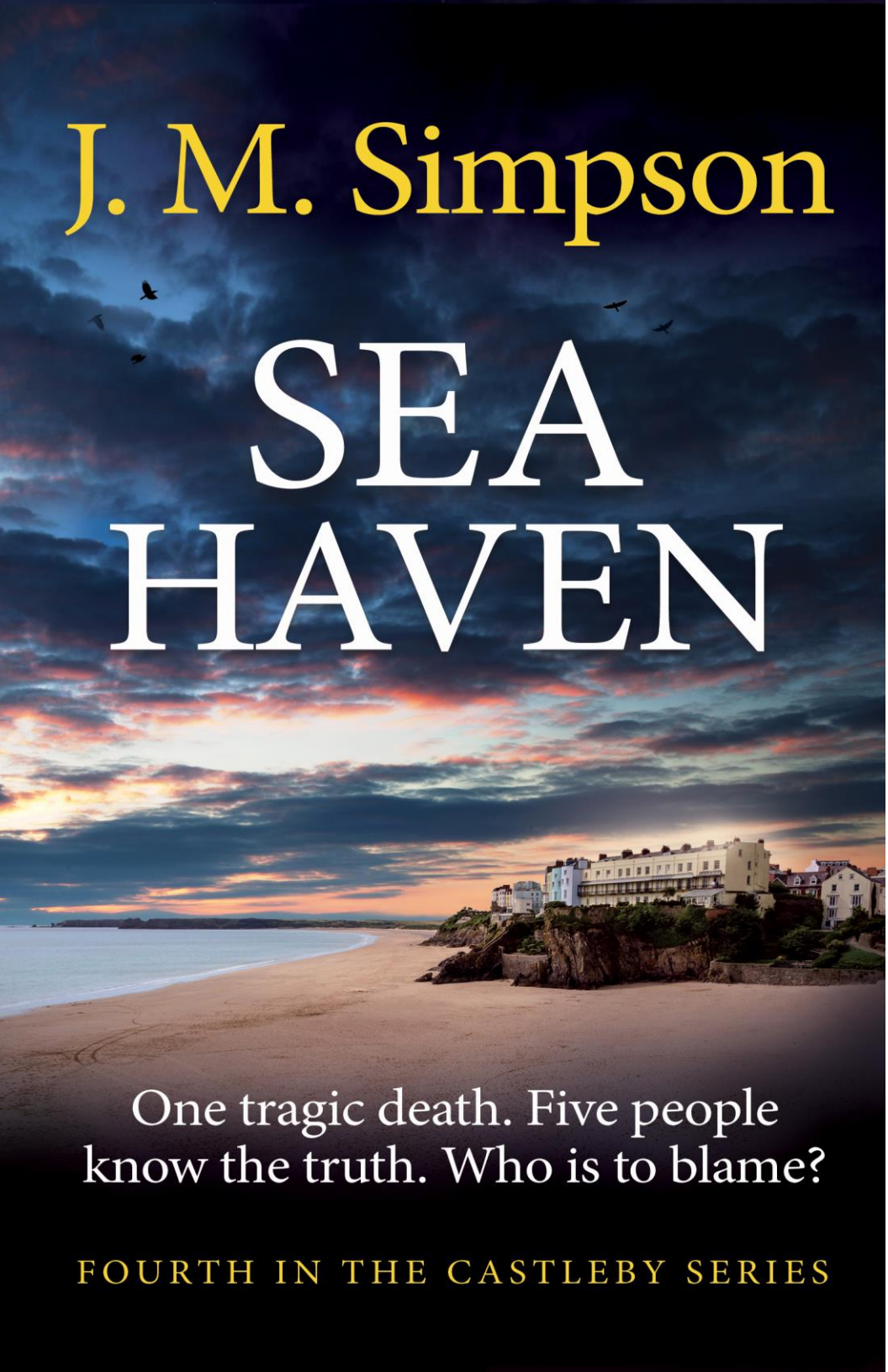




J. M. Simpson

SEA HAVEN

One tragic death. Five people
know the truth. Who is to blame?

FOURTH IN THE CASTLEBY SERIES

SEA HAVEN

J.M. Simpson

Also by J.M. Simpson

The Castleby Series

Sea State

Sea Change

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Author's Note

I have taken a degree of literary licence when depicting the wonderful work and crew members of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). I have embellished various aspects and fictionalised others to get the story right and to keep pace. Therefore, any and all mis-characterisations are entirely fictional, and any procedural errors are wholly mine.

For Jane Bateup.

A truly wonderful soul, who once took a large swig of wine and said,
‘You should totally write that.’

Sweet is the remembrance of troubles when you are in safety.

Euripides

PROLOGUE

The torrential November rain lashed heavily against the windscreen, the wipers barely coping with the unrelenting onslaught of water. The wind threw leaves and debris across the car in vicious bursts.

She woke suddenly at her mother's scream. The headlights behind were too bright, too close. Harsh, bright light flooded the front of the sports car; she blinked as it hurt her eyes and she raised an arm to block it. She heard her mother scream again, a screech of brakes and suddenly she felt weightless. She heard metal scraping, glass smashing. She felt the airbag's impact force the air from her lungs: a hard, brutal white-hot impact. Then nothing.

She awoke, cold and wet, and heard sobbing. On the fringes of consciousness, she heard a man's voice shouting bitter, angry words. She tried to move, but the pain was so intense, she passed out.

When she awoke, she turned her head and tried to see in the darkness. She tried to move her arms but couldn't. She couldn't see. She felt wet on her face. Was that rain?

She heard a rustle, and what sounded like breathing... panting. In the darkness she was blinded by a series of bright flashes. She tried to move again, but the pain was excruciating.

Just before she lost consciousness, she realised the sobbing had stopped, the angry voice had stopped and there was silence again.

She had no recollection of the hours the fire crews spent cutting her and her dead mother from the Porsche 911 Carrera. She didn't remember being air lifted to hospital, nor the six hours of surgery, where they tried to save her severely damaged heart.

She didn't remember arresting four times and being put on a bypass unit, while they looked for a donor heart. She didn't remember the transplant nurse informing her and her father that she was now at the top of the transplant list.

All she remembered was her mother telling her how much she hated driving in bad weather. These were the last words she remembered her mother ever saying to her.

CHAPTER 1

Sebastian Scott picked up the last suitcase and heaved it into the back of the BMW estate. He returned to the house and closed the downstairs shutters, seeing the activity prompt interest from the group of paparazzi crowded outside his London home.

‘Why don’t you all just fuck right off?’ he murmured, snapping the last shutter closed, as he saw some of them jostling with their massive telephoto lenses.

Checking the extensive list that Tabatha had given him the day before, he made sure he’d remembered everything. He smiled as he remembered her sitting in her hospital bed, pale, but businesslike with her notepad, issuing instructions carefully to him like she was the adult, and he was the thirteen-year-old.

He realised he needed to put the bin out and pursed his lips. That meant running the gauntlet out front. Grabbing the bin bag, he opened the door hearing the flurry of lenses clicking and the endless questions shouted at him.

How are you coping after the death of your wife, Sebastian?’

'How's your daughter doing, Sebastian, how do you feel about her nearly dying?'

'Will you give us an exclusive, Sebastian, about coping with the loss of your wife?'

Seb ignored them and kept his face away from the cameras. They'd been pestering him for days on the phone, message after message left. The voices asking the same questions.

'Weren't you supposed to be with them that night?'

'Doesn't all of her fortune now come to you?'

He heard it again and faltered. Rage built inside him. Then he heard her voice.

'Don't let them get to you, darling, they're scum. Don't give them anything they can use. Don't rise to it.'

He closed his eyes for a second and breathed deeply. He calmly wheeled the bin towards the edge of the pavement and then returned to the house, shutting the front door carefully behind him. Leaning against the door he saw his hands were shaking. The voices taunted.

'How much was she worth, Sebastian?'

'How did you do it, Sebastian?'

'Was your wife having an affair with Levinson Lucas?'

He pushed himself away from the door, grabbed the handful of newspapers on the hall table and took them into the kitchen, throwing them in the recycling. The headlines screamed at him in huge black letters. 'Cassie Warner in fatal car crash.' He closed his eyes and turned the paper over, unable to look at the picture of his wife's beautiful face any longer. Blinking away the tears he turned off the lights and stood for a moment in the quiet house, remembering. Remembering Cassie. Bringing Tabatha home for the first time. Christmases together. The fun, the laughter, the love.

Setting the alarm, he let himself out of the back door. As he sat in the car, he tapped out a text to say the list was done and he was just leaving. The response was instant.

Drive safely. Wuv U Dad. XX

He replied. *Wuv U. XX*

He sat for a moment and another text arrived. He smiled. It was from Cassie's best friend and Tabatha's godmother, Gabriella, who everyone called Bree. She was a force of nature, an absolute riot, drank like a fish, swore like a scaffolder and they all adored her.

WTAF? Where are you? Here? There? Call me IMMEDIATELY.

Seb replied.

BOSSY COW. I was here and now I am on my way to there. Stop being so demanding and PUTTING EVERYTHING IN CAPS.

She replied immediately.

I LIKE CAPS! IT'S ME TALKING LOUDLY. DRIVE SAFELY. Call U later.

Seb pulled up towards the rear double gates at the end of the enclosed drive, which slowly opened. He pulled out and they shut silently behind him. Like a door closing on a chapter, he thought as he watched them in the rear-view mirror. Gunning the powerful engine he accelerated down the street, the paparazzi didn't notice his car until it was too late to give chase. Good luck finding him, he thought as he headed towards the motorway.

Seb was making good time. The traffic behaved as he passed the most notorious part of the motorway. His phone rang, and he pressed receive on the steering wheel.

'Where are you?' Tabatha demanded.

'On the motorway, and good morning to you too,' he said, amused. 'How are you feeling?'

'OK,' she replied. 'Nurses have been doing more blood tests, I think I'm empty,' she grumbled.

'What does Doc say? Anything new since we saw him yesterday morning?'

'Gotta wait for bloods, I think. Where are you?'

‘Will you even know if I tell you?’

‘Give it to me in time then.’

‘I reckon probably another three hours or so depending on traffic.’

‘Are you coming here or going there?’

‘What would you like me to do?’

‘Go and unpack, check the house and then come back here.’

‘Yes, boss.’ Seb had been staying near the hospital for the last three weeks and not in their second home in Castleby, he just hadn’t been able to face it and he needed to be near Tabatha.

‘Have you eaten?’ she demanded.

‘Tabs...’

‘Have you, Dad? You know you’d live on cereal if you could.’

‘I’m going to stop in a minute for a pee and coffee.’

‘And food.’

‘Yes, and food,’ he said, rolling his eyes.

‘I can see you rolling your eyes,’ she said accusingly.

‘Busted.’

‘OK, text me when you get there? You know I worry about...’

‘I know, sweetheart... I know. Need anything?’

‘Nah, I’m going to have a sleep, I’m tired.’

‘You alright?’

‘Don’t fret. I didn’t sleep well. Bad dreams.’

‘OK. Rest up. See you later, Tabby Cat.’

‘Later, Dad... Wuv you.’

‘Wuv you too,’ he said.

As Seb drove, he thought about Tabatha and her progress. Three weeks ago she had received a new heart after the car Cass had been driving crashed over the edge of the road and down a steep incline lined with trees, partially impaling Tabatha.

Even now, Tabatha couldn’t remember a thing about it. She remembered leaving the road and being frightened, but nothing after

that. The police had now concluded there was evidence to suggest it wasn't an accident. Seb tortured himself that his wife must have suffered an agonising death, knowing that Tabatha had also been hurt. He blamed himself. It had been his fault, and he had paid the price with his wife's life.

Cass had hated driving in bad weather. She had asked him twice to come with them, but he had been trying to finish a script and was in the zone. His writing was flying, and he hadn't wanted to stop. He remembered kissing her soundly, calling her a lightweight and teasing her.

He remembered saying, 'If you hate driving in bad weather, you know you could try slowing down a little and drive at the same speed as everyone else, rather than screaming around at full pelt. Take my car if you like, rather than your rocket.'

She had laughed and stroked his face. 'Now where's the fun in that?'

Unexpectedly, his eyes filled, he gripped the wheel and tried to see through the tears. He saw a sign for motorway services and pulled in, managing to stop the car before the crippling onslaught of grief came.

Seb drove down the high street and admired the town's festive lights. Castleby had gone all out for Christmas, he thought. He tried to remember the date and when the 25th actually was. He knew he had at least a couple of weeks. Bree, Tabatha's godmother, had said she might come for a few days if she could get away, but Seb had no idea when that might be. He had lost all track of time. He was exhausted and wrung out on every level.

He pulled into the driveway in front of the tall Georgian house that overlooked the beach one side and the harbour the other. It was a row of four, named Compass Row, and theirs was the end one.

They had rented the house one summer a few years ago for a few weeks and had fallen in love with it so much that Cass had bought

it when she had landed her first big Hollywood film. Amazed at the huge fee her agent had managed to negotiate, she had wanted to buy something to mark the occasion. It was a home from home, their secret escape, and they visited whenever they could. Cass had named the house 'Compass Haven'. This was where Cass and Tabatha had been heading the night of the crash. His wife had died within five miles of one of her most favourite places.

He parked out front and sat for a moment, resting his head on the steering wheel, then desperate to see the sea, he roused himself and went inside. As he walked through the spacious rooms towards the back of the house, he smelt his wife's perfume lingering in the air. He stood at the huge windows at the back of the house and drank in the view. He remembered that they often used to stand there together, watching the sea.

He smelt her perfume strongly again and couldn't help but look around. It was his mind playing tricks on him, he was sure of it.

'I wish you were here,' he said softly, the words catching in his throat. 'I don't think I can do this alone.'

He realised he had been lost in thought and hadn't texted Tabatha to say he was there. He tapped out a quick message before unloading the car. His phone rang and he frowned when he saw the number for the hospital.

'Sebastian. It's Dr Carucci. Tabatha tells me you're back from London.'

'I am. Everything OK, Felix?' Seb said, dreading the response.

'Everything is fine. Bloods are good. She's doing well. She can come home in a few days if this carries on. Maybe Saturday?'

'Really?' Seb was delighted.

'Yes. Nothing stressful mind you. Plenty of rest and sea air, I think.'

‘Wow. Home for Christmas. That will be amazing. Thanks, Felix. We’re staying here for the foreseeable future rather than London.’

‘It’ll do her good, she needs to be in a healthy environment. Are you in to see her later?’

‘I’ll be there in a couple of hours.’

‘OK, we’ll talk then, get the nurse to buzz me when you get here, and we’ll tell her together.’

‘Will do. See you later, and thanks!’

Seb finished unpacking the car and stood in the hall, thinking. He had time to get a Christmas tree to surprise Tabatha with, plus he had the beginnings of an idea about a present for her. He looked at his watch, he needed to get his act together. There was a load of stuff he needed to get done before he saw Tabatha.

* * *

‘Going once, going twice. Sold. Lot sixty-three sold for three hundred and fifteen thousand pounds to paddle number twenty-seven. Madam, please make your way over to the clerk.’ The auctioneer motioned to Jenny Miller who was still clutching her paddle and pointed to the corner. ‘Now, lot sixty-four. Who will start the bidding at ten thousand pounds?’

Jenny realised that she had been holding her breath and gasped suddenly. *Christ that was quick!* she thought. One minute she had waved her paddle at one hundred and fifty thousand pounds and two minutes later the price had rocketed up. She blinked and it dawned on her that the place was hers. Really hers. Now it *was* time to worry.

Jenny completed the bank transfer and then felt her hand being shaken.

‘You can collect the keys from the office as soon as you’ve had confirmation that the final funds have cleared, and the paperwork is

complete. Final completion should be within a week,' the clerk said dismissively.

Jenny left the hall in a daze. It was still sinking in. She had bought a massive run-down place in need of a serious amount of work for three hundred and fifteen thousand pounds. Was she mad? She walked out into the town square and sat down on one of the benches for a moment, enjoying the December sun on her face, but still slightly dazed about the whole proceedings.

'Excuse me.'

An elderly man stood in front of her. 'I don't suppose you know where the registrar's office is? I think the signage, is all wrong,' he said ruefully, pointing to the cast iron tourist signs. 'I know for a fact that the car park is that way.'

Jenny smiled at him. 'The registrar's office is in the library now, which is that way,' she said, pointing. 'Big new building. Can't miss it.'

'Right. Wish they'd stop changing things,' he muttered. 'Thank you.'

'No problem.' She hoped he had happy news to register. She remembered sitting in the registrar's office a few months ago registering her brother's death. Although she lived alone and had never been married, she had never felt so alone as she had then. Her last living relative gone. Many of her hopes and dreams had been tied in with her brother, they had been inseparable. She had to do it alone now. But she had made a solemn promise to him on his deathbed that she would. She would finish their dream, while he watched over her.

He would have been thrilled about today. About two hundred grand under budget too! A great start. Not wanting to get caught up in the sadness of her brother's passing, she decided she would drive to Castleby, have a look at the outside of her new investment and have dinner in the pub opposite, before heading home to begin packing up her rented house.

Jenny strolled down the high street, admiring the Christmas lights. She wandered slowly, looking in shop windows and admiring the display of photographs on the town noticeboard of the recent Carnival of the Sea. The town had been completely transformed for the weekend. She chuckled at some of the pictures and hoped she would be open in time for it next year.

Rounding the corner, she looked at her new investment. She was now the proud owner of the huge end of terrace six-storey house, with orangery, on Compass Row, made up of four tall, elegant Georgian houses. As far as Jenny knew, the other houses were primarily holiday lets, although she was intrigued to see a BMW estate in the driveway at the other end of the terrace.

There was a battered car parked haphazardly in the drive of her property, and she wondered who it belonged to. Every time she had been to the area doing her research, the other properties had looked empty.

Jenny and her brother had spent months searching for the right place and had finally found Compass End; it had suited all of their needs perfectly for conversion into a small luxury hotel and bistro.

Jenny took a few pictures and wandered across the road to the Hope & Anchor pub, where she managed to get a table in the window so she could look at the house and start to make plans.

An hour later, Jenny was worried. She had watched a constant stream of, what her brother would have called, ‘the great unwashed’ entering the house through the basement and then leaving a few minutes later. Jenny wasn’t stupid, she knew what it meant. She also knew that, as soon as she could, she would be getting in touch with the police and requesting they accompany her into the building so she could change the locks and make it secure. Last thing she wanted was to be paying over three hundred grand for a bloody crack den.