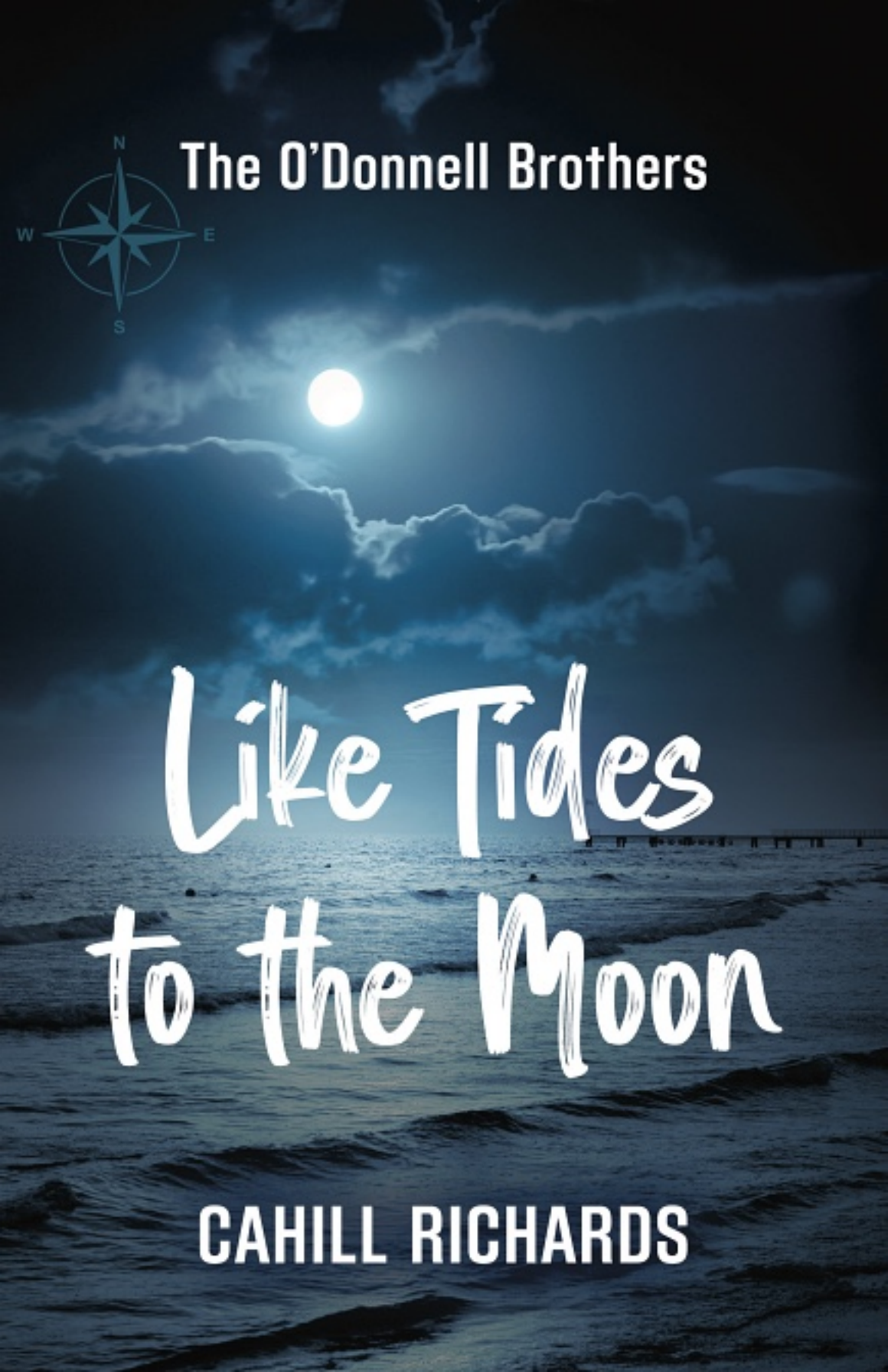
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CHAPTER ONE

Allie

Allie Nolan walked across the quad toward the parking lot at her university, fretting over the midterm exam Professor Darnell had graciously allowed her to make up. It had been more difficult than his usual exams, or maybe her head just wasn't in the game today, but she thought she'd done okay. Not spectacular by any means, but considering the weekend she'd had, she thought she'd probably squeaked by.

It felt a bit surreal to not have to worry about Jonathan following her out to her car, but he was locked away in rehab for at least another three weeks, thanks to Amber's efforts. Allie had first learned of Jonathan's fate from her 'sometimes dad' Matt Jameson, when he'd told her that Jonathan had been taken to the emergency room for a suspected overdose and his parents had chosen to send him straight to rehab to get clean. She felt a little guilty for setting Jonathan up that way, but if anyone deserved it, he did. And he wasn't exactly innocent since it *had* been Jonathan's stash of meth Amber had found in his room, even if she had knocked him out with a tranquilizer and planted the meth where his parents would find it.

When Allie arrived home Saturday night after rushing to Denver with the Jamesons to be by her boyfriend Patrick's side after he'd been badly injured, her father had been waiting for her with an extremely sour look on his face. As soon as Matt and Maggie said goodnight after dropping her off and chatting with her father for a few minutes, he'd pounced on her. He'd first read her the riot act for flying off to Denver on a whim, and then he'd asked her what the nature of her relationship was with Patrick. When she'd sworn Patrick was just a friend and that

it was a coincidence he'd gotten hurt while they were there, sticking to Matt's fabricated story, he'd accused her of lying.

And then he'd dropped the bomb. He said he'd spoken at length to Jonathan's father, Kyle Vandemore, and that Jonathan had been sent to a facility to deal with his drug use and would be there for a minimum of four weeks. Furthermore, she learned that when Mr. Vandemore had asked Jonathan if she herself had been using drugs, Jonathan had informed his parents that Allie was not only using with him, but that she'd supplied the drugs and had gotten them from a roadie named Patrick.

"Why would he say that?" Allie had asked, although she knew damn well it was Jonathan's way of getting his revenge, not only on her, but on Patrick. "I've never done any drugs in my life... ever!"

"Prove it!" her father had bellowed. "I have a drug test kit right here. I won't make you pee into a cup because that would only show drugs in your system for a few days at best. This tests your hair and will show me if you've done any drugs in the last ninety days."

And then he'd made Allie sit down while he sterilized scissors, and he'd cut a one-inch section of her hair right at the root line. He'd packaged it up and put it in a mailer, then said, "This had better not show positive results, young lady, or you'll have a room right next to Jonathan in rehab. And if you ever get anywhere near that Patrick fellow again, I'll make sure he's investigated, arrested, and thrown in jail."

"None of what Jonathan said is true," she'd insisted. "Patrick had nothing to do with anything, and Jonathan's just saying that because he's jealous of him. Why do you always believe Jonathan instead of me?"

"I'll let you keep your car and your phone... for now," her father had said in a dismissive tone. "But if the results come back showing that you've done any drugs, that will change, Alexandra. You may

attend your classes, but you'll come back home right after, and you'll stay away from the Jamesons. If the results come back negative, then I might consider letting you participate in Meghan's wedding, but you can consider yourself on house arrest until I tell you otherwise. And when you go to class on Monday, I'd highly suggest you speak to your professor about making up the midterm you missed by frivolously jetting off to Denver."

The results from the drug test hadn't yet come back and she was a hundred percent sure they'd be in her favor, but her father was already treating her like she was guilty. Every single day since then he'd threatened to take her car keys and her phone, reminding her again how ashamed of her he was. Under normal circumstances, Allie might have said screw it and escaped to Meghan's house, but since Patrick was at the Jamesons' she had nowhere to go. She wouldn't let Patrick get in trouble for something he didn't have any idea about, and even though she was completely devastated by ending it with him, it was for his own good, and even more so now.

Her eyes blurred with tears as she plodded to her car, thinking about Patrick and how much she missed him. There he was, finally off the road and back in Winding Hills, and she couldn't touch him, or see him, or even talk to him. At least when he'd been away working, she'd been able to text him multiple times per day and they'd talked almost every night. Now she didn't even have his voice to look forward to. Allie missed him so much that every inch of her ached with longing for him, and she couldn't fathom how she was going to go on without him. Her life seemed empty now, and she felt completely hollow inside. Were her ambitions to become a lawyer one day worth the price of losing Patrick?

Allie wondered if he hated her for leaving him on the plane and exiting his life in such an abrupt manner, and she agonized over how he was getting along. She took comfort in the fact that he was

surrounded by people who genuinely loved him and wanted the best for him, but she was also certain that no one could love him as much as she did. It was so unfair that both of them had to be without the other, but, she kept telling herself, it was for his own good, even if every second without him made her ache inside a little bit more.

When Allie got to her car and started the engine, a thought suddenly came to her. How would her father know whether she was following his orders and going straight home from school every day? Was he tracking her car somehow, or was he using her phone to see where she went? She didn't know the first thing about tracking devices, but maybe Amber could check her car for her. Amber was in the protection services field, after all, and would probably know just where to look and what she was looking for. She pondered the idea of calling Amber and asking her to take a look, but what if her calls were being monitored by her father?

Maybe tomorrow when she came to class she'd try to use a phone on campus to call Amber and ask her to meet her there. She'd like to do it right this instant, but her father would be calling her soon on the landline he'd had installed at home for the express purpose of checking up on her, and she was already running late. She couldn't chance having Amber come to her house just in case her father was having her followed and watched. That thought unsettled her greatly, but she wouldn't put it past Bill Nolan to do something like that, even if she was his daughter.

No, her best course of action right now would be to go home and work on applications and essays for scholarships, then get her homework done so she could put in a few hours studying for her LSAT exam for law school. Once her brother David got home from school she'd at least have someone to talk to, even if she couldn't confide in him about everything she was going through, but David would get her mind off her own problems for a while.

As Allie backed her car out of her space, a Toxic Joy song came blaring out of her speakers and her eyes filled with tears again. It was a ballad called "When I Come Back Home to You," with her 'sometimes Dad' Matt Jameson on drums. Allie found it ironic that this, of all songs, would be playing on the radio right then, not only because she'd been forbidden from going to his house to visit his daughters, Meghan and Mara, but also because the lyrics talked about being away from the one you love and looking forward to the reunion you'd have once you were home. If only she could come back home to Patrick everything would be okay, because being without him had left a gaping hole in her. Her father could threaten her freedom and refuse to pay her college expenses all he wanted, but maybe she could figure something out so they could be together again. She'd just have to make a plan, see it through, and pray that Patrick would be willing to take her back. She smiled through her tears as she decided right then to make the tune currently playing on the radio her theme song to keep her strong and focused.

CHAPTER TWO

Amber

"Hi Amber, it's Allie," Amber heard on her voice mail though her phone's speaker. "I have a favor to ask you and I can't call you on my own phone. Long story, but I think I may have a tracking device on my car and wondered if you could check it out. I'll be in the parking lot at school around two o'clock today and also on Friday, or tomorrow at around four. I know it's a lot to ask, but if you can come then I'd really appreciate it, and if you can't, no biggie. Thanks Amber, and tell everyone hello for me."

"What do you make of that?" Amber asked Tim, her gorgeous green-eyed supervisor on Matt Jameson's security team. "With Jonathan locked away in rehab who'd be tracking her?"

"No idea," Tim said. "But maybe you'd better go meet her today. I can stick around here for as long as you need to cover your shift."

"Yeah, and maybe I'd better pick her up a burner phone," she said, her mind catching on one line Allie had used. "If anyone needs to be able to use her phone to call me, it's Allie."

"Here, take some cash for a phone," Tim said, reaching for his wallet. "Matt will reimburse me once he knows it's for Allie."

"No, keep your money, Tim. I'll just get a cheap one for now, and once I know what I'm dealing with, we can go from there," she said. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Be safe," Tim said, giving her a grin. "Remember, there's a shortage of spectacular redheads in the world."

Amber grinned back at him and headed out the door of the guard shack to get in her car. She gave Tim a wave as she pulled away to navigate the twisting mountain roads into town on her mission to pick

up an inexpensive prepaid phone and meet Allie at her university by two o'clock.

Once she'd stopped in town to make her purchase, she hightailed it to Allie's college parking lot, scanning the rows and rows of parked cars for Allie's light blue Chevy Malibu. Amber found it up in the front row and pulled in behind it to wait, and before long she spotted Allie making her way across the quad, looking like she was crying. *Allie must've gotten a B+ rather than an A on an exam to make her so upset*, she thought amusedly, but then remembered she'd heard Allie had broken up with her boyfriend Patrick.

Amber hadn't officially met Patrick and his brother Liam yet, but she knew that Liam was recently engaged to Mara, the second oldest Jameson girl, and that both brothers would be staying at the Jamesons' house long term. She was dying to get a look at both guys, mostly because she was well acquainted with Allie and Mara and wondered what their tastes in men were like. She'd seen pictures of Patrick, although they were a tad grainy and blurry because they'd been shot at such a distance, and it was her procurement of those photos that had put Allie's ex-boyfriend in rehab. Amber still hadn't figured out how Jonathan had managed to take photos of Allie and Patrick having sex on a lounge chair by the Jamesons' pool, but she'd suggested to the team that they look for any gaps in security coverage so it couldn't happen again.

She got out of her rental and began feeling around Allie's car, concentrating on the wheel wells on the driver's side as Allie approached her, wiping her tears and brightening a little.

"Oh, Amber, you're here," Allie said, flinging herself onto her and giving her a hug. "Thank you so much. I didn't know where to start or what to look for."

"No worries, Allie," she said, feeling very uncomfortable at the sudden embrace as she awkwardly patted Allie's back. "Let me finish searching, and then we'll talk. Unlock your doors for me, okay?"

Allie nodded and hit the button on her key fob, and Amber got inside. Within seconds, she'd located a small black box under the passenger seat on one side and stuck it in her pocket, wondering again who might have put it there. She checked the rest of the interior and came up empty-handed, so she got out to finish inspecting the exterior of the car, feeling along the bottom edges and up inside the wheel wells on the passenger side. Her hand hit something solid. She yanked it away from the metal of the car, then held up a tiny black box for Allie to see.

"You found one?" Allie said, looking awed. "Oh my gosh, I can't believe it."

"I found two actually," Amber said, pulling the first one she'd located out of her pocket. "Now we have to decide what to do with them."

"Can't we just get rid of them here?" Allie asked.

"I guess it all depends on who put them in your car and whether you want that person to know you discovered them," she said. "Let's get in my car to talk. We'll stick these on your driver's seat for now and we'll go have a cup of coffee somewhere close by."

"I have to be home soon," Allie said, a nervous edge to her voice. "I don't think I can go anywhere for too long."

"What's going on Allie?" she asked, more concerned than she had been.

"It's my father," Allie said, looking about to cry again. "I think he's the one who put them in my car, and he calls me at home... on a new landline... and if I'm not there he'll freak."

Amber thought about it a minute and said, "Okay, put these in your car, and then call him and tell him you got held up at school and you'll be a little late getting home."

"Okay," Allie said timidly, and she took the trackers from Amber and set them on her front seat under her sweater before she called her father. A couple of minutes later Allie joined her in her car, and Amber drove a short distance to the drive-thru at a fast-food place and got two cups of coffee before pulling into a parking space.

"So, what's going on?" Amber asked sympathetically.

"My father found out about Jonathan being in rehab, and Jonathan told him I was doing drugs with him and got them from Patrick," Allie blurted out in one breath. "He made me take a drug test... he chopped off a hunk of my hair... and I'm not allowed to go anywhere but to school and back... not even to see Meghan and Mara. Not that I'd go to the Jamesons' house anyway with Patrick being there."

"Patrick of the risqué photos we stole back from Jonathan fame?" Amber asked, pretending she knew nothing about their break up. "I thought he was your boyfriend."

"He is... was..." Allie said, shaking her head as her eyes filled with tears again. "I broke up with him when we flew back from Denver."

"How come?" she asked.

"Because I didn't want to make him miserable," Allie said tearfully. "My father called me the day we left Denver and he was furious and said we were going to have a long talk when I got home. The way he'd said it... I was pretty sure he knew about Jonathan, but now I'm glad I did break up with Patrick because my father threatened to have him arrested for dealing drugs if I went anywhere near him again."

"But Patrick doesn't do drugs, does he?" she asked.

"No, never," Allie said. "I wouldn't have gone out with him if he did."

"Then there's no way Patrick is gonna get in any trouble with the law, Allie," Amber said patiently. "They can take him in and question him... even tail him... but they're not gonna catch him dealing drugs."

"But I don't want him to have to go through all of that because of me," Allie said, wiping her eyes with her hands. "He doesn't deserve to be put through that kind of hassle just because he was my boyfriend."

"I'm betting he'd think having you as his girlfriend is worth the hassle, Allie," she said. "Have you talked to him since you dumped him?"

"No," Allie said very quietly. "I'm afraid my phone's being monitored by my father. I don't know if he can see calls I make and texts I send. Why? Have you seen Patrick?"

"I haven't had the pleasure of meeting him yet," she said. "But I did bring you something that I think will make your life easier, and you could even use it to call him if you decide to." And then she brandished a bag from the backseat and handed it to Allie. "It's a burner phone... prepaid, so it's untraceable. You get a few minutes of talk and text time with the phone, and I bought you a card you can use to refill it. When you get home you can charge it up and get it activated, and then I want you to text me your phone number, okay? I'll add it to my contacts so I'll know it's you calling."

"Thank you so much," Allie said, digging in her purse. "I'm not sure I have enough on me to pay you back, but we can go to an ATM and I can take some out of my account."

"It's on me," Amber said. "I want you to be able to call me or one of the guys if you need us. I'll share your new number with them and have each of them text you so you have their numbers. Now, let's talk about the GPS trackers on your car. I think the best action we can take right now is to leave them there. If you need to go somewhere other than home or school, I think I know a way for you to do that. We'll

look for a hiding place near the parking lot at school and near your house, and if you do go somewhere else, you can hide them away and tell your father you're staying late to go to the library or whatever."

"Okay," Allie said. "Although right now I have nowhere else to go anyway. I can't see Meghan and Mara or Patrick, and they're the only people I ever hung out with."

"Your father is a bully, Allie. You know that, right?" she said. "Maybe more of a bully than Jonathan is. Shit, you're a freaking adult and he's treating you like a kindergartner. Have you thought any more about applying for scholarships so you can get out of your house?"

"I've already applied for two," Allie said meekly. "And I have three more I'm working on. I should have them finished and get them sent away this week, but even if I get a scholarship, I have nowhere to go now."

"I think you should come clean with Patrick and let him know what's going on," Amber said. "It's not just your decision to make, Allie. He's a grown man, and I'm sure if you explain to him what you're going through right now he'll understand. I'm sure he'll be willing to take the chance of getting hassled to be with you. Do you want me to talk to him? Tell him what's going on?"

"No!" Allie said emphatically. "If I decide to tell him then it should come from me. And besides, in another three weeks or so Jonathan will be getting out of rehab and I'm sure he'll go right back to stalking me. And if that happens, Patrick will go after him, I know he will. I need to wait until I can be sure I've got a scholarship or two, and hopefully the internship I interviewed for, and then I can try to disappear from Jonathan's radar, with or without Patrick."

"We'll find a way to get Jonathan to leave you alone, Allie," she said. "I've been thinking a lot about it, and I may have come up with something, but it might take your father down with him. Are you prepared for that?"

"I just don't want my mom or my brother to get hurt by anything, but my father has it coming," Allie said. "What's your idea?"

"I'll tell you about it when I have the wheels in motion," she said. "Right now, ignorance is bliss. I'm gonna take you back to your car now and we'll find a hiding place for the trackers, just in case. Hide that burner phone after you activate it and get rid of the packaging at school. And I want you to use it to call me every couple of days and check in so I know how you're doing."

"Okay," Allie said with a nod, and Amber put the car in reverse and backed out of her parking space, then pulled onto the street to head back to the university.

Once she returned to campus, Amber began looking around for somewhere Allie could stash the tracking devices without anyone finding them. She spotted a long hedgerow that ran the width of the parking lot. "That's where you'll hide them, Allie," she said, pointing ahead of her. "Bring a zip lock bag and put them inside it, and then you can tuck the bag underneath the bushes. If anyone sees you, you can say you dropped your favorite pen or lost an earring or something. And look for a similar hiding place at home."

"I can do that," Allie said. "Thank you so much, Amber. I'd better get going home, so I'll talk to you Friday, okay?"

"I'm here to help you, Allie," she said. "If things get wicked crazy don't wait to call me, any time, day or night."

Allie nodded and attempted a smile as she left. Amber waited until Allie had pulled out before she put her car in gear. She followed Allie until she had to turn off to head back to the Jamesons' house, feeling incredibly sorry for the poor girl and more determined than ever to help her. Allie was a virtual prisoner in her own home with her father as her warden, and she vowed on the spot to make it right for her, even if she had to do it on her own time. Amber needed to talk to Tim and tell him everything she knew to pick his brain for ideas, and then she

was going to have a long talk with Matt Jameson to let him know exactly what Allie was dealing with.

CHAPTER THREE

Patrick

Patrick lay curled on his side in his bedroom at Matt Jameson's house. It had been a very long and agonizing ten days since Allie had left him, and he was utterly tormented by her absence in his life. She'd cut him loose "for his own good," she'd said, but he hadn't found anything good in it at all. The nights and mornings were the hardest because he was alone with his thoughts about her, how he'd like to be kissing her and holding her and making love to her. *And waking up next to her,* he thought, as he glanced out the window and saw that the sun was rising. He should be looking at her beautiful face and watching her sleep right now, then awakening her with soft kisses on her eyelids and nose.

But he was alone, and he was going to remain alone until Maggie or Liam coaxed him out of bed and pleaded with him to eat something and start the routine of the day. The past few days had been the same. He'd shower and dress and choke down a cup of tea and maybe a few bites of toast, and then help Maggie or Matt with whatever needed doing around the house. When he could, he'd escape to the big music room on the ground floor and play Matt's drums or one of the guitars or basses for hours on end. Sometimes he'd go out into the backyard with a pad of paper and a guitar and write lyrics and music to several songs he was working on, all of them with the same theme of loneliness and heartbreak.

Patrick's nightmare had returned with a vengeance, and he was waking up gasping for breath every night. Last night's dream had even sent him running to the toilet to retch, although there was little in his stomach to get rid of. He'd had dry heaves for a few minutes and then he'd gotten back into bed on his side, curling up into a ball. The

nightmare had always remained relatively unchanged over the years, but last night's had included a new feature. When Pete had smashed the whiskey bottle over his head and knocked him over the edge of the cliff, Allie had been there to help his father deliver the deadly blow. He'd felt the icy arms of the Shadow Man grab his body as he fell from the edge of the rock face before being jolted awake and bolting to the bathroom to throw up.

A soft knock sounded on his bedroom door, but he didn't respond to it. Patrick knew the person he most wanted to be on the other side of it wasn't going to be there. He heard another knock, this one louder, and a little voice say, "Patrick, are you awake?" It was Mellie, his little pixie, and the only person in the house with whom he still wanted to spend any time. It was as if she could sense his sadness and emptiness and was trying as best as she could to help him overcome it.

"Come in, Mellie," he called, not moving from the bed. He heard the doorknob turn and quiet little footsteps shuffle across the floor towards him before she climbed up the side and kissed him on his cheek. He rolled onto his back and looked at the tiny little girl smiling down on him as she cheerfully said, "Good morning, Patrick!"

"Morning, Pixie," he said weakly. "What brings you here so early? Shouldn't you be getting ready for preschool?"

Mellie nestled in beside him, still in her pink princess pajamas and said, "It's my play today at school. You promised you'd come."

Patrick thought back to a few weeks before when she'd first landed the role of the title character in her school's preschool production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. He'd been in the kitchen with Allie when she'd come home from school, and she'd flung herself on him before making the announcement. She'd invited him and Allie to come and watch her, and he'd promised her that if he'd returned from working on the road by the time the play rolled around wild horses couldn't keep him away. It seemed like a lifetime ago to him now, but

Mellie had not forgotten his promise. He wondered if Allie would be there.

God, he missed her. Their love affair had been unexpected and had moved along at such a frenzied pace that he'd known, deep down in his gut, that it was too good to be true. And now, in his complete misery, he spent hours looking back at the past two months, wondering if he'd missed a sign that it wouldn't be forever as he'd hoped.

Patrick closed his eyes as he wrapped an arm around little Mellie and pretended to drift back off to sleep, lost in his thoughts. After a minute or two, Mellie nudged him to rouse him again as she lay cuddled up next to him in his bed. "Patrick," she said in her small child's voice. "Are you gonna come to my play?"

He opened his eyes, awake enough now to be cognizant of the fact that she wasn't going to leave without an answer, and he gave her a tickle under her chin with the arm that was around her. "Of course, I'll come to your play, Pixie. I wouldn't miss it," he told her. It would be a distraction from his thoughts. Thoughts that were always on Allie and how much he wanted to be with her right now. But more than a week had come and gone without any word from her at all, and even though he still held onto a tiny shred of hope that she'd reconsider and come running back to him, he had to be honest with himself and begin to accept the fact that it was over between them.

The O'Donnell Brothers series

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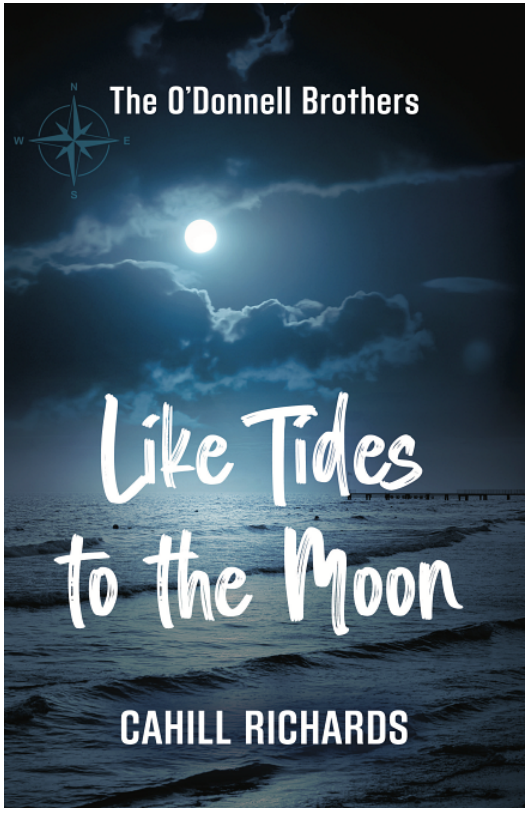

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