

[PDF] Without A Trace (Rock Harbor Series #1)

Colleen Coble - pdf download free book

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Description:

About the Author

RITA-finalist **Colleen Coble** is the author of several best-selling romantic suspense novels, including *Tidewater Inn* and the Mercy Falls, Lonestar, and Rock Harbor series.

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Chapter One

It was days like this, when the sun bounced off Lake Superior with an eye-squinting brilliance, that Bree Nicholls forgot all her qualms about living where the Snow King ruled nine months of the year. There was no other place on earth like the U.P.-Michigan's Upper Peninsula. With Keweenaw Peninsula to the north and Ottawa National Forest to the south, there could be no more beautiful spot in the world. The cold, crystal-clear waters of the northernmost Great Lakes stretched to the horizon as far as she could see.

But she'd never find those kids by focusing on the seascape. Pressing her foot to the accelerator, she left the lake behind as she urged her old Jeep Cherokee forward along the rutted dirt track. Bree's best friend, Naomi Heinonen, steadied herself against the door's armrest and looked over her shoulder at the two dogs still safely confined in their kennels. The Kitchigami Wilderness Preserve lay to the east, past Miser, a drive of only fifteen miles or so, but on this washboard road, it took longer than Bree liked.

"Don't kill us getting there," Naomi shouted above the road noise.

Bree didn't reply. These lost children weren't some vacationers without ties; they were residents of Rock Harbor, two of their own. And night would be here soon. If Naomi were driving, her foot would be heavy on the accelerator too. The preserve was a formidable tract that could swallow up two kids without a trace.

The wind churned autumn's red and gold leaves in eddies and blew them across the road like brightly colored tumbleweeds. Equally colorful trees crowded the hills like giant banks of mums. The U.P. in autumn was Bree's favorite time, except when ever-shorter days put strangleholds on their search efforts.

M-18 headed on east, but Bree made a sharp turn onto Pakkala Road, which would take them into a heavily forested area. In the spring, motor homes and SUVs pulling campers plied the road on their way to experience some of the last wilderness left in the Midwest. Today the road was practically empty.

"Fill me in on what we know," Bree said.

"Donovan O'Reilly reported Emily and Timmy missing three hours ago. They were on some outdoor nature thing with their school," Naomi said.

Bree knew Donovan O'Reilly—he owned the local Ace Hardware store. His wife had left him and the kids nearly two years ago, and now his eyes had a haunted look, as though he wondered what fate would hand him next. Bree often stopped by Ace to pick up supplies for the ongoing renovation of her lighthouse home, and a friendship of sorts had developed between them.

"One of the students said she heard Emily talk about seeing a raccoon," Naomi continued, "so that might be what caused the kids to wander off. It's not much to go on, but they've started searching." She chewed on her lip. "You remember Timmy has diabetes? I wonder when his shot is due."

"I was thinking about that." Bree imagined Donovan was out of his mind with worry. "Donovan asked me out last week; did I tell you that?" she asked. She'd been tempted to tell him yes. Her lighthouse echoed with silence, but she had realized it wasn't fair to use someone like Donovan to ward off her loneliness. "I said no, of course."

Naomi didn't reply, and Bree looked at her curiously. "What? You don't like him? Didn't he used to

be your brother's best friend? You probably know him and the kids pretty well."

A flush moved to Naomi's cheeks, and she looked out the window. "That was a long time ago. I only see him at the hardware store now, and I like him fine. Why did you say no?"

"I'm not ready. Maybe I never will be." Bree tapped the steering wheel with impatient fingers, wishing the Jeep could go faster over the bumpy, rutted road. Instead, she slowed and turned onto the access road that would take her back to the campground parking lot.

As she pulled in, Bree saw people fanning out in a search grid. There was an assortment of searchers, ranging from teenagers like Tommy Lempinen to professional types like Inetta Harris, who was still dressed in her business suit. When one of their own was threatened, Rock Harbor residents pulled together.

Bree and Naomi got out, attached leashes to the dogs, and shrugged their arms into their ready-kit backpacks, fully outfitted with first-aid kit, small plastic tarp, energy bars, flashlight, flares, bug repellent, towelettes, compass, Swiss pocketknife, radio, topographic map of the area, canteen, sunglasses, sunscreen, and every other item one was likely to need on a search. A young woman in a brown National Park Service uniform was Bree's first target.

"We're the Kitchigami K-9 Search and Rescue team," Bree told her, though that much was printed on the bright orange vests that both the women and the dogs wore. "I'm Bree Nicholls. Who's in charge?"

The young woman pointed toward a group of people nearly hidden by a stand of sycamore. "The lead ranger is over there." Bree looked and recognized Donovan's ink-dark hair among them.

Bree and Naomi headed toward the group. Donovan saw Bree and broke away. Pain contorted his handsome features. With his black hair and dark blue eyes, Bree had always thought he looked a bit like Pierce Brosnan, though today he was too upset and pale to carry off the James Bond sang-froid.

"Please, you've got to find the kids!" His hands trembled as he thrust two small jackets toward her. "They don't even have their jackets on, and it's supposed to get to near freezing tonight." The torment in his eyes spoke of his fear of loss more clearly than his words. "Timmy's shot is overdue now."

His voice quavered, and Bree put a comforting hand on his arm. She knew the anxiety he felt. "We'll find them, Donovan. The dogs are well trained, and Samson has a special radar for children."

His head snapped up as if mounted on a spring. A dawning hope filled his face. "I'll come with you."

How well Bree remembered that overwhelming desire to help. The waiting was the hard part. When her husband's plane went down, taking their son and all her hopes for their future with it, she had felt a crushing need to do something. In her case, there had been nothing to do but try to move on. With any luck, Donovan probably would not be in that situation.

She shook her head as she took the jackets from his hand. "You have to stay close to base, Donovan. The kids will be scared when we find them, and you'll need to be in a position to get to them quickly when they're found. Try to stay calm. We still have several hours before sunset. We'll find them."

Donovan nodded, but his gaze flickered from Bree to Naomi with a naked appeal in his eyes. "I want

to do something."

"Pray," Naomi advised.

His eyes squeezed shut. "I started that as soon as I learned they were gone," he whispered.

Naomi's answer to everything was prayer. Prayer had done little for Bree's own desperate pleas. What use was a God like that?

"Let's go," Bree said.

As they approached the tree line, a slim, feminine figure stepped out of a stand of jack pine and came toward them. Bree lifted a hand in greeting. She should have known her sister-in-law wouldn't be far from the action. She craved media attention the way the mine owners craved cheap workers.

Hilary Kaleva pushed aside the branches barring her way into the clearing as though they were a personal affront. Hilary, Rock Harbor's mayor, was having the mother of all bad-hair days. Her hair, blond like her brother Rob's, was swept up in a formerly elegant French roll, but strands loosened by tree branches now clung damply to her neck. Streaks of mud marred her navy suit, and bits of pine needles clung to the fabric.

"It's the poodle," Naomi muttered to Bree. "I'm out of here. I'll wait with the rangers."

"Coward," Bree murmured. She wished she could laugh. Rob used to call Hilary his "poodle sister," which Hilary found less than amusing, but Bree and Naomi had always thought the description apt. Hilary could be sweet and loving one moment then turn and bite without provocation. And she talked until Bree grew weary of listening. But she could be just as endearing as a poodle when she wanted to be. From the expression on her face, today wasn't one of those days.

Samson woofed at Hilary in greeting and strained at the leash to meet her. The mayor flinched at the sniffing dog, pulling away with a moue of distaste. As if sensing Hilary's animosity, Samson lurched toward Hilary then came alongside Bree and rubbed his nose against her knee. Bree tugged him farther away from her sister-in-law. No sense in upsetting her.

Hilary's scowl eased when Bree pulled the dog a safe distance away. "What are you doing here? I thought you were searching the northeast quadrant today."

Bree's smile faltered. Hilary always managed to drain her confidence with a relentless determination to bend her to her will. "I was home when the call came in. The brick is crumbling on the tower, and it seemed like a good day to repoint it. I was just about to mix the mortar when Mason called." Bree stopped and chided herself for babbling like a kid caught playing hooky. Maybe it was time they both realized Rob's plane might never be found. Not in the northeast quadrant or any other. The forest had swallowed the Bonanza Beechcraft like Superior could swallow a sinking ship.

Hilary's eyes flashed. "You have more important things to do than to repoint the brick on your lighthouse. Let a professional do it."

"The last time I checked, my bank balance was screaming for mercy, Hilary."

Hilary sighed, and she gave a smile that seemed forced. "I'll pay for it. You promised you'd find them, Bree. It's been nearly a year. Rob's birthday is the day after Thanksgiving. I'm counting on

giving him a decent buria...

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