

A LEAP  
*of*  
FAITH



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He reached down from heaven and rescued me;  
he drew me out of deep waters.

Psalm 18:16 (NLT)



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# Chapter 1

Atlantic Beach, Florida

When Hurricane Ester crashed onto the shores of Courtney's hometown, everyone in its path feared nothing would ever be the same again. An unusually warm November had lulled them all into thinking the hurricane season was past. The weather forecast on the morning news indicated the storm forming off the coast would not make shore. But by afternoon, things were different. The storm was turning unexpectedly and heading right in their direction!

Terrified of the coming storm, sixteen-year-old Courtney Alexander had already made one trip outside, begging her mom and stepfather to come in. "The storm is turning toward us. Come in the house, please!" she begged her mom again.

"We have plenty of time," her stepfather called back from the pier next to their dock. He kept his left arm tightly around her mom as the wind whipped at their hair and peppered their clothing with salty spray. Cling-

ing to the railing with the other hand, he refused to heed Courtney's warnings, although she could see them struggling to hold on to the railing.

She raced down the dock, wanting only to get back inside. She thought she heard her mom calling, "Courtney!" Glancing back, she watched in horror as they were swept off the pier.

"Mom!" Her scream blew back into her throat, with a wind strong enough to bend the backyard palms to the ground. She barely made it back to their yard before the swirling wind and water headed in her direction. Changing her mind in a split second, she turned and snatched up a heavy piece of rope hanging over the post at the end of the dock. She ran for the park up the hill from the beach. Once there she knotted the rope around her body and ran for the big steel post that supported the tower, overlooking the park. Running around and around the post until she had used up all the rope, she managed to secure herself to the post.

She would never forget the shock of the wind and water tearing at her. Surely she would drown or get swept away, post and all. She tried to scream, hoping someone would hear her and come to her rescue, but the wind whipped her voice away.

"God . . . help . . . me!" Her voice came out in gasps. "I'm sorry! I know I turned my back on you when Daddy

died, but I need you to help me be strong and make the wind and rain stop. Please!” She knew only He could provide the miracle she needed. Without it, her life could be over. As she slumped down within the rope wrapped around her, she thought she heard a whisper.

*I am here.*

It seemed like forever before the storm finally stopped. Courtney was barely conscious as the day faded into night. The storm raged on, taking her breath away over and over. When she finally realized she could breathe without struggling, she brushed the wet hair out of her eyes and looked around in amazement. Her clothes were soaked, the water up to her neck, but the rope had held her fast to the pole. The sun was rising, bringing daylight that allowed her to look in disbelief at her surroundings. While she could see broken swings and the curve of a slide floating amid other debris, the post tower had somehow remained intact. But that was about the only thing left. Destruction littered the area around her as far as she could see. And the park on the hill was barely above the water level. She felt bruised and beaten, and despite the whisper she’d heard the night before, she was all alone—no help in sight.

She unwound the heavy, wet rope and worked her way loose from the pole. Pulling herself up the metal steps to the tower above, she looked around. The entire

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area was flooded. Chimneys stuck up out of the water where houses had been. Some of the trees had uprooted and floated along with trash cans and windows and other items that had washed away in the storm. An empty metal boat bobbed along in the water, along with a plastic mattress, a bicycle, and a cooler. She turned in the direction of her home. Nothing remained of it. She couldn't help the twinge of relief that came as she imagined her stepfather gone forever. But she would give anything for another chance to see her mom. She fingered the locket around her neck that had belonged to her mother and her grandmother before her. Her mom had trusted her to take care of it, and for now it was all she had. The tower swayed as a strong gust of wind swept by, and Courtney realized she had to get somewhere safe.

The metal boat had snagged in a couple of broken trees near the park, and she made a hasty decision. She climbed down the steps, gathered the wet rope that had saved her life, and jumped into the water. She headed toward the trees, and by inching out along the branches, she could just grasp the boat's edge. Balancing carefully, she pulled it toward her and climbed in, taking the rope with her. Once settled in the boat, she grabbed a nearby bucket as it floated by and bailed out the water. She pulled the branches away and broke free of the tree. Then, using the oars that had miraculously stayed in the

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oar brackets on either side of the boat, she pushed out into the swirling waters.

