



A NOVEL

Northern Lights

Michelle
Cary

Northern Lights
by Michelle Cary

Amber Quill Press

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* * * *

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NORTHERN LIGHTS

By

MICHELLE CARY

Northern Lights
by Michelle Cary

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(With Amanda Young)

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Northern Lights
by Michelle Cary

"A man cannot be too careful in his choice of enemies."

—Oscar Wilde

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CHAPTER 1

"You want me to do what?" Nathan Lowery pinched the bridge of his nose with this thumb and forefinger, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He couldn't possibly have heard his sister-in-law correctly.

"I want you to take Brooke with you for king crab season." Willow stood, hands on hips, her shirt pulled tight against her six-month pregnant belly, looking at him with eyes radiating both challenge and hope.

Yeah, he'd heard right the first time.

In her late twenties, with softly curled russet hair and legs that went on for miles, Brooke Hague was an enigma. Shy and unassuming, she and Willow had somehow become best friends while taking a cooking class several years back. Brooke was a subject he never took lightly.

He still remembered the first time he'd met her—at a picnic Willow and Adam had held during the summer.

He'd spotted the auburn-haired beauty from across the deck and his heart almost stopped in his chest. Still grieving, he hadn't been much into making new friends back then, but he'd taken a liking to her straight away. She hadn't spoken much that day, but in the years that followed, she'd slowly warmed up to him. For the last couple of years Nathan had finally begun to feel more like Brook's friend than Willow's brother-in-law.

Nathan sighed and attempted to keep his frustration in check. He'd come to talk to Adam about the new season and

the remaining repairs on their boats the *Talisman* and *Northern Lights*, not take on his stubborn and slightly hormonal sister-in-law.

Feet planted, Willow stared at him. A formidable wall of womanly determination and power, Nathan couldn't help but wonder how Adam fared in arguments with her. He was considering that thought when she cocked her head to one side and said something he never expected. "Please."

Please? He arched a surprised brow. Willow never said please. "Do you understand what you're asking me to do is impossible?" He didn't doubt Brooke could handle the job, but the Bering Sea was no place for a woman. The conditions they worked in were inhospitable, to say the least; especially for a woman as petite and private as Brooke.

Willow shook her head. "No, it's not. I know other crab boats allow women on board to cook, so why won't you?"

He blew out another long breath and found no relief. Willow wasn't going to make this easy on him, and Adam would surely kick his ass if he got her riled in her condition. She was one of those people who had a personality that put them into one of two categories—you loved her or you hated her. There wasn't an in between. Usually Nathan's affection for her fell into the former, but at the moment, the latter wasn't out of the question. It irritated him when people challenged his authority as captain and Willow was pushing her luck.

Fighting to keep his temper at bay, he crossed the room, plopped down onto the well-worn beige sofa. "It's not that I

won't allow a woman on my boat, but you know it's not a safe environment."

"It's safer than what she's facing right now."

Nathan frowned. Something about her statement seemed off, and the desperation in her voice set his senses on edge. In all the years Nathan had known her, he'd never seen Willow this worked up. "Why? What's going on?" Was Brooke in some sort of danger?

Willow shook her head and began to pace, her bare feet barely making a sound as she padded over the plush carpet. "I promised I wouldn't say anything, but under the circumstances I think it would probably be okay." She turned back to look at him. "Years ago, Brooke testified in a criminal trial back in her hometown and put away a dangerous man."

"What kind of trial?"

"I don't know." Willow chewed at her fingernails and turned to again pace. "You know how Brook is—she doesn't like to talk about her past. I wouldn't have even known about the trial, except for the fact the man was recently paroled and now women who have a resemblance to Brooke have turned up dead."

His frown deepened and his gaze rocketed up to meet hers. "Dead? What do you mean dead?"

"I mean dead, Nate. As in heart not beating, lungs not breathing, bury you in the ground dead." With each word, her voice rose a little until he feared she'd break into hysterics.

Willow's body shook and tears pooled in her eyes as her normally cool self-control began to slip. "The last one was found in the trunk of his car and apparently he's disappeared."

Now the police think he might have discovered where Brooke's been living and is on his way here to kill her."

"Hey." He reached for Willow's hand and pulled her to the couch. "Calm down. You don't need to be getting so upset in your condition."

Willow shot him a small smile and placed a hand over her rounded belly. "I know." She eased down onto the couch next to him. "I can't help myself. Brooke is my best friend and if anything happened to her I don't know what I would do."

While he understood her feelings, in his line of work, allowing emotions instead of logic to dictate decisions might cost lives. He needed to be practical about this. The police were already working this case, so he could only assume they had a plan in place to protect her. "What do the police say?"

"From what Brooke told me, the Seattle Police are working with Bristol City Florida PD. They're considering the idea of putting her in protective custody, but that means she'd be locked away in some safe house and won't be able to go anywhere or talk to anybody until they find the bastard."

"Considering? Why haven't they done it yet? What in the hell are they waiting for?" Nathan pushed to his feet, scrubbing a hand over his face as he fought to rein in his flaring temper. Getting emotional wouldn't help anyone.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" Willow asked. "If they put her in custody, she'll be no better off than some prisoner. Where's the fairness in that when she was only doing the right thing?"

He had to agree. It didn't seem right to lock Brooke away when she'd done nothing wrong, while some psychopath was

out on the loose. Still, having her safely ensconced in the arms of the Seattle PD would give Nathan the peace of mind he needed. She'd be protected from the killer on the boat, too, but the risk of injury and loss of life was great in his line of work. She'd simply be facing a different type of danger. "Honey, I understand what you're saying. I really do, but even if she is inconvenienced for a little while, she'd be safe."

"Maybe, but she'd be safer if you took her with you. There's no way this psycho can reach her in the middle of the Bering Sea. Plus she trusts you, and Brooke doesn't trust too many people."

He rolled his eyes skyward and prayed for the strength to survive this conversation. He'd rather face forty-foot seas and icy spray than have this debate with Willow. She was like a dog with a bone when it came to something she wanted. Once she'd sunk her teeth into a subject, there was no letting go until she got her way. "She might be safe from him, but she'd have other dangers to face and even if I agreed, there's no guarantee she'd say yes."

Willow's eyes pleaded with him even before she spoke. "Can't you at least ask her? But don't tell her I told you about her situation. I promised her I wouldn't say anything to anyone."

His stoic, salty sea captain demeanor slowly crumbled under the force that was Willow, revealing the compassionate man he diligently kept hidden. He rubbed at his temples, gazing at her from beneath his palm. "If I'm not supposed to know about her situation, then how do I ask her?"

Through her tears, a slow smile spread over her features. "So does that mean you'll do it?"

It was bad enough he had to deal with her crying, but the hope in her tone nearly undid him. "I didn't say that. I'm simply trying to get all my information straight and think this through before I decide."

Her smile faded slightly, replaced in part by a contemplative expression. "Well, Adam said you've been kicking around the idea of adding a sixth deckhand to pick up the slack and do the cooking. Brooke could do that."

Nathan dropped his hand to his side and resisted the urge to curl his fingers into a fist. Adam was lucky he'd gone with Danny to make repairs to the *Talisman*. Otherwise, Nathan might have wrung his brother's neck for opening his mouth. "You want me to put her on deck?" He shook his head. "Honey, no offense, but I think those pregnancy hormones are affecting your brain."

"Okay, maybe she couldn't work the deck, but she could cook and clean for you guys. Come on, Nate. It'd only be for one season, and you know she's a good cook."

He'd had the pleasure of eating Brooke's meals on more than one occasion and definitely agreed. Brooke did know her way around a kitchen. "Yeah, I know she is, but—"

"But nothing," Willow interrupted. She rose from couch and stepped in front of him. All five-feet-six-inches of her, taking his six-foot-two-inch frame head on. "In all the time we've known each other I've never asked you for anything, but I'm asking now. Please do this for me."

Nathan rested his hands on her shoulders while he scrambled to find a way out of this situation. Willow was right. In all the time he'd known her, she'd never asked anything of him, but saying yes wasn't as easy as it sounded. If he agreed, he'd have to answer to his brothers, who were partners in the family's two boats—although he suspected Willow had probably already talked Adam into it. He'd still have to get Danny and Michael on board with the idea, not that it would be a difficult sell.

Danny had hired a female cook a few years back and to date still hadn't suffered any problems. Nathan could use those grounds to lobby for Brooke's position if need be. Besides, if he said no and something bad happened to her, he'd never survive the guilt.

Other boats in the fleet also carried female cooks, though most were usually wives, daughters, or relatives of the crew. Still, it wasn't unheard of. And while he was as suspicious as any of the captains in the fleet, he never believed having a woman on board was bad luck.

After several long minutes, he finally decided being the oldest brother and the captain gave him an advantage. Once he'd convinced his brothers his was the right decision, he'd inform the rest of his crew of his decision and they'd simply have to deal with it. Besides, if he paid her from his own share of the profits, no one would have any reason to complain.

"Fine." He pushed up from the couch. "I'll ask her."

A loud knock on the front door caused Brook to jump and nearly slice her finger on the knife she was using to chop the

romaine for her salad. Nobody ever came to her apartment to visit, and certainly nobody came after dark. She glanced at the microwave clock and debated whether to take the knife with her.

If she lived in a better neighborhood, and for that matter a better apartment, then maybe the few friends she did have would want to come over for dinner or to watch a movie. She'd found this place when she'd first move to Seattle nearly ten years ago. It may have been old, with its chipping plaster walls and creaking floorboards, but it was hers.

The knock came again and she decided, under the circumstances, it might be best to bring the knife along. According to Detective Morrison, who was heading up her case and playing liaison with the Bristol City PD, the last murder had happened only three days ago. She didn't think it was enough time for Wayne to get from Florida to Seattle and locate her, but why take the chance?

She wrapped her fingers around the handle, getting a good grip before starting down the steps. Her hands shook as she prepared for battle. Careful not to make any unnecessary sounds, she eased her way down the rickety steps inside her apartment and sidled up behind the front door.

Would she even be able to recognize Wayne after nearly ten years? The last time she'd seen him was the day of sentencing. People could change a lot in that amount of time, in appearance and personality.

If worst came to worst, she could pretend nobody was home, then make her way back up stairs to call Detective Morrison.

That would only give him another reason for wanting to place her in protective custody. She'd balked at the suggestion, knowing they would hide her away until Wayne was caught, which could be as short as a few days or as long as several months. The thought of spending weeks, even months on end in isolation, with only members of the police department to talk to, seemed a bit tough to take. Besides, she'd made a promise to herself years ago that she'd never allow Wayne to ruin her life again. Up to this point, she'd stuck by her promise, but now, as she hid behind her front door with the real possibility of having a psycho standing on the other side, the idea of protection didn't seem so bad.

With a certain amount of dread, she rose onto her tiptoes and peered through the peephole. Shocked by what she saw, she drew back, not believing her eyes, before going back for a second look. Sure enough, Nathan Lowery stood on the other side of her steel door waiting patiently in the frigid evening air for her to answer. His hair blew wildly in the crisp fall wind, as he tugged his coat up around his ears and blew warm breath into his hands. What was he doing here?

She knew Nathan through her best friend, Willow. He was the oldest of Willow's three brothers-in-law. Unconventional, with an earring and long, straight chestnut hair he kept in a low ponytail, he always reminded her more of a rogue pirate than the captain of a crab-fishing vessel.

Being around men tended to make Brook nervous, but from the moment she'd met Nathan she'd felt oddly at ease with the man, which had given her an entirely different reason to worry. Over the years, their relationship had

evolved from casual acquaintances to friends. Much to her surprise and disappointment, though, he'd never made a move on her, instead choosing to take the friendship route.

She peered through the hole a third time. What could he possibly want with her?

Stuffing the knife behind her back with one hand, she reached to unlock the door with the other.

"Nate?"

"Uh, hi, Brooke."

"What are you doing here?"

"I needed to talk to you about something. Can I come in?"

"Sure." She stepped back, allowing him space to enter. As he passed by, she caught the faint whiff of spices from his cologne and worked to keep herself from melting into a puddle in front him. Nathan Lowery had the ability to make her go weak in the knees, and the feeling both irritated and excited her on levels she'd never enjoyed with any other man.

That exact lack of experience kept her from pursuing anything with him. Not that he'd be interested anyway. While he was obviously here for a reason, she very much doubted it was to woo her into bed.

He climbed the first few steps before stopping to wait while she closed and locked the door. She turned back and noted the scowl on his face. He nodded toward her hand, his gaze locked to her side. "Do you always answer the door with a knife in your hand?"

She glanced down and caught the entryway light glinting off the blade. *Oh, man!* The last thing she wanted was to

have to explain her situation to him. "Um...I was in the middle of cutting up lettuce. Since I don't live in a great neighborhood and rarely get visitors after dark, I..." She shook her head. "Never mind." She'd shared her past with only Willow. Nathan shook her up from the inside out and made her want to trust; he always had, but to do so now, simply because she was scared, didn't make sense.

The crease in his brow deepened at her dismissal of the subject, and she hoped he wouldn't push the topic. He stood in place for several seconds, apparently contemplating her statement, before he turned and began to climb the remainder of the stairs to her apartment. She followed, then crossed in front of him and motioned to the couch. "Have a seat. You want something to drink?"

He shook his head as he sank down onto the cushion. "No, thank you. Actually, I wanted to talk to you about a job opportunity."

Surprised, she paused in front of the refrigerator and turned to face him. That was the last thing she'd expected him to say. Knowing Nathan was the captain of a commercial fishing vessel she couldn't help but wonder why he'd need her services. "What kind of job opportunity?"

"I need someone to cook for my crew during king crab season. Willow tells me you're between jobs right now and she thought you might be interested."

Her hand flexed on the knife handle, just a small tremor, but she put the knife on the counter, just in case. She picked up a dishtowel and busied her hands by drying them to cover her nervousness. "You want me to work on your boat?"

"Well, yeah, if you're interested."

A job offer hadn't been what she'd expected from Nathan, but she hadn't planned to walk into work two weeks ago and learn that the new restaurant owner was firing the entire kitchen staff either. She'd been at Ponteros for over a year and because of staff turnover had spent countless hours working overtime and climbing her way up to sous-chef. It was a position where she could not only make a name for herself in the culinary world, but would finally give her a paycheck that would cover more than just rent and utilities. To have it ripped out from under her had been disheartening to say the least.

Working on a crab boat wouldn't provide her any of the resume-building prestige she needed to get her foot in the door at the big restaurants, but from what Willow told her, there was good money made on the Bering Sea. And when she boiled everything right down to it, prestige didn't pay the bills.

Before she could answer, he began again. "You should know, it's not an easy job and it could get very dangerous, even deadly."

She thought about Wayne and her current situation. It couldn't possibly be more dangerous than what she was already facing if he found her. Plus, being out of Seattle on a fishing vessel with two of the Lowery men would afford her both protection and freedom, a combination she wouldn't be able to keep if she said no. Before she had time to rethink her decision and chicken out, she spoke. "I'll do it."

"Really?" His lips tipped into a smile. "Good. I'll be by around six Saturday morning to pick you up. You'll be gone for at least a month, maybe up to six weeks, and we'll only be in port a couple of times to offload. Since those will be your only opportunities to pick up any necessities, make sure you bring enough personal needs stuff to last."

She nodded. "What sort of clothing?"

"Warm. It gets damn cold out there. Sweatshirts and blue jeans and pack some long underwear if you have it. Got any of that light-weight survival gear?"

She shook her head in the negative, and he shrugged.

"Boots are preferred, but since you won't be working the deck, you can wear sneakers if you like. We have a small washer and dryer on the boat, so I'd prefer if you didn't pack more than around a week's worth of clothing. We simply don't have the room."

She nearly smiled. He obviously didn't know who he was talking to. In those first few months after leaving Florida, she'd gotten by with just the clothes she'd stuffed in a single suitcase. Even now, years after, she wasn't big on clutter. Carrying light was something she excelled at. "Okay. Is there anything else I need to know?"

"You'll be the only woman."

His words sent a prickle of fear dancing across her skin and she let out a tentative, "I see." Living on a boat with five men, three of whom she didn't know changed the rules a little.

As if he sensed her nervousness, he placed a gentle hand over hers. "Don't worry. You already know Adam and me. The

other three on our boat are hired hands. They're good people and won't give you a hard time, but if they do, you let me know." He squeezed her hand. "Okay?"

She nodded and swallowed hard, sending the rising bile in her throat back where it belonged. Nathan's offer gave her the perfect opportunity to hide and make some money at the same time. She couldn't let her unfounded fear of men to get in her way. To date, no other man but Wayne had ever hurt her, and she had absolutely no reason to think Nathan or Adam would let any of the crew do anything sinister. Besides, she could take care of herself. She'd been doing it for nearly ten years now.

"We'll be fishing in tandem with my brother Danny's boat the *Talisman*, but you won't have to worry about him or any of his crew except for when we're in port. You remember Danny, right?"

Still too shaken by the idea of being the only woman on the boat, she just nodded. Danny was the next oldest of the four Lowery brothers and didn't show up to many family events. She'd seen him at a few special holidays over the years, but hadn't made the same effort to get to know him that she had with Nathan.

Nathan let go and stood. "Great. I'm happy to have you as part of my crew. I can't wait to taste some of your great cooking again. I can't wait to be rid of Adam's burned-to-a-crisp burgers."

Despite her nerves, Brooke finally found the ability to speak and hoped she didn't sound as though she'd choked on a frog. "I'll try not to disappoint."

His look turned soft and he raised his hand to brush a thumb along her cheek. The contact sent an unfamiliar wave of desire rushing through her and Brook barely resisted the urge to turn into his touch.

"I doubt you could disappoint me, even if you wanted to," he said, letting his hand fall away.

What in the hell had that been about? She wanted to say something, anything, but once again, the power of speech failed her. Instead, she stood still, and watched him walk to the steps. With one foot on the riser, he stopped and smiled. "I'll see you Saturday." He disappeared down the staircase. Seconds later, she heard the door open and close and sank down to the sofa cushions.

Oh my God, what did I just get myself into?

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CHAPTER 2

Nathan pulled his F-150 to a stop in front of Brooke's apartment, threw it in park and glanced at his watch. *Five-fifty-five. Right on time.* He blew out a long breath and fought to control his nerves while his stomach twisted and flopped. For the first time in years, he felt as though he was going to vomit. He blamed his condition on missing breakfast, even if it wasn't the truth.

Everything about this situation screamed mistake, yet here he was, parked on the street in front of her storefront apartment. It wasn't just his own long dormant feelings toward her he needed to address, but the inevitable fact that, aside from Adam, he'd have to win the rest of his crew over to the idea of having a woman aboard.

Yes, he was the captain and what he said went, but his crew had feelings and opinions of their own they would want to share. He only hoped Brooke's cooking would curb any grumbling among the ranks.

The crew was only a small part of his much bigger problem. No way could having her trapped on a boat for weeks on end bode well for him. He was sure she could handle the job just fine. That wasn't the problem. Being so close to her for such a long period of time was. He'd been infatuated with her for years, but chose not to pursue something more substantial with her once he realized how skittish she was around men.

Actually, he'd been surprised she'd wanted to go considering her phobia. Then again, maybe over the years she'd managed to overcome her fear. On that thought, his heart sped up a little. Before he could ponder his mental wanderings any further, the front door opened and Brooke emerged. With a model's cheekbones and smooth creamy skin atypical for a red-head, she looked a goddess. He noticed that this morning her cheeks were flushed a dusky pink in the early morning light. She turned to lock the door, and Nathan could almost picture her tiny frame through the wool coat she wore. Her curly auburn hair was in a high ponytail, which touched the middle of her black pea coat. Black gloves covered each hand, hiding her slender fingers, while a matching black scarf flapped loosely in the breeze and protected her swan-like neck against the morning chill.

Despite the piranhas gnawing on his stomach lining, Nathan forced a smile and stepped out of the truck. After all, it wasn't her fault he was second-guessing his decision simply because he was attracted to her. No matter what happened, he was determined to keep this trip all business and preserve the friendship they shared. He stepped out, rounded the back of the truck and took the large duffle bag from her shoulder. "Hi."

She grinned, and Nathan noted how it didn't quite reach her eyes. In all the years he'd known her, he'd never seen her smile reach her eyes. Often times he'd wondered why she always looked so sad, like the weight of the world rested on her narrow shoulders alone. Now wasn't the time to revisit that question.

"Hi. Were you waiting long?"

"Nope." He set the bag down in the back of the truck, then opened the passenger door for her. "I just got here."

"Good." She slid into the seat and set the smaller bag on her lap. "I was watching for you, but I had to go to the bathroom. When I came back to the window, I saw you were here."

"Not a problem. Are you sure you're ready for this?" He was sure he wasn't.

She nodded. "As I'll ever be."

"Good. Let's get going."

Hoping to mask his nervousness Nathan closed her door, then slid into the driver's seat and set off for the marina. Tension radiated off her frame, adding to his own uneasiness while they drove in silence through the early morning traffic. He reached over and turned up the radio, hoping the distraction would bring back a level of comfort to their situation. When still she didn't speak, he decided it was time to try a different tactic. No way could they survive the entire trip tiptoeing around each other. It simply wasn't practical.

"Nervous?" he finally asked.

"A little," she confessed. "I mean, I've been on boats before. When I was little, my father used to take us out on his boat. I'm sure it's nothing compared to yours, but I do remember it being a lot of fun. Sometimes the water would be so clear my brother Brent and I used to dive off the back and swim with the fish."

She knew how to swim. Her ability to swim had been one of about a dozen questions he'd thought to ask after he'd left

her apartment that day. Finding out she could without needing to ask made his life that much easier.

The last thing he wanted was to bombard her with a bunch of questions that would no doubt frighten her. He could almost bet she didn't have a life insurance policy or a will and, at this point, asking her those questions would only serve to frighten her more. Maybe some inane small talk was in order. "So your dad is a fisherman?"

She shook her head and her smile slowly dissipated. "No. He just liked having his own boat. I mean we did do some fishing, but it was all for sport. I was ten the last time he took us out on the water."

"That's a long time to go between boating trips. Why so long ago?"

Her gaze fell to her still gloved hands. "He died."

Way to go, Lowery. Nice way to start the season. Nathan wanted to kick himself. Why hadn't he known that information before now? How was it he'd never questioned her about her family at one of the cookouts? Maybe he had and she'd changed the subject on him. One thing he'd learned about Brooke was she was a master at evading personal questions. Nathan had to wonder if even Willow knew about Brooke's father.

That, too, would be a question for another day. Right now, Brooke had provided him with ammunition for more discussion. He only hoped she wouldn't clam up again. "I'm sorry. How old were you when he passed?"

"Almost eleven. He'd taken my brother and me to the movies. We were on our way home when we were involved in

an auto accident. Dad never wore his seatbelt, but he made us wear ours all the time. That's probably what saves our lives, but the impact killed him."

"That must've been horrible for you."

She nodded, and he noted how she swallowed hard before she spoke again.

"It was. It's gotten easier to deal with as the years have passed, but every once in a while, I'll have a moment where I really miss him a lot."

Nathan struggled for the appropriate words, but nothing came to mind. He'd been lucky his own childhood had been one filled with joy and family. It wasn't until he was an adult that his own tragedy had taken place. Thankfully, his family had been there to help him pick up the pieces. He couldn't help but wonder if Brooke's remaining family had given her the same support at such a tender age.

She shifted and turned her head to look out the window. By her body language, he was pretty sure she was through talking for the moment. Maybe it would be best if he just changed the subject all together.

"Adam did a little grocery shopping for the trip up, but we'll do the bulk of it when we get to Dutch. If there's something specific you want to make, be sure to let us know. That way we can get everything you'll need. Or if you'd feel more comfortable, you're welcome to go with Adam and the rest of us to shop."

"Okay."

Another silence fell between them as he switched lanes and took the next exit ramp. Did her silence still stem from

nervousness or had their conversation about her father shifted her thoughts to something more subdued? Not wanting to think about her being sad, he chose the former hoping a bad case of nerves was causing her to clam up. "It's okay, you know."

"What's okay?"

"Being nervous."

"Who says I'm nervous?" she retorted, looking indignant that he'd assume such a thing.

He tried but couldn't hide his smile at the spirited personality beneath her tough exterior. "You just did a few minutes go. I'm telling you it's okay to feel that way. You're about to do something new and scary. It's pushing you outside your comfort zone and you're feeling it." He certainly was.

A small smile claimed her features and she cast a quick glance at him. "Wow, a crab boat captain and a therapist. Where *do* you find the time?"

While he appreciated the sarcasm she flung his direction, he also knew she used it as a defense mechanism, a way of deflecting her true feelings without bluntly telling people to butt out. He'd seen her use it time and again at parties and cookouts. If she thought it would work on him, she was sorely mistaken.

Choosing to ignore her comment, he continued, "You'd be surprised at what I've learned over the years. I've seen grown men who've boasted how they were the toughest SOB on earth be reduced to a quivering puddle of goo by one Bering Sea storm. Yet, I've seen the smallest man, one that barely

outweighed the coil of shot he was supposed to haul, work hard and climb the ladder all the way up to captain." He'd also seen death first hand and had lost more friends to the sea than he could count on two hands, but he didn't think it best to mention that right now. "You just never know if you're suited for that kind of work until you try it."

She cocked her head to one side and cast a thoughtful look his direction. "Just how old are you?"

"I turned thirty-eight last month." He watched her out of the corner of his eye. Her perfect pink lips, pursed together at the same time her sea green eyes flicked upward as if she were thinking. Unfortunately, he knew exactly what she was trying to figure out. "That means I was eleven when you were born and twenty-one when you were ten."

"I never realized what a big difference there was in our ages."

Unfortunately, he had and was still trying to come to terms with it. It wasn't as if he was robbing the cradle and right now, he wasn't doing anything but talking to her. Still, the thought had crossed his mind. If they ever did become involved, would he be able to see past the ten-year-old girl who still suffered a broken heart and find the mature woman within? "It's not as big a deal now you're an adult," he said, more for himself than her.

She arched a delicate brow. "What isn't?"

"Nothing. I'm just saying we're both adults is all." Thankful at the opportunity to change the subject, he pulled into the marina lot and parked. "We're here."

She drew in a deep breath and held it. "Yes, I suppose we are."

He reached across the seat and patted her hand. "You'll do fine."

"I know, but I'm just a little worried about how the crew will feel. I know Adam's okay with my being here, but what about the other men? I read somewhere that fishermen tend to be superstitious and having a woman on board is considered bad luck."

Nathan opened his door and stepped out. "It's true that some fishermen are superstitious, and I have my fair share of superstitions, but having a woman on board isn't one of them."

"Yes, but what about your crew?"

"They'll be fine with it, especially after they taste your wonderful cooking."

He rounded the truck and grabbed his bag from the back. "You want to win them over, then cater to them. Find out what their favorite meals are and cook them. Help the guys out when they're tired and clean up after them. Go out of your way to make them feel special and you'll be in with no problem."

He grabbed hold of her bag. "Here, let me carry that."

She wiggled away and turned to face him a look of defiance plastered across her delicate features. "Like hell."

"Excuse me?"

"You're my boss, not my boyfriend. How would it look if I let you carry my stuff on board?"

Well! There was that spitfire attitude. He had to admit, he'd like to see more of it. With hands in the air, he backed away from her. "Okay, then. Follow me."

He could only hope her enthusiasm to prove herself lasted once she got a real taste of the Bering Sea.

Brooke shifted her feet to steady herself and hoped the Dramamine she took earlier would work. She'd spent a lot of time on her father's boat when she was younger and never remembered getting seasick. Still, it had been nearly twenty years since the last time she'd stepped foot off dry land and at one-hundred-thirty-eight-feet, the *Northern Lights* made her father's cabin cruiser look like a row boat. Besides, from what Nathan and Adam had told her about the Bering Sea, it wasn't going to be the Gulf of Mexico waters. She'd rather be cautious than sorry.

Already the men were outside checking equipment and making any last minute repairs before the season started. From the way Adam explained it, they'd need to get to Dutch Harbor first and retrieve their equipment for the job. Then they would head out to sea before they'd actually start catching crab.

She'd told Nathan that she wanted to be treated like any other member of his crew, but discovering she was supposed to sleep in a room where four other men would be bunking was definitely more than she'd bargained for. To keep from causing problems, she'd dutifully put her things away and pretended it hadn't bothered her. No way could she bring herself to sleep that close to men she didn't know. She'd simply have to find someplace else to bed down. The only

other real place to sleep would be the built-in booth seat where the crew ate their meals. It wouldn't be the most comfortable place, but then this trip had nothing to do with comfort. It would do.

Then there was the whole issue of cleaning. After taking stock of the cleaning supplies on board, she quickly realized that, while the men had the means to clean, for whatever reason, they didn't, or at least didn't do it well. No way would she take a shower in that bathroom until she'd had a chance to scrub it from top to bottom. Who knew what kind of nasty bacteria was growing on that shower floor? Good thing she'd thought to bring rubber dish gloves to protect her hands, but too bad she hadn't thought to bring a mask as a barrier against the mold and mildew she'd be eliminating in the next few days.

Her stomach fluttered and for a split second, she worried she might be getting seasick. Then the fine hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention and she realized she wasn't alone. She spun on her heel to find Nathan standing directly behind her, leaning against the counter, arms folded over the wide expanse of his chest, hiding the *Northern Lights* logo on the front of his green sweatshirt. The same color green as his eyes, she noted. His long chestnut hair, normally held back by a leather thong lay draped over each shoulder, giving him that rogue pirate look she liked so well.

He smiled, revealing the two small dimples in his squared chin, and Brooke swore she was going to melt before his eyes. The man's smile could thaw ice. "You scared me," she finally managed to say and held a hand up to cover her heart.

"I didn't mean to." He pushed off the counter and spanned the short space between them. "You looked like you were in deep thought and I didn't want to interrupt."

"Oh, I...um...I was just thinking I needed to start making a list of meals so I'd know what food we'd need to get at the store."

Nathan leaned in close and the steady beat of her heart doubled. His face was mere inches from hers, their lips millimeters apart. Was he about to kiss her and if he was, how exactly did she feel about that? Would she kiss him back? There wasn't any doubt in her mind that she liked Nathan, a lot, but relationships were not her thing.

She'd never managed anything close to what most people deemed a "real" or "long-term" relationship, always cutting away before the third date. Some people called her lack of commitment fear. She called it self-preservation. Then, none of the previous men in her life had ever created the same magnetic pull she felt around Nathan. There were reasons, she reminded herself, why she never let men get close and she wasn't about to start now, no matter how attracted she was to Nathan Lowery.

Before she could open her mouth to ask what he was doing, he reached above her head, opened the cabinet and pulled a coffee mug from inside. "You made coffee, right?"

Relief and disappointment cascaded through her veins. Nathan was too smart to start something with her while he was working. She needed to remember that. Feeling more than a little stupid for thinking what she had, Brooke nodded and pointed toward the full pot sitting safely in its carafe.

"Adam said my number one priority was to make sure I had fresh coffee available at all times. It was the first thing I did."

His smile widened. "Good. Are you still nervous?"

"No," she shot back much quicker than she should have and bit down on her bottom lip in embarrassment. *Nice, Brooke! Very smooth. So much for keeping your feelings in check. Why not just broadcast to the world that you're interested in the man?* "What I meant was—"

He set his cup down on the counter and turned to face her, placing a hand on each shoulder. "Hey, like I told you before, it's okay to be a little nervous. This is all new and strange to you. Honestly, I'd probably be worried if you weren't."

He assumed her nervousness was because of the job and not him. She'd go with that if it meant keeping her true feelings hidden. "Okay, so I am a bit nervous. I just don't want to screw anything up."

He tugged her into a quick hug and dropped a soft kiss on her hair. "You won't. I have faith in you."

He pulled away, snagged his cup and headed back up to the wheelhouse. Adam had told her that Nathan was a different person on the boat. That he took his job very seriously. *We don't coddle people and we don't spare their feelings when they screw up. So be prepared.* Adam's words pinged around inside her head like a pinball.

Then what had that been about, because it certainly wasn't a "not spare her feelings" moment?

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CHAPTER 3

Nathan perused the racks of outerwear looking for one in an extra small. Considering women didn't fish for crab, it wasn't likely he'd find one, which presented a slight problem. If he'd been thinking ahead of time, he'd have taken Brooke to a place in Seattle where he would have had a better chance at outfitting her with what she needed. It was too late for that so he'd simply have to make do.

He pulled a small waterproof jacket off the rack and handed it to Brooke.

She took the garment from him and pulled it over her head. "Can I ask why I need this stuff if I'm not going to be on deck?"

Since they'd left Seattle, she appeared to have worked through her initial fears and seemed to be settling in nicely. Not keen on the idea of flying her back, Nathan was thrilled to see her making the adjustment.

Almost from the moment they'd docked in Dutch Harbor, she'd been full of questions, asking how things worked and why the men did things one way versus another. He'd even noticed at one point how the sadness she often carried seemed to have disappeared. He couldn't explain why it was gone; he was only glad it was.

"Because, if you should somehow end up on deck—which you shouldn't—but if you do, I want you in the right gear. Without the appropriate coverage, you'll easily get soaked to the bone by a single wave over the wheelhouse. The water is

just above freezing and it'd take no time for hypothermia to set in."

She pulled the jacket over her head and held out her arms for his inspection, her lips curled in a playful smile. "It's a little big."

Nathan rubbed his chin with his thumb and forefinger, while he inspected the garment. "You're right and that's the smallest they come in that brand. Guess we'll need to try a different manufacturer."

She pulled the hooded jacket over her head and handed it back to him. "I'm guessing you don't get a lot of women up here wanting to fish."

He placed the jacket back on the hanger and turned her toward another rack a few aisles away. "Not really. If there are any women, they're usually doing your job, so there's not really a demand for small sizes." He scanned the rack and pulled a bright yellow hooded jacket from its hanger. "Here, try this."

She repeated the process until they'd finally settled on the best fitting gear he could find though, even an extra small it was still a little big on her.

"Okay." Nathan clapped his hands together. "Now to get you a survival suit. Stay put for a minute while I talk to the clerk."

He walked toward the counter, catching Brooke watching him while she supposedly perused the racks of outerwear. This probably seemed a bit over the top for her, considering the job was cooking. Maybe she didn't need all the gear, but

knowing she'd have it made him feel better. His reasons were simple—he wanted her prepared for anything.

After briefly speaking with the clerk, he returned to where Brooke stood waiting. "The suits usually come as a one size fits all, but there sometimes is a noticeable difference in how they fit from one person to the next. While we have several extra on our boat already I've seen men twice your size fit in them. I don't think they'd conform to you the way we need them to. The clerk has a couple of suits from manufacturers that run on the small side. She's going to dig them out for us. They'll need to fit like a glove if you're going to pass the coast guard inspection. I want you to try them on before we decide which one to buy."

"Here you go, Mr. Lowery. Just let me know which one you want."

"Thank you," he said to the sales clerk before turning back to Brooke. He picked up the first bag and held it out for her. "Inside this bag is the one thing that'll hopefully keep you alive long enough for the coast guard to find you if the boat should sink. Since you've never put one of these on before, I'm going to help you. Be aware you'll have to learn how to don one without help before you'll be allowed to sail out with us."

She nodded. "So what do I do?"

Nathan shook the suit free, then unrolled it so it lay flat on the floor. "You need to get in."

"Do I leave my clothes on?"

He tried not to smile. He really did, but in the end, he couldn't help himself. "As much as I'd like to get a peek at

that gorgeous body of yours, the honorable man in me dictates that I tell the truth. Yes, you leave your clothes on."

Her lips tilted up at the corners and her cheeks flushed a dusty rose color. He wondered if her skin looked so pink and lovely after making love. *Whoa, buddy, back the boat up!* Thoughts like that had no room in his head during this trip.

Taking a step back, he worked to shake loose his last mental wanderings as she climbed into the suit and began pulling it up and over her body, punching her arms through each sleeve. "It seems a little loose."

Trying to keep his mind on the task, Nathan studied the suit. "Yeah, I think you're right. Don't bother zipping it. Just take it off and try the other one on."

She wiggled out of one garment and into the other, and struggled to get her arms in the sleeves. "Is it supposed to be this tight?"

"Yes. The better the fit, the less chance the suit will let icy water in."

She wrangled her second arm into the sleeve, then groped around for the zipper.

"Here, let me do that." Nathan reached for the zipper. It was supposed to be a benign gesture meant to help her, but when his hand brushed against her abdomen, sparks raced through his fingers and up his arm. She sucked in a quick breath, and his gaze flicked up to meet hers. Her eyes radiated her surprise and something more. That something more drew him in and pulled at his very soul.

As much as he wanted to deny it, he couldn't. The attraction was too great, too powerful for him to ignore.

Before he even realized he'd done it, his other hand spanned her waist, holding her in place. For a few heartbeats, their surroundings faded away, and he had a sudden overwhelming urge to lean over and kiss her.

"Um...I think I have it now," she said, breaking the silent link they shared.

Nathan let go and took a much needed step back, giving them both some space. If he didn't get his renegade emotions under control now, this season was going to be pure hell.

He cleared his throat. "I think that's the one."

"I'm supposed to do what?" Unsure she'd heard him correctly, Brooke stared down at the gear, which only hours ago they'd purchased on Nathan's dime. She certainly hadn't been comfortable with him spending nearly a thousand dollars on equipment she might never wear and would, hopefully, never need. Yet, he'd insisted on paying, citing the fact he'd approached her about the job and wouldn't feel right if she had to pay for her own gear. Knowing she didn't have the money in her bank account to both cover her bills and pay for the outerwear, she'd conceded. Her only consolation was the fact at the end of the season she'd have enough money to pay him back. Brooke Hague didn't take charity from anyone—not anymore.

"You need to be able to get in to your survival suit in less than a minute. Adam will walk you through the process a few times, then you can try it on your own."

"Why?"

"Because, like I said back at the store, if we'd need to abandon ship, that survival suit is what's going to keep you

alive long enough for the coast guard to find you. Without it, you're dead in minutes."

A quick full body shiver shimmied up her spine and spun outward. Well, wasn't that a scary as hell prospect? Die at the hands of a mad man or possibly freeze to death in the Bering Sea. *Nice choice.* "Okay. Show me what to do."

Twenty minutes later, Brooke was nearly exhausted from pulling the suit on and off, but had managed to beat the time. With a look of approval plastered across his face, Nathan smiled. "Good. Now we're going to practice abandon ship procedures."

She eyed him warily, very much wishing she could crawl into her bunk instead. "Which entails?"

He pointed to the small pack Adam held. "Adam's going to throw that pack into the water and pull the cord to inflate the life raft. Then, while wearing your survival suit, you're going to jump into the water, swim to the raft and climb in."

Mouth agape, she stared wide eyed up at him. "I'm supposed to willingly jump into the water?"

He nodded. "That's part of the drill."

"That may be, but you said the water temperature is just above freezing."

The smile he wore disappeared and he stepped into her space, forcing Brooke to step back in order to look up at him. Adam had warned her on the trip up that Nathan didn't appreciate having his orders questioned. Now she understood what he'd meant. It wasn't so much anger she saw in Nathan's emerald eyes, but disapproval.

"That's right. And out there"—he pointed toward the harbor entrance—"the water won't be nearly as calm as it is inside this harbor. We run into trouble and have to abandon ship, you'll need to know what you're doing or you *will* die."

The tone in his voice told her he wasn't joking in the least. Still, something didn't seem right and she couldn't help but ask the question bouncing around inside her head. She hadn't survived for the last ten years by rolling over and playing dead whenever someone dictated it. "Okay, but why don't you have to go through the drill with us?"

Boy, oh, boy, was that the wrong question to ask. He wrapped his fingers around her bicep, sending a wicked chill through the neoprene that she imagined was colder than the water she was about to jump into. Then he leaned over and whispered against her ear, "Because I'm the captain. Now, if you don't want to do this, I can easily call the Dutch Harbor police and they can make sure you're safely delivered back into the capable hands of the Seattle PD."

Shock raced through her system as his words took root. How did he know about her situation and the police's involvement? More importantly, how did it tie to her being here?

Wide-eyed and mouth agape, she stared up at him, knowing those questions would have to wait until later when she could talk to him in private. She swallowed hard, nodded, turned and walked to the end of the deck to wait for the order to jump.

Two hours later, his words still echoed in her ears as she busied herself in the galley, stocking shelves with all the food

staples that would keep the crew fueled and working over the next few weeks. Her only explanation for him knowing was that Willow had told him about the trial and the danger she now faced. Willow was the only person she'd confided in.

She'd thought it odd when she called Detective Morrison to let him know about the job opportunity and he'd so easily agreed to let her go. Now she had to wonder if Willow had given Nathan the necessary information to clear the trip without her knowledge.

She loved Willow like a sister, but damn the woman couldn't keep a secret to save her life. It wasn't any wonder why she hadn't told Willow everything about her past. The last thing she needed was Nathan or any of her other friends looking at her differently because of something she'd just as soon forget ever happened.

Footfalls behind her grew louder against the linoleum, then stopped. She turned to find Nathan standing directly behind her, blocking her only exit from the kitchen. After the situation earlier, she wondered if he was there to lecture her further on the need to follow orders. She'd certainly gotten a good tongue-lashing from Adam after the drill ended. He'd made it clear that her safety was top priority for them and she needed to trust them when they told her to do something. Unfortunately, trust wasn't something that came easy to her and taking that particular leap of faith would require every ounce of courage she could muster.

Her nerves danced and she set a can of baked beans onto the counter and waited for him to speak.

"About earlier," he began.

Oh, boy, here it comes. "I'm really sorry about that," she quickly offered, hoping to stem the lecture she knew was coming. "You have to understand, I'm not one to blindly take orders. I like to ask questions and have all available information in front of me before I do something stupid, like jump into nearly freezing water."

Nathan paused and his mouth curved slightly, not quite making it into a smile. She'd take that as a good sign.

"And you need to understand I'm not used to having my authority questioned. If I tell you to do something, you can rest assure there's a damn good reason for it. Your life, just like the lives of Adam and the others on this boat, are my responsibility and I don't take that job lightly. On the other hand..." He walked into the galley, past where she remained in front of the stove and snagged the coffee pot. "I'm also not used to having greenhorns on board. Especially one who doesn't have a clue of what she's about to get herself into."

She wanted to pick up the can of beans and continue stocking the shelves, to step to the sink and find some dishes to wash, anything that would keep her hands busy and mask her nervousness. Instead, she remained in place and stupidly lobbed the next volley into his court. "You're the one who offered me the job."

He nodded, then tasted the coffee. "You're right, I did, and because of that, I'm going to try and have extra patience with you. You still have a lot to learn before I'll be comfortable with your position here. In order to facilitate that process, I want you to feel free to ask all the questions you can think of and I'll do my best to answer them. However, if you set foot

on deck when you've been told not to, you'll see a side of me you'll wish you hadn't, okay?"

If curiosity really did kill the cat, then Brooke was sure she had to be part feline and had probably used up about half of her nine lives. "Okay, but why am I not allowed on deck?"

He pushed off the counter, moved in front of where she stood and set his cup down beside her. With one hand on either side of her, he boxed her in and stared her directly in the face. His look wasn't one of anger or even frustration, but it was deadly serious. "The deck is the most dangerous place on this boat. Accidents happen. People can die out there and, despite what you might think, I'm actually quite fond of you."

She felt the pressure on her head and realized he'd snagged her ponytail. In an attempt to ease the sting from his pull on her hair, she tipped her head up, lifting her chin. It was a position that once again brought their lips close, and she could feel the heat of his breath against her skin, smell the subtle scent of mint from the gum he'd chewed.

He leaned in, bridging the distance, and Brooke lids fell closed in anticipation of the kiss, but instead of their lips connecting, he brushed the lightest of kisses over her closed eyes. "I don't want you injured." He kissed one eye. "Maimed." He kissed the second. "Or worse." He punctuated the last word with a gentle kiss on the tip of her nose.

She swallowed audibly. "Worse?"

He pulled away slowly and smiled down at her. "We won't talk about the worse, but be aware that it could happen." He stepped away from her, grabbed his mug and turned on his heel, only to pause and look over his shoulder at her from the

steps. "I've never lost a crewmember while I've been captain. I wouldn't want that streak to end with you."

With those final words for her to chew over, he quickly ascended the steps, disappearing topside.

Brooke remained fixed in place, staring at the empty steps, still enjoying the aftereffects of having his lips on her. Despite the sternness of his tone, it was the intensity of his eyes which had held her riveted in place. No way had she been imaging the looks he'd been giving her since that first day back in her apartment. Now he'd taken it a step farther by kissing her, but not in the traditional manner. She lifted a hand to her eye, touching the lid where moments earlier his lips had been.

She'd definitely felt the sparks between them and her own desire to act on those feelings, but a kiss on the nose was something you gave your sister or a friend, not a prospective lover. Not that she actually expected him to see her as such. Her dating history encompassed only three men over a ten-year period, all of whom she'd dumped after the third date. She simply wouldn't be comfortable making the first move.

Relationships had never been something she'd done well with and no way would she ruin her friendship with him over what might be a miscommunication. Especially when every time she thought he was going to do something more than invade her space he flipped a switch and turned on the captain mode, once again distancing himself from her.

Maybe he was as confused about his feelings as she was about hers, or maybe she was totally off base and reading his signals completely wrong. Either way, at the rate they were

going, she had no doubt that this was going to be a very long season.

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CHAPTER 4

Brooke couldn't stop her shakes as she, Nathan, Adam and the other three crewmembers walked up the path leading into the local bar. Bars meant drinking, and drinking inevitably led to angry, pushy men who thought they could have their way with her simply because they were stronger.

For years, she'd struggled to forget the foul stench of alcohol. Now she was walking directly into what she knew would end up being a bad situation. Back on the boat, she'd tried to make excuses as to why she couldn't come with them for the traditional before season drink. She'd thought of every excuse in the book and even tried to pull out the tried and true "women's problem" issue, only to have Nathan trump her time and again. Frustrated at the fact he could tell she was lying when he started pushing her for the real reason why she didn't want to go, Brooke had given in to avoid airing her sordid past.

"You cold?" he asked as he walked with a gentle hand pressed to the middle of her back.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Why?"

"Because I can feel you shaking."

"I'm fine," she managed to say before Adam opened the door and ushered everyone inside.

The smell of alcohol and stale cigarettes assaulted her nose, drawing out dormant memories. An intense pain she hadn't felt for years reared its ugly head, and she immediately had to push down the urge to vomit. Who knew

that nearly ten years removed from that night a simple smell could bring everything back with such clarity.

Directly across from her against the far wall was the bar. It ran the length of the wall, then turned and wrapped around the next wall, continuing out of sight. Typical of a tavern, the lights were low, combining with the thick pall of cigarette smoke to create a murkiness in the room. From somewhere in the ceiling, old speakers pumped out decades-old rock music, just barely loud enough for her to hear.

"Nathan!" a male voice yelled over the drone of men cavorting over their ales, many probably telling the same fishing stories for the umpteenth time.

Brooke searched the room for the voice and eventually spotted Danny in the corner with his crew. He waved a hand, pointing to a table next to where he sat. The men turned in that direction and began weaving their way through, with Brooke in tow. She certainly didn't want to end up separated from them in a place like this.

"Well, if it isn't the *Northern Lights'* crew, and look what they have with them this year, boys." A man sitting at a table they passed raised his hand, giving Nathan a high five.

Nathan stopped and turned his attention to the man. "Carter, how the hell are ya?" Nathan asked, slapping hands with the man.

"Been good. How 'bout yourself?"

"Can't complain," Nathan retorted.

"I see your crew has gotten better looking from last year."

Brooke's back straightened at the mention of her and she edged slightly closer to Adam.

Nathan snagged her by the wrist and gently tugged her toward him, wrapping his arm around her shoulder when she was close enough. "Carter, this is Brooke. She's our cook for this season."

The man gave Brooke the once-over. She felt exposed, as if the man had x-ray vision and could not only picture her naked, but see all her innermost secrets. It was everything she could do not to lift her arms and cover herself in the face of his ogling.

"Well, hell, Nathan. She's like a fucking siren. With her on board, who needs bait? Just put her picture in the pot. Once the crabs got a look at her, they'd willingly climb inside."

She knew the man had meant to give her a compliment, but damned if she didn't feel as though he were sizing her up like a wolf about to pounce on his prey.

Completely oblivious to her feelings Nathan let out a chuckle and glanced down at her. "You may be right, Carter. I guess if we run out of bait we'll have to try that." With his free hand, he patted the man on the shoulder. "We're gonna go have a drink with my brother and his crew. You have a safe trip out there."

"You, too, Nathan. I hear she's going to be a might foul this year so make sure you're on your toes. I want to be able to trade stories with you next season."

Nathan turned them away and continued his trek to the empty table Danny held for them. "Who was that?" Brooke asked.

"Carter Shoemaker. He's captain of the *Trade Winds*."

"Sounds like a boat you'd find in the Caribbean, not the Bering Sea."

Nathan laughed. "That's the point. He named the boat after the place he plans to retire. He said that way it would be a constant reminder of what he was working for."

They neared the table, and Danny stood, enveloping her in a hug. "It's good to see you, Brooke."

"Yeah, you, too." She slipped into the booth side of the empty table. She wanted to her back to the wall so she could see everything going on in the room. Nathan slid into the seat next to her, while Adam took up residence in the chair on the end. Ensconced between the two men she trusted most, Brooke relaxed slightly. If nothing else, she knew she was safe as long as she stayed with them.

The waitress sidled up to the table to take their drink orders. One thing Brooke wasn't willing to do was drink. The vile stuff had lead to nothing but pain in her life. She ordered a cola and waited for the looks to come her way. Instead, the men all gave their own orders, never casting one glance in her direction. Much to her surprise, Nathan ordered one shot and a cola also.

After the waitress walked away, Brooke turned to him. "You don't drink?"

Nathan shook his head. "I have one shot with the guys to celebrate the new season. I'll have one at the end of the season, too, but as a general rule I never drink during the fishing season. The last thing I need is to drink one too many and end up with a hangover in a storm. That's not to say I don't like a beer now and then, but I know my limits."

She had to admire a man who knew when, where and how much to drink. Too bad her stepfather hadn't been as disciplined.

The conversation turned toward the upcoming season, and Brooke listened intently to the discussions, knowing the more she learned the better off she'd be. She'd discovered during the emergency drills earlier in the day how unprepared she was for the trip at hand. Listening to the men might help her learn some of what she still didn't know.

Two hours and three colas later, Brooke's head was pounding from the wealth of information the men had provided. They'd answered her questions, told stories about other boat and of their own experiences, until she found herself wondering if she'd made the wrong decision in coming. Sometimes ignorance really was bliss. For several minutes, she'd been putting off going to the bathroom. She knew it was stupid, but the idea of walking past all the men in the bar had kept her safely ensconced between Nathan and Adam. Now she swore her bladder was going to burst if she didn't go soon. "Where's the ladies room."

Adam raised a hand and pointed. "Around the corner on the other end of the bar, right next to the men's room."

Gathering the courage she needed, Brooke pushed from the booth seat and headed for the restroom, making sure to look like she belonged. If she appeared confident, maybe everyone else would leave her alone. Then again, maybe the looks she thought she was getting were all in her imagination and nobody cared about her being there anyway.

She almost laughed out loud at that thought. How many years had she lived looking over her shoulder, taking self-defense class after class and never had anything happened to her.

Without looking back through the bar, she entered the ladies' room and let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. Careful not to touch too much in what was a typical bar bathroom, Brooke quickly did her business and washed her hands. The fact of the matter was everything had been fine since they'd walked in and what she'd perceived as possible threats were probably nothing more than her own overactive imagination at work. It happened any time she was out of her element, and this situation certainly fit that bill.

She stepped out of the restroom, quickly scanned the room and headed back toward the booth where Nathan and the guys were waiting. She'd only taken a few steps when a tall, lanky man with dark hair and a drunken smile intercepted her. "Hey, doll, haven't seen you around here before."

Her heart stopped for a moment before resuming at triple speed. She sized him, up wondering what kind of drunk he was. Would she be able to pass by him easily or would he force the issue? Either way, it was time to let the man know she didn't want to be messed with. Gathering her courage, she stepped forward. "I'm sorry, my boss is waiting for me," she said as she tried to push past him.

The man stood his ground and grabbed her arm. His action sent her fight or flight response into overdrive.

"Now where are you going in such a hurry, pretty? I'm sure your boss won't miss you for another few minutes." He took a deliberate step forward, crowding her space.

She wracked her brain, grasping at the random and all-too-brief fragments from several years of self-defense classes. Brooke took a step back and away from his funky beer-breath, while she fought to break the tight grip fear had on her throat. Instead, her back landed against the corner of the old jukebox, pinning her between it and the wall.

Despite her best efforts to remember some usable technique to defend herself with, panic welled up inside her chest and threatened to cut off her air.

"Don't touch me," she managed to hiss, while praying somebody else would step in and stop him.

The man raised his hands in the air, and she flinched, preparing for the sting she feared she would soon feel.

"Hey, I only want to talk. You're the one in a hurry to get away." He lowered his arms, planting one hand on the jukebox, the other on the wall, pinning her in. "Now why don't you tell me your name, darling?"

"What in the hell is going on here?" Nathan's voice carried over the noise and, while it didn't go silent in the room, it did quiet down considerably as men turned to watch the show.

The man who had pinned her against the wall curled his lip in a snarl, preparing for battle, and turned to see who had interrupted them. When he got sight of Nathan, he immediately backed down. "Mr. Lowery, I was just talking with this pretty lady."

"Talking, huh? So why does she look like a scared rabbit caught in a snare?"

"I..." The man moved his arms, giving Brooke the access she needed to escape.

Instinct took over and she rushed away from the scene, leaving Nathan to deal with the stranger.

Feeling claustrophobic and embarrassed by her inability to defend herself, she bypassed the table and raced right out the front door into the frigid night air. Tears stung her eyes and blurred her vision as she skidded to a halt. She had to go, to get away from the bar and all the memories it conjured, but being alone in the dark was no better than being trapped by that man inside. Yet, she couldn't quite muster the courage to return to the table. There would be questions she wasn't prepared to answer. If only she could catch a cab back to the boat.

A cab? Yeah, right! Dutch Harbor wasn't exactly New York City and cabs weren't readily available.

Not knowing anything about her surroundings, she had no idea which direction would lead her back to the boat. The last thing she needed on top of everything else was to get lost in a strange town where she was out-numbered by the opposite sex nearly ten-to-one.

The door behind her flew open and Nathan emerged. "Brooke!" His panicked gaze landed squarely on her and he raced to her, wrapping her in a protective embrace. "I thought you'd gone back to the table. When I got there and realized you were gone, I got worried."

"How did you know to come looking for me to begin with?" she asked, her voice cracked with emotion.

"One of Carter's men was on his way back the table when he spotted that guy harassing you. He came and told me."

He pushed her to arms' length and studied her face. "Did that jerk hurt you?"

Afraid that she'd start to bawl if she opened her mouth again, Brooke shook her head. She should have been more prepared. If she'd been a normal woman without all the emotional baggage hanging over her head, she'd have warned off the drunk fisherman on her own and moved on. That is, after all, why she'd spent all that time and money on self-defense classes. Only, when the moment finally came to use what she'd learned, she'd frozen, reverting to that horrible night and allowing fear to consume her.

"I don't understand, honey. If he didn't hurt you, why are you so upset? I mean I know the situation was a little unnerving for you, but to be honest, most women up here just tell guys like that to buzz off."

"It's not just that."

"Then what is it?"

She tried to wave him off with a dismissive hand, hoping he'd let the subject drop. "Never mind. I'll be fine."

"Oh, no, you're not going to stand here in front of me on the verge of tears and then give me that 'never mind' bullshit. Something's wrong, Brooke. Tell me what it is so I can fix it."

"You can't fix it," she retorted as she wiped an errant tear from her cheek, angry at herself for allowing the situation to balloon out of control. "Nobody can fix it. Just let it go, okay?"

"No, it's not okay and I'm not going to let it go. Something happened in there that's upset you more than it should. I want to know what that something is."

"Nothing happened in there, Nathan."

"Then what is it that's put you in knots?"

"I was raped, okay?" As soon as she said the words, Brooke wanted to reach into the air and stuff them back into her mouth. For nine years she'd kept her horrible secret and in a moment of weakness she'd let it slip. Her gaze fell to the ground and she studied the pattern of the walkway leading up to the bar.

She hated herself for allowing the words to escape, but strangely enough, a huge sense of relief now settled over her. Hundreds of miles away from home and with no place to run, she had no choice but to face Nathan and hope he'd let the subject drop. Drumming up the courage to speak again was hard enough, but she simply couldn't bring herself to look him in the face. "I want to go back to the boat," she whispered.

"Okay. Let me tell the guys we're leaving and I'll grab your coat and we can go."

Oh, man! That's not what she'd meant and she was pretty sure he knew it. Ignoring the tears now cascading down her cheeks, she forced herself to look up and meet his stare. "No. Just put me in a cab and tell them where to go. You stay with your crew. I'll be fine."

Nathan's expression changed from that of concern to something darker, and she would have sworn he could heat the air with his anger alone. "You will not go back to the boat alone," he boomed.

"But—"

He shook his head, sending his long mane of hair flying.

"No buts. You don't want to stay here, that's fine. I understand, but I'll be damned if I'm going to let you go back to the boat by yourself. One missed step while you're trying to climb aboard and you could end up in the icy water below. With nobody around to help, you'd die."

"But I'm not drunk, Nathan, and you know I can swim."

"Not if you hit your head on the way down. Besides, I think we need to talk about this."

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CHAPTER 5

Silence accompanied the cab ride back to the *Northern Lights*. Nathan sat in the back seat next to her, stewing over her revelation. He'd love nothing more than to find the asshole who'd violated her and break the son-of-a-bitch in half. No, that was wrong. He didn't want to break the man, he wanted to torture the bastard until he was begging Nathan to kill him and put the poor sick fuck out of his misery. How could any man do something so vile to a woman, especially such a wonderful person as Brooke?

He slid a quick glance at Brooke, who sat scrunched against the opposite side door, creating an invisible wall between them. How long had she been erecting barriers to keep people at a distance? How long had she been silently suffering?

While he might not know exactly how she was feeling, he did intimately know how it felt to suffer alone. A quick picture of Casey flashed in his mind. While others had been able to move on after her death, he hadn't and was eventually left to deal with the pain alone. Even all these years later, he had moments when it took every ounce of strength he had to get out of bed and face a day without her and the boys.

One thing was for sure—if he had anything to do with it, Brooke wouldn't suffer alone any longer.

Once back safely on board the *Northern Lights*, he gave her some space and a few moments to gather her thoughts. He hoped she would open up and talk to him. No such luck. If

her current attitude meant anything, he'd have to say she had no intention of talking to him or anyone else about what had happened.

She turned to him, revealing what he was sure was a forced smile. "Thank you for making sure I got back here safely. I'm going to head to bed now. So if you want to go back to the bar, you can."

After her disclosure, the last thing he wanted was push her into a corner, but no way was she going to blurt out something like that and then not expand on it. "Honey, I think we need to talk about what you said back at the bar."

She straightened her spine. "On second thought, I'm not all that tired yet. I think I'll go sit in the wheelhouse and look at the stars." Without ever looking back at him, she turned and headed up the steps.

Nathan followed and stopped short when he spotted her standing at the top of the steps staring out the window. "Brooke?"

She didn't move, didn't even acknowledge his presence. He eased up behind her. Her shoulders moved up and down, leading him to believe she was trying hard not to cry. A fissure started in his heart. He'd seen a lot of ugliness over the years and could handle most situations, but seeing her cry again would be more than he could bear. "Honey, please talk to me."

"Why? You can't change it."

"No, I can't, but sometimes it helps to talk to somebody. Just getting it out in the open can be a huge relief."

"It was a long time ago, and I thought I'd put it behind me." She sucked in a ragged breath. "But his breath smelled just like my—the man's that night and all the memories came rushing back."

Nathan heart cracked just a little more and he nestled in close behind her. "I'm sorry that happened to you, and I wish more than anything I could make the pain go away." He lifted his hands to her shoulders and began rubbing a path up and down her arms. "I want you to know you're not alone in this anymore. I'm here for you, sweetheart. If you want to talk about it or you need a shoulder to cry on, whatever it is, I'm here."

She turned into his embrace and rested her head against his chest, but she didn't cry. "It happened so long ago, but sometimes it still feels like it was yesterday. All I've ever wanted is to forget it and move on."

"Have you ever talked to anybody about this? A counselor or therapist?"

She shook her head. "I kept thinking if I just didn't mention it, it would go away. Guess I was wrong, huh?"

He rubbed a hand in tiny circles over her back. "You can't keep stuff like that inside. It festers like a sore and grows until it eats you alive, leaving nothing but a broken shell behind. Believe me when I tell you it will never go away if you can't face it head on."

She gave a slight smile. "More counseling, Dr. Lowery?"

He pulled her a little closer and dropped a soft kiss in her hair. "Just experience talking is all."

She lifted her head to look at him. Then her expression changed and she pushed away. "What the hell am I thinking? I can't be hanging all over you, whining about my problems like you're my long lost boyfriend or something."

"Hey..." He tipped her chin up with his finger. "It's okay. Don't worry about it. Right now you don't need a boss, you need friend."

"That may be, but this isn't the time for me to be worrying about it."

"Why not?"

"This is supposed to be a tough man's job and having a weepy woman on board kinda puts a dent in that image."

He brushed a thumb over her cheek and felt the slight dampness beneath this thumb. "You've lived with this pain in silence. I think that makes you as tough as any man on this boat, including me."

Nathan was still awake and kicking himself for the way he'd forced her to go to the bar with them when the rest of his crew returned to the boat. But then how was he supposed to know about the rape when she'd so carefully kept it hidden away? Still there had been signs and he'd completely ignored them.

He stared down at maps and tried to concentrate on where he wanted to drop their pots this year. Much to his frustration, Kyle and Zach returned a bit more toasted than they should knowing what was coming up, but that would be their problem tomorrow. They all knew better than to get shit-faced the night before the season began and they all knew the consequences if they did.

Adam's head appeared over the railing separating the wheelhouse from the steps leading down into the galley and common area. "You didn't come back. Is everything okay with Brooke?"

Nathan looked up at his brother and tried to decide how much he should tell him. The boat was no place for secrets, but he knew Brooke had trusted him with something she'd never told anyone. The last thing he wanted to do was breach that trust. "Not really, but I think with a little help she will be."

Adam wrinkled his brow. "What the hell does that mean?"

Nathan motioned to the steps. "The rest of the guys are in bed already?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Because she'll kill me if she knew I was telling you this. I absolutely don't want the rest of the crew to know."

"Know what?"

He blew out a long breath and raked a hand through his hair. "She was raped."

Adam's mouth opened slightly and his eyes grew wide. "She told you that?"

Nathan nodded, feeling like a heel for violating her trust. "And that incident back at the bar brought all those horrible memories flooding back for her."

"I don't think she's ever told Willow. I'm sure I'd have heard about it if she had."

"She said she'd never told anybody until now." Nathan leveled a finger at his brother. "And I don't want you saying a

word to Willow or anybody else. Brooke trusted me with this, and I'd hate to lose that trust."

"Then why did you tell me?"

"Because this is your boat, too, and you have a right to know what's going on. Besides, I know you'd want to help her if you can. I'm not sure yet why it's so important to her for others not to know, but I intend to find out."

Adam walked into the wheelhouse and plopped down on the small couch built into the back wall. "How long ago did this happen?"

"I don't know. I didn't get a lot of details from her. She was too upset, and I don't want her pulling away from me so I didn't press her for information."

"This is a lot of responsibility on your shoulders now. What are you going to do?"

Hadn't he spent the last hour asking that same question? There wasn't any doubt in his mind that he cared a lot for the petite red head now sleeping soundly in his bunk. But how deep did those feelings run? What this simply a case of friendship turned to infatuation or something more? If he listened to his feelings, he'd have to say more, but there wasn't any way she'd be capable of handling anything more than something platonic. Not right now anyway.

"I don't really know what I'm going to do, other than just be there for her." He sank into his captain's chair. "I've been debating over this for the last few hours and finally decided the good of the boat comes before personal issues, but that doesn't mean the rest of the crew needs to know or that you have to treat her any differently than before."

Adam nodded. "Of course. Are you going to tell her that you told me?"

Nathan glanced out the windows into the darkness. "I don't know. I'm afraid she'll hate me for telling you, but I'm not sure I could handle the guilt of keeping it from her."

"It might be better to tell her once we're at sea. I'm sure she'll be angry, but with no way to leave right away she'll have time to cool off before we return to port."

Nathan nodded. "You're probably right. Oh, and one last thing—I moved her from the crew quarters into mine. I think under the circumstances, she'd be more comfortable sleeping with a door between her and the rest of the crew. If any of the guys ask, you can tell them she moved because they snore. They don't need to know anymore than that."

Adam arched a curious brow. "And just where are you planning on sleeping?"

"With you dicks," Nathan replied, choosing to ignore the suggestion behind the question. "Now remember what I said. Not a word."

Adam gave another nod and pushed up from the seat. "Will do, but, bro, can I offer a word of advice?"

"What?"

"Don't let this consume you while we're out here. I won't argue that you're good at your job, but trying to nurse her while keeping us on the crab and safe is probably more balls than even you can juggle at one time. Apparently, she's been living with this for a while, so a few more weeks probably won't make a difference. There'll be time to deal with her problems when the season is over."

Adam stretched. "Well, it's late and tomorrow is the beginning of many long days to come. I'm going to go get some sleep while I can. See you in the morning."

He disappeared down the steps, leaving Nathan with his own thoughts again. Adam was right. No matter how much he wanted to help Brooke through her pain, now wasn't the time to do it.

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CHAPTER 6

For nearly a day, they pushed through rough waters, heading for the fishing grounds Nathan and Danny had chosen for the season. Still nauseated from seasickness, but proud of herself for not puking, Brooke slowly ascended the narrow steps leading into the wheelhouse with a fresh cup of coffee. In the time she'd spent so far on the boat, she'd learned to balance things like coffee against the motion of the boat. It hadn't been easy, but she looked at it as a challenge to be conquered.

After their encounter in the galley the previous day and last night's conversation, she'd steered clear of Nathan, choosing to focus on her job. The galley, common area, bathroom, bunkrooms all looked as though they hadn't seen a good scrubbing in years. In a way, she was thankful. Working hard was the one thing she knew she did well. The cleaning would give her a chance to feel like a contributing member of the crew instead of an interloper who'd made a huge mistake by coming.

She paused at the top of the steps and took a moment to appreciate the breathtaking view. The vast expanse of water before her went on for as far as she could see. Small waves churned all around them, creating a striking contrast of white foam against the blue-green water. Sea birds few in the distance, diving every so often to the surface only to quickly return to the air. It was both an awe-inspiring and frightening

sight. Just outside the window to her left, she spotted Danny's boat, the *Talisman* keeping pace with Nathan.

The only other souls for miles, she thought.

"Is that fresh coffee?" he called from his captain's chair.

Turning her attention back to the moment, she nodded and weaved her way over to where he sat, steering the vessel with ease. CB radios and computer monitors wrapped around the small desk-like area that Nathan referred to as the helm. With one hand, he reached over his shoulder and took the cup from her. "Thank you, hon. Coffee is the lifeblood of this boat. As long as my cup stays filled you'll keep me happy."

She smiled. "I'll do my best."

"You're already doing a good job."

He'd been wonderful about not bringing up the subject of her rape again, and Brooke was more than thankful for his understanding and consideration. She knew it was an irrational fear that she'd lose the easygoing rapport she'd built with friends if she disclosed the rape to anyone, but still one she harbored. When she was younger, she'd seen too often how her mother's well-meaning friends would look at her mother with pity when they'd try to talk her into leaving Wayne. Most times, she'd refuse. On the rare occasion when she considered leaving, Wayne would invariably discover her intentions and beat her back into submission. Brooke couldn't stand the idea of enduring those same looks from her friends if they knew she'd been raped.

Sure, she could have shared her trauma with Willow and others, but where would that have landed her? She didn't want to be the poor, pitiful friend with the tragic past who

everyone felt the need to coddle. That would have made her feel even worse. It was bad enough she'd suffered that night. To see that knowledge continually reflected in her friends' eyes, knowing they pitied her would have been more than she could take.

A static-filled voice permeated the room, breaking Brooke's trance and causing her to jump. She hadn't understood a word said, but apparently Nathan had. He picked up a radio mic and keyed it.

"We're a half-mile from where I want to start dropping our pots," he said. "And about two hours away from one hell of a storm," he mumbled under his breath.

Brooke's stomach lurched at the thought of waves bigger than the ones currently washing over the bow. "I'm guessing that's a bad thing?"

"You'd guess right. Storms at the beginning of a season can take out crab boats with nary a chance for them to call for help. With all the fishing gear on deck and the storage tanks empty, we're top-heavy right now. If we end up in the ditch when we're setting gear we could get rolled really easy."

"In the ditch?"

His lips tipped into a small smile. "I'm sorry, hon. I keep forgetting you don't know these terms. The ditch means we end up traveling sideways to the waves instead of directly into them, which is the safest route in a storm. If we're in the ditch and a big enough wave comes along it could wash over the side and wreak havoc with the boat's stability. It could also very easily sweep the men right off the deck and into the water."

Brooke cast a quick glance out the back wheelhouse door down to the deck below where the men worked. She didn't want to picture a wave breaking over the side of the boat or think about losing any of the crew. "Wow. You weren't kidding when you said there were hundreds of ways to die out here. If the job is that dangerous, why do you do it?"

"Money for one thing. You can make almost a year's salary in a few weeks if you have a good season. Some men are also in it for the adrenaline rush, but I actually prefer to try and not stare death in the face too often."

She let out a nervous laugh. "That's good to know. While I'm not necessarily afraid to die, I'd rather not check out any time soon either." Brooke bit down on her lip and worried it between her teeth. While it probably wasn't the most opportune time, she did have a million questions running through her head, begging to be asked. Nathan had told her to ask whatever she wanted. "Tell me again, why you and Danny fish together."

Nathan glanced over his shoulder at her. "So we can look out for one another. If we're just a couple of miles or so from each other and an emergency happens, somebody is there right away to help."

She nodded. "So you're not only part-owners in both the boats, but you're each other's life support, too."

"Exactly. If, God forbid, they have to abandon ship, there's a decent chance we'll be able to get them on board before they freeze to death. And it's the same for us."

She stared over his shoulder out the front windows. "It's hard to believe something that beautiful and calm could wreak such havoc."

"It's calm now, but when we start getting different storms converging, the seas can get wild. It's rough and nerve-wracking."

Since she knew nothing about fishing, she'd have to take his word for it. "Would it be all right if I stepped outside to get a better look before the storm hits?"

He pursed his lips together as if in deep thought. "I suppose it's all right if you stay near the tackle room door and out of their way. Make sure you put your gear on before you go outside, though. The seas are calm right now so we shouldn't take any waves that could get you wet, but why take the chance?"

Tickled by the idea Nathan was actually going to let her on deck during the action, Brooke raced downstairs and quickly donned her wet gear. Then she headed through the tackle room onto deck.

Adam looked up from where he stood and frowned. "I thought Nate said you weren't allowed out here."

"He's given me a reprieve for a few minutes so I could watch you guys work and see how things are done."

Adam nodded. "Gotcha. Okay. What do you want to know?"

She spotted the overhead crane move into position. "Everything. I want to understand the process."

Standing atop one stack of crab pots, a deckhand clipped a chain to the end of the crane and the overly large wire

rectangle lifted from the stack beside him and was moved into position. It banged against the railing, landing on the launcher with a clang that echoed over the expanse of the boat, revealing just how heavy and dangerous the traps were.

"They kinda look like giant cages," she said.

"They're called pots and they are like cages. You could think of them as a large crab trap if you want. The idea is for the crab to climb into the open slots on the sides in search of food. Once inside, they can't get back out. Then we haul them to the surface, open the gate on the end and dump them out onto the sorting table."

As Adam spoke, two crewmembers flipped open one of the pots already in the launcher and Kyle Miller, one of the lower ranking deckhands, slid inside to hang the bait. He climbed out, secured the gate and in only a few seconds, the pot slid off the side of the boat into the water. Within seconds, another pot sat on the launcher, waiting to join the first one deep below the water's surface.

For Brooke, the entire process was utterly fascinating. Over the years, she'd prepared plenty of crab entrees and never once had considered where it actually came from. "If the pot sinks to the bottom, how do you get it back?"

Adam motioned for her to follow him. He moved to the launcher and picked up what looked to be a large balloon with numbers and letters painted on the orange plastic. "This is a buoy bag. It's attached to a line of rope we call a shot. When the pot gets launched—" He paused and waited for the pot to slide off the launcher. It hit the water with a giant splash and quickly the coil of rope began to unfurl. "The pot sinks and

takes the rope with it. There is enough line so it doesn't pull the buoy bag below the water." He threw the bag over the side, then threw a second smaller bag with it. "The second buoy is the trailer. It keeps a length of rope on the surface so when we're ready to pull up the pot, we have something to snare with the picking hook."

Completely engrossed in the action, she stepped up to the rail to see where the buoys went. "So the pot is sitting on the bottom and you'll leave it there for a while so the crabs will hopefully crawl inside."

Adam nodded. "That's the idea. If all goes well, in a couple of days, when we come back for these pots, they'll be full of Alaskan king crab."

"Adam, I want Brooke away from the rail, *now!*" Nathan's voice carried over the loudspeaker on deck. They both turned to look up toward the wheelhouse, only to find Nathan standing in the doorway looking mad as hell. She grimaced at Adam and scurried back toward the tackle room door. "Sorry. I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

Adam only shrugged in response. "Don't worry about it. If he weren't growling about you, it'd just be something else. He doesn't want you getting hurt. None of us do."

"I appreciate that, but he looked really mad." She angled her thumb toward the open door. "I think it might be best if I head back inside before he yells again."

Brooke barely had her rain gear off when Nathan emerged from the wheelhouse steps. "What in the hell do you think you were doing out there?"

His angry tone had her head rocketing up to meet his stare. "I...I'm sorry. Adam was showing me how the process worked and I wanted to see where the buoy bags went."

He set his coffee cup down on the counter separating the galley from the eating space, placed both hands on the counter and drew in a long breath. For several seconds, a tense silence filled the air while she waited for him to speak. She wasn't accustomed to dealing with angry men, at least not since she'd left Florida, and to do so, she discovered, wasn't something she wanted to repeat.

When he finally turned his gaze back to her, the look in his eyes had softened. "Did Adam also explain to you how if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time, you could get hit with one of those pots or have your leg caught in the shot and get dragged over the side?"

Tiny prickles of fear danced across her skin as she absorbed his words. "I don't think he'd gotten that far."

He left his cup and walked toward her. She had to force herself not to take several steps back.

"I wasn't just trying to scare you before, when I said that the deck is the most dangerous place on this boat. Each one of those pots weighs about eight hundred pounds empty. It could easily crush you if you're in the wrong place."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, feeling like a child being scolded for having her hands in the cookie jar.

Nathan drew in another long measured breath, and she realized he was working to keep his temper in check. So it was possible for some men to have control over their anger? That certainly was something for her to consider...later.

"I told you to stay away from the rail. If you were any of my deckhands, I'd be ripping you apart right now for not listening. Instead, I'm going to give you a warning. While we're fishing, I'm in charge and I expect you to obey my orders to the letter. Maybe I didn't make that clear before, but I want to make it clear now."

"I won't disobey your orders again."

He hooked her chin with his finger and thumb, forcing her to look at him. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, but I'd never forgive myself if I let something happen to you. If you have any more questions, please come ask me. Now I have to get back upstairs. With the storm brewing, I only trust the autopilot for so long."

She stood in place and watched him climb the steps. A process she guessed he would probably repeat a hundred times over the next few weeks. She could only hope she stayed on his good side during that time. While the encounter hadn't been as bad as ones she faced in the past, being on the receiving end of his wrath wasn't something she wanted to feel again.

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CHAPTER 7

Rain pelted the wheelhouse roof and wind howled outside the windows while Brooke clung to her seat. The vessel rode up a large oncoming wave, reminding her of the climb a rollercoaster made before that first big drop, only this wasn't a two-minute thrill ride. No, this was terrifyingly real. The wave peaked and the bottom dropped out, sending the boat plowing through air for a few seconds. Pointed nose down, it landed with a bang against the water just as another wave crested the bow. Lost in the wall of water, Brooke remained glued to the bench in the wheelhouse, praying they wouldn't end up swallowed by the angry seas.

"I can't believe the men are still on deck," she marveled aloud, hoping her voice didn't sound as fearful as she felt. She wasn't scared for her own safety as much as the men working below. If Willow only knew what Adam went through, she thought, there's no way she'd ever let him fish.

Brow tight with concentration, Nathan shot her a sideways glance. "They won't be for long. They just have to get the remaining pots launched and then they can come inside. It's safer for us with the gear off."

"It almost seems suicidal for them to still be out there. What if they're washed over the side by a wave?"

Nathan shook his head, but his eyes never left the window. "That's the one good thing about having a boat with the wheelhouse forward. When the waves wash over the bow like they are now, the vessel takes the brunt it instead of the

men. It's still dangerous, but less so than if we were set up like some of the other boats out here with their wheelhouses on the stern."

She frowned as she studied the wall of windows in front of her and considered the danger Nathan faced. It was less than the men on deck danced with on a daily basis. She couldn't help but think, though, how one good wave through the thick glass could kill or injure him just as easily as a pot on deck could take out one of the crew. That image didn't sit well with her on many levels. "Not so safe for you, though. Have you ever had a wave take out a window?"

"Once or twice," he replied, glancing back at the television monitor mounted high on the wall attached to a closed circuit camera monitoring the deck.

Once or twice? She found little comfort in his statement. What if the windows blew out in a surge? Would Nathan be able to survive a blast like that? Her heart leaped in her chest and she pushed the ominous thought aside as she allowed her gaze to follow his. She didn't want to admit it, but his caring nature with her had started to break down the emotional walls she'd so carefully erected. He seemed to understand her in a way others didn't, making her both happy and uncomfortable at the same time.

She wasn't used to the idea of sharing her past with others, especially men, but Nathan made it easy for her. He treated her in a way she hadn't felt since her father had died. Because of that, her feelings for him were growing stronger by the day.

Craning her neck, Brooke turned her attention toward the screen, too. "How in the world are they managing to stay on their feet, let alone work?"

"It's not easy, and I guarantee they'll be feeling it tomorrow, but it's something they'll work through and move on. There's no time for licking wounds out here."

The radio above Nathan's head crackled drawing both their attentions toward the other wall.

Nathan reached above him and turned up the sound. "...one-six-eight-two-point-eight west. The beacon is registered to the fishing vessel *Arctic Storm*, which is red and white in color and one-hundred-twenty feet in length. All stations having seen or know the whereabouts of this vessel should contact the coast guard immediately. All vessels in the vicinity should keep a sharp look out for signs of distress and assist if possible..." Nathan turned the volume down.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath as he raked a hand through his hair, mussing his already loose ponytail.

"What's going on?"

"The *Arctic Storm's* EPIRB has gone off and they're not answering the coast guard."

She wasn't sure what that actually meant, but from the increased concern now etched into his features, she could guess whatever had happened was probably bad. "What's an EPIRB?"

"It's an acronym for emergency position indicating radio beacon, which is a device all boats are required to carry. If something bad happens and the beacon is submerged it sends off an emergency signal letting the coast guard know

the vessel is in trouble and its position." He nodded toward the radio. "Their beacon is signaling and the boat isn't answering the coast guard's call."

"If they're in trouble can't we help?"

He closed his eyes for a moment and drew in a long breath. "No, hon, we can't. It's too far from here and right now, with this sea kicking up, I doubt we could perform a successful rescue anyway. Any boat that tries would run the risk of becoming a casualty as well. Hopefully, the beacon simply dislodged and fell over the side."

She didn't understand how he could be so calm when people could be dying even as they spoke. Why it should matter to her so much when she didn't even know the men, she couldn't fathom, but it did. "And if it didn't and nobody goes to help, they'll die," she pleaded.

"I'm sure somebody is fishing near them and will go to try and assist. The problem is, they never radioed a mayday, which means whatever occurred probably came on them quick. If something did happen—and I'd rather assume it didn't—but if it did, then more than likely they're already dead. Either way we'll find out soon enough."

Hours passed as the storm raged. Nathan continued to jog the boat into waves while they listened to the chatter on the radio. With the dawn came the news of debris spotted by search boats, removing any doubt about the fate of the ship and turning the mission into a frantic search for survivors.

Brooke sat transfixed, staring up at the radio, hoping for the best. Then the news came of two men wearing survival suits pulled from a life raft. The men's account of the accident

confirmed everyone's worst fears. The rest of the *Arctic Storm's* crew would remain forever lost to the Bering Sea. The details of the boat's demise soon filtered through the fleet and sadness drifted over the wheelhouse.

Nathan glanced at her. "Brooke?"

The claustrophobic feeling she got every time her emotions kicked up had returned and she couldn't contain the urge to flee from the pain. She stood and steadied herself against the lurching boat. "Excuse me."

"Where are you going?"

"My bunk. I'd like to be alone for a bit." Without looking back, she disappeared down the steps and headed directly to Nathan's stateroom. She closed the door behind her, creating what she knew to be a flimsy barrier between her and the world. Varying emotions battled inside her, all demanding attention, and she dropped down onto the bunk. With the storm continuing to rage, she should have been afraid, but her only thoughts were with the men on the doomed vessel. Were their last moments filled with terror? Did they know they were about to die?

She curled up on Nathan's bunk and closed her eyes, trying to force away the pain she shouldn't be feeling on such an intense level. The men on that vessel were complete strangers, so she shouldn't have emotional ties to them, yet the need to cry for their loss overwhelmed her.

Tears brimmed and she turned over to face the wall before she swallowed hard and let out a quiet sob.

For what seemed to be the hundredth, maybe the thousandth time Nathan nervously glanced over at the empty

wheelhouse steps. It had been over an hour since she'd disappeared below deck to hide in her bunk, and the need to go to her, to comfort her, overwhelmed him. Yet duty called, forcing him to stay seated and in control. Leaving the helm in a storm would be the equivalent of signing their death warrants. No matter how upset she was, she'd have to work it out on her own until the storm calmed.

Nathan closed his eyes for only a few seconds; long enough to picture the stricken look on her face when the announcement came about the men. Hell, he wasn't ashamed to admit that he'd felt like shedding a tear or two in the moments immediately after the announcement. Any man with a heart would feel the loss, even if he didn't know the men personally. Death was death and the finality of it still hurt.

Despite her strong facade, he knew Brooke's emotional state already stood on shaky ground, and his desperation to know what was going through that head of hers drove him crazy.

Adam appeared over the staircase railing. "Hey."

Nathan nodded to him. "You guys done?"

"For now." Adam's gaze turned out the windows. "I see the storm is finally starting to ease."

"It ain't over yet, bro. We're in the eye right now. There's still the backside to contend with. I wish it were over. It's all ready taken a boat and four men."

Adam's brow rose in surprise. "Who?"

"The crew of the *Arctic Storm*."

Adam's face screwed into a frown. "Wasn't that Shea Long's boat?"

"I think so."

"Well, hell." Adam slapped a hand down on the railing. "I did a summer cod haul with him a few years ago. A damn nice guy. Do you know if he made it off?"

Nathan shook his head, wishing he could have told him all the men made it off alive.

"How many survived?" Adam asked.

"Only two. Listen, I know you're exhausted, but can you do me a favor and take the helm for a few minutes?"

"Sure. Why?"

"I want to check on Brooke. She sat up here listening to everything go down, then she got up and left. I want to make sure she's okay."

Adam walked up behind him. "Go ahead. I'll survive on ten minutes less sleep."

Grateful for Adam's understanding nature, Nathan headed for the steps. "I'll give you ten minutes more than the rest of the guys when I get them up in a few hours."

He hit the bottom step and spotted the closed door. The right thing to do would be to knock first. Besides the respect issue at hand, she might be uncomfortable with him barging in. He paused, raised a hand to knock, then changed his mind. Despite her issues, it was his boat and if he wanted to go into his cabin, he would. Besides, if she were awake, he doubted she'd answer him anyway, and if she were sleeping, he'd simply turn around and walk back out. No harm done.

He turned the handle and entered, spotting her lying on the bunk with her back to him. "Brooke?"

She flinched, giving away the fact she was awake.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she replied, her voice muffled by the covers she used to hide her head.

"If that's true, then sit up and look at me."

A shuffle of covers resulted in her turning her head. Red puffy eyes stared up at him, confirming what he'd already suspected.

Smiling softly, he eased down onto the bunk next to her. "You don't look like you're okay."

She shook her head. "I can't deny I was upset, but I'm okay now. I just needed some time to work through it."

He slipped a hand over hers. "Such a tough outer shell you have. You're so desperate to put on the facade of a cool, controlled person. Yet underneath, you really are a wounded soul." He let go of her fingers and raised a hand to graze a knuckle over her cheek. "Aren't you, honey?"

Her breathing hitched on a hiccup, and she stared up at him with those hurt-filled eyes. The pain they radiated struck him at his core and chipped away at his own barriers. Even if her circumstances were vastly different from his, she still knew what it felt like to suffer and to endure the pain.

"Those men were somebody's sons, husbands and fathers and now they're gone. It seems so cruel."

"Life is cruel, sweetheart. I know you understand that fact."

She glanced down. "That doesn't mean it always has to be that way."

"You're right, but holding people at arm's length in order to keep the pain at bay isn't the way to make that happen."

"I..." She started to speak, then closed her mouth.

"You don't want to let anyone in for fear of getting hurt again." He leaned toward her, all the while swearing to himself he wouldn't do what he was about to. She wasn't in any condition to handle the pressure a kiss would bring, yet he couldn't stop himself. Something deep inside nagged at him, urging him to find out if she would pull away. "I know that fear, baby. I know it better than you might think."

He curled a finger beneath her chin, and she looked up, her sad eyes centering on him before drifting closed as he brushed a gentle kiss over her lips. When was the last time, he wondered, that she'd allowed a man to get this close? Even this slight amount of contact caused her to shudder beneath his touch. Her tremors reverberated through his body to mix with his own. She didn't pull away as he had expected her to do, instead remaining in place. If nothing else, he considered it a beginning, something they could slowly build on. Satisfied with the result, he pulled away and moved his hand to rest atop hers. "I also know at some point you have to trust people again and try to move on."

"I'm not sure I can," she murmured.

"You just did," he replied before releasing his hold on her. He stood and headed for the door. She would no doubt need some time to deal with everything, and he needed to get back to the helm. "I know it won't be easy for you and it's going to take some time, but just know"—he rested a hand on the door—"I have all the time in the world."

He left the room and immediately headed back into the wheelhouse shaking his head. The long hours with no sleep

Northern Lights
by Michelle Cary

were starting to get to him. That had to be the reason why he would do something as stupid as kissing her. She wasn't ready for anything that even resembled a relationship and, if he were being honest with himself, neither was he.

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CHAPTER 8

The smell of bleach drifted up the wheelhouse steps and slowly permeated the cabin. Nathan glanced over at the steps leading down below. What in the hell was she doing down there? He didn't have to wait long for the answer because a few minutes later she appeared on the wheelhouse steps.

"Hey."

"Hey. What are you doing? Everything smells like disinfectant."

"Oh, I finally managed to scrub that disgusting bathroom from top to bottom. Now I won't feel totally grossed out when I take a shower."

"You cleaned the bathroom?"

"I said I was going to. Did you know the bottom of the shower stall was actually white?"

Nathan suppressed the need to smile at her dig. "I know the bathroom wasn't the cleanest, but the men are exhausted and hungry when they come in off deck. I'm not going to make them spend what little time they have to sleep cleaning."

"I know." She bit down on her bottom lip, tugging it between her teeth, and he couldn't help but wonder if she knew how damn sexy she looked when she did that.

Sexy? He gave himself a mental smack and worked to rein in his wayward libido. Now wasn't the time or place for such thoughts. Trying to keep his mind on work, he continued with the topic at hand. "Listen, even if it doesn't sound like it, I do

appreciate all the hard work you're doing. I'm sure the crew will, too. Speaking of which, I'm going to let them come in to sleep and eat in about an hour. Do you think you can have something whipped up for them?"

She smiled. "You bet." Brooke turned to head down the steps, then paused. "Would you mind if I played some music?"

"Why would I mind?"

"Well, the guys told me about superstitions and such, and I didn't want to do anything that might screw up your mojo."

Nathan let out a laugh. "Honey, my mojo has been screwed up for years. Go ahead and play your music. Maybe it'll bring us some good luck."

An hour later, he descended the steps into a wash of country music and stopped to watch Brooke work in the galley. She sang along while Sugarland played through an iPod and speakers.

The song was slow and sad. Amazed by the wonderful voice she'd kept hidden away until now, he remained in place. Would she quit singing if she knew he was listening? That would be such a shame, considering how much she seemed to be enjoying herself. With her back to him, she moved food from the stove to a plate, all the while swaying her head back and forth with the music.

The song changed to something more upbeat just as the men arrived from outside. Varying voices and sounds mixed with the music playing while the men stripped their outer gear creating a chaotic blend of noises. Arguing with Zach

over a lost bet, Kyle stopped mid sentence and sniffed. "It smells good in here."

Zach elbowed him out of the way. "Of course it does you idiot. Brooke's been cooking."

"No." Kyle shook his head. "It's more than just the food. It smells...clean."

The smile that engulfed Brooke's face as she sat the plate of burgers on the table was something Nathan knew he'd never forget. Despite being tired and hungry, his men had noticed her hard work.

"That's because I've been cleaning," she replied as she headed back to the galley to retrieve the rest of the food.

Zach snagged her by the arm and pulled her into a quick dance. "Do you dance as well as you clean and cook?" Zach asked, twirling her in a circle before pulling her against him.

The sudden surge of emotion that coursed through Nathan was one he hadn't expected and didn't like one little bit. It was stupid to be jealous of Zach when the man hadn't done anything. Yet, he couldn't shake the urge to put him through a wall for touching her. Trying to rid himself of the green-eyed monster, he shook his head. It wasn't Zach's fault he was too chicken to confess his feelings to Brooke. Not that she would have been ready to hear them even if he did.

"Aren't you tired?" she teased, obviously playing along.

"Exhausted," Zach replied.

"Then where are you finding the energy to dance with me?"

"Ever heard of a second wind, darlin'? Well, I'm well beyond my second wind and so tired I'm punchy." He yanked

her against his chest, holding her tight, and Nathan's temper flare yet again.

"What do you say, Brooke? How about you and me run away together and leave these bums behind?"

The fine hairs on Nathan's neck stood on end. Brooke wasn't one who took well to that type of playing around and he feared Zach was about to erase all the comfort she'd gained over the last few days.

Looking thoughtful, Brooke pursed her lips, then grinned. "You smell like dead fish."

Zach released her and shot Kyle a seditious glance. "That would be because I lost a bet with some asshole over who could bait a pot faster and had to do bait for the last string."

"Then I suggest you grab a shower and I'll keep a plate warm for you."

He laughed. "That bad, huh?"

"Yep."

"Okay, I'll get a shower, but don't let Kyle eat everything. He's got two hollow legs, you know."

Brooke laughed and turned back toward the table. Her gaze met Nathan's and, for a moment, something flickered in her eyes before disappearing beneath a cautious haze. "I was wondering if you were coming down to eat."

Despite being thrilled how at ease she seemed to be with the crew, he couldn't help but take exception to her cautious attitude with him. But then Zach hadn't been the one who'd kissed her the other day, when she was vulnerable. Nathan forced a smile and filed his thoughts away for later scrutiny.

"Of course I was. I'm starving and no way would I miss out on your cooking."

He stepped down off the bottom riser and crossed to the table while she continued to eye him with some caution. "How long were you standing there?"

He dropped a gentle hand on her shoulder, careful not to do more and make the situation worse. "Long enough to see my crew make me proud by noticing all your hard work."

She opened her mouth to speak, but before she'd uttered a word Zach's shocked voice filtered out from the bathroom. "Holy shit, guys, Brooke bleached the bathroom. It's actually clean in here."

Knowing any concerns he'd had about the men taking to Brooke had just been erased, Nathan grinned and changed the subject. "So what did you make to eat?"

Brooke puttered around the galley, cleaning up the last of the dinner dishes while the men headed out to pull the last string of pots before their first scheduled off load. A week had passed since Nathan had kissed her, yet she swore she could still feel the warmth of his soft lips against hers. It bothered her, more than it should have, that she'd spent so much time analyzing the moment.

While the overwhelming urge to feel his arms around her, to absorb the comfort and strength he offered, pushed her forward, she couldn't quite shake her fear. Nathan would never intentionally hurt her, but what about unintentionally? Could she manage the pain if things didn't work out between them and he left her? Rolling her eyes toward the ceiling, she gave herself a mental smack. How presumptuous of her to

have them in a relationship when she wasn't all that sure of his objective.

Her gaze shifted to the wheelhouse steps. The fact she even considered a relationship with him both gave her hope and scared the hell out of her. Men invariably, when you let them get too close, ended up causing nothing but pain. No matter how much she liked Nathan, she couldn't let that happen.

She would have preferred to stay away from him until her feelings faded, but there wasn't much room for keeping a safe distance on the one-hundred-thirty-foot floating island they called *Northern Lights*. Her only option was to face situation head on.

Gathering up her courage, she grabbed a clean cup and poured the black gold into it. Then she turned and headed topside. With them due at the processors within the next forty-eight hours, she needed to decide if she was going to stay on board for the rest of the season or go back to Seattle and the capable hands of the Seattle PD.

The second half of her thought left a nasty taste in her mouth. Hadn't she come with Nathan and his crew in order to avoid landing in police protection? Even facing her feelings for Nathan was still better than spending days, possibly weeks, locked away from all human contact.

She stepped into the wheelhouse, weaved her way over to the helm and carefully set his cup down. The metronome beating of her heart pounded in her ears as she tried to formulate an opening. What exactly was she supposed to say to him? *I like you, but stay the hell away from me?* Plus, she

had a feeling no matter what she said, Nathan would probably ignore her.

Chickening out, she turned to go and spotted a four-by-six photograph taped to the corner of the window. It was of a pretty brunette with long, straight hair and brown eyes. A little boy stood next to her wearing a large, toothy smile. A man who looked a lot like Nathan stood behind her holding a second boy who couldn't have been more than a year old. The tattered edges of the photo were taped and worn, and the color had begun to fade with time.

Brooke frowned. Willow had never mention anything about Nathan being married and, for the life of her, Brooke couldn't remember a single time where he'd come to an event with a women or children in tow. She glanced down at his hand and noted the absence of a wedding ring.

Curiosity scratched its way to the surface until she couldn't help but ask about the photo. "What a beautiful family."

He remained silent.

"Yours?"

"At one time."

At one time? What did that mean?

"It looks like it was a few years ago. How old were you?"

"Twenty-six."

"I didn't know you were married."

"I'm not."

Her frowned deepened and she quirked a brow. "But that's you in the picture, right?"

"Yes." He didn't offer up any more information, and Brooke decided that maybe it was best not to push any further.

She took his empty cup and turned to head down to the galley.

Her foot was on the top riser when he spoke. "The woman is my wife, Casey, and the kids are our two boys, Ryan and Gregory."

Wife? Kids? "Willow never mentioned you were married."

"Probably because Adam told her not to talk about it."

"Oh, okay." Each answer seemed more cryptic than the last and only made her more curious. "So how old are your boys now?"

"They would have been twelve and fourteen this year."

Would have been? She shifted her gaze to him. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

He shook his head. "There's no way you could have."

"What happened to them, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Carbon monoxide poisoning." The pain in his voice struck deep in her soul.

Her heart softened just a little more. She couldn't imagine losing her entire family, especially when it involved children.

"Oh, how awful. How long ago?"

"It will be eleven years this January. Actually..." He glanced at the photo. "It wasn't too long after this picture was taken. We'd just had a new furnace installed after Christmas. When they put it in, they didn't hook something up correctly. A week after I left for opilio season, I got a phone call informing me that something had happened to my family and I needed to come home right away." His voice shook on the last word and he paused, obviously trying to get a grip before he continued.

His pain flowed through the wheelhouse and washed over her. All these years later he was still grieving, yet Brooke couldn't help but think how he'd continued on, living his life despite the pain. The need to be close to him, to offer what little comfort she could, pushed Brooke to cross through the wheelhouse. She stopped behind him and placed a soft hand on his shoulder.

He covered her hand with his own, then drew in a deep breath and began again. "They wouldn't tell me what had happened, or even if they were all right until I got back to Seattle."

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"I appreciate the sentiment. It was a long time ago, though, and I've learned to deal with it."

"Even so, it must still be painful for you to look at their picture and wonder about all of the what-could-have-beens."

He nodded. "I won't deny that some days it's rough. Other days, though, especially when it seems as though the sea is going to swallow us whole, it can be extremely comforting."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"On those days, when I'm face-to-face with my own mortality, it's reassuring to know if the end does come, they'll be waiting for me on the other side."

Brooke stood behind his chair and contemplated his statement. She'd spent all her life fearing death, trying to survive. She'd never considered the idea of an afterlife. If there really was such a thing, it meant her father might be waiting for her. "That's a very interesting perspective."

He shrugged. "Maybe, but mostly it makes the idea of dying out here not quite so scary. I mean, let's face facts. There are a lot better and less painful ways to go out than by drowning or freezing to death."

Brooke shivered at his remark. "I suppose you're right about that. I guess you do whatever helps you get through the moment."

"Isn't that what you do?"

"Yeah, I guess it is."

They pulled into port at the processor with a couple of hours to spare. Once inside the safety of the harbor, Nathan granted her permission to be on deck. Eager to get a good look at the offloading process, she donned her wet gear and headed outside.

Zach spotted her as she emerged on deck. "Well, well, Brooke, did Nate finally reinstate your deck privileges or are you making a run for it?"

She laughed at his obvious dig and decided to play along. "Yeah, the warden gave me time off for good behavior, so I thought I'd spend it watching the offload."

Zach wrinkled his nose. "I can think of a lot better ways to spend your day than watching a bunch of men haul crab off to be butchered."

She leaned against the wall and smiled. "You have to remember this is all new to me. So while you might think this process is boring, I'm going to find it fascinating, at least for a little while."

A cable was attached to the crane and the giant lid covering the aft holding tank lifted off. Careful to make sure

she didn't get in anybody's way, Brooke inched closer, hoping to get a better look. "They're really big," she murmured from a distance.

Zach glanced between her and the tank, then walked over and snagged a crab that had managed to escape onto the deck. He brought it up to her, careful to keep a cautious grip on the claws. "Have you ever seen one up close and personal?"

"Yes, but not right out of the sea like this." She studied it with a critical eye. "Ugly creatures they are. Kind of remind me of giant sea spiders."

"Ugly?" Zach scoffed. "Honey, these are beautiful. Each one looks just like a giant dollar sign."

Her smile widened. "You would think that." She reached out tentatively, then drew back. "When I worked at the restaurant, they came packed in ice and were usually dormant. That one is moving around an awful lot. It's not going to pinch me if I touch it?"

Zach shook his head. "No, I've got the claws. Go ahead and touch it if you want."

She brushed her fingers over the shell. "Being right out of the water like this, I half expected it to be slimy or something, but it's not."

Zach let out a laugh. "Do you realize you're petting it like you would a dog?"

Heat rushed to her face and she couldn't help but grin. "Well, how am I supposed to touch it?"

"Zach!" Nathan's voice boomed from above, causing Brooke to jump back.

She turned her head and looked up to see him standing on the catwalk above. A hard gaze radiated from his tired eyes, landing directly on Zach. The pallor in his face served as a nasty reminder of how difficult the job could be.

"What in the hell is going on out here?"

"I was giving Brooke her first close up look at a red king crab."

"Well, she's seen it, so toss that crab back in the tank and get to work."

Zach nodded. "Looks like your parole's revoked. Good luck," he whispered to Brooke as he turned to leave.

She continued to stare up at Nathan while he looked out over his men, obviously avoiding her gaze. What had she done now?

Her first urge was to return to the galley and hide until his mood changed, but the anger in her shouted for satisfaction. Why should she cower away and feel guilty when she didn't even know what she'd done? He might be captain, and she might have agreed to follow his orders, but, by God, it was time he gave her some answers. Without waiting another second, she stomped across the deck and climbed the ladder leading to the catwalk. "Can I ask you a question?"

His jaw clenched as he stared out over the work below. "I suppose."

"What did I do this time to piss you off? I mean you did say I could go outside and watch."

"She noticed his hands braced on the top railing, his knuckles white, and she followed his gaze to where Zach stood below. "Is this about Zach?"

"He knows there's work to be done and instead he's cavorting around with you."

She shoved her hands against her hips. "He wasn't cavorting as you called it. He was showing me what a red crab looked like."

"I saw you two laughing."

She frowned. "So what?"

"You like him."

"Of course I like him. He's a nice guy."

"Fine." He threw his hands in the air, turned and stomped up the steps to the wheelhouse door, leaving her alone on the catwalk.

She glanced between the wheelhouse and the deck, then marched up the steps behind him. No way was this conversation going to end like that. Nathan was pacing like a caged tiger when she entered the cabin.

"I don't understand you. First, you tell me I need to be more trusting, then you kiss me and now you're mad because I'm doing what you said. I can't win."

"This isn't a competition," he snapped.

"You're right—it's not and when you decide to stop pouting like a little boy who's had his ball stolen come find me. Until then, don't bother. I've got enough damn drama in my life without adding you and your mood swings to the list."

She turned on her heel, but before she'd taken a solitary step, Nathan's fingers wrapped around her bicep. She looked over her shoulder at him, caution coursing through her veins. He wouldn't hurt her. Deep down she knew that, but it didn't erase the fear she still harbored.

His eyes were dark with anger and something else. It was the something else that had her turn back to face him.

"I'm sorry," he finally said after several long seconds.

"You're right. I'm just...confused."

"What are you confused about?"

"You," he replied looking her straight in the eye. "I won't deny I have feelings for you, Brooke. They're deep, powerful and make me act stupid sometimes."

He released her arm and scrubbed a hand over her face. "I know you're not ready for a serious relationship, so I've been trying to deal with my feelings on my own. Trust me. I don't want to feel this way and it's infuriating. After Casey died, I never wanted to fall for another woman, but then I see you with Zach and..." He shook his head, letting the end of his sentence trail off.

"You thought I was interested in Zach?"

Nathan shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "I'm not proud of myself, Brooke, but you need to know that even now I want to drag you to the wheelhouse floor and make you mine."

His words conjured memories she wanted very much to forget. Fear pulled hard at her, forcing her to take a step back.

He winced when she moved away, but didn't try to step toward her. "Aw, shit, honey, that was a poor choice of words."

"I know what you meant," she replied, hoping to appease some of his guilt. It wasn't his fault she was still so sensitive.

"Still, I didn't mean to scare you. I'd never ever do anything to hurt you. You know that, right?"

His remorseful look made her smile and she nodded, bridging the distance between them. "I know you wouldn't. And I'm glad you told me how you feel." She raised a hand to his cheek and felt the warmth radiate down her arm when he turned his face into her palm. "But I'm not sure I can ever give you what you want."

He took her hand and gently kissed her palm. "I know."

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CHAPTER 9

For an hour, Brooke sat in the wheelhouse while Nathan pulled the *Northern Lights* away from port and headed back to sea. With their first offload complete, she knew it marked the halfway point in the season. She watched Nathan from the corner of her eye, noting how tired he looked.

Weeks on end of little sleep combined with an out of control coffee habit showed in his features. Eyes, wide and spirited at the beginning of the season, now looked sunken and dull, while his hair, tied in a haphazard tail, had loose strands hanging around his face.

While the rest of the crew took their respective watches at the helm, giving him a few much-needed hours of sleep, Nathan still shouldered the brunt of the responsibility.

She wished there was something she could do to help. If nothing else maybe she could stay up and keep him company during their jaunt back to the fishing grounds. Yes, that's what she'd do. Without confirming her plans with him, Brooke first headed to the galley to pour him a fresh cup of coffee before returning to the wheelhouse.

"More coffee?"

He shot her a tired smile that made her want to wrap him in a huge hug. "Thanks, hon."

She stuck her thumb in her jean pockets and rocked back on her heels. "So, would you like some company?"

He shook his head. "I'd love some, but you should really bed down and get some sleep. I know getting up at odd hours to cook for the men must be messing with you."

"What about you? When was the last time you had any appreciable sleep?"

"I'll get some when the season is over."

"But that's still at least a week away. Nathan, you can't go a week without sleep."

"I won't, but I'm the captain and I have more responsibilities than everyone else, which means I have to deal with less sleep."

"But it's not healthy."

Now he did turn to look at her. Knowing she challenged him when she shouldn't have, Brooke expected to see anger in his tired gaze and was more than a little surprised when all she saw was a smile.

"I appreciate your concern, hon, but I'll be fine. You need to sleep."

Her gaze shifted from him to the window. Ominous skies in the distance foretold the coming storm. "Are you sure? It looks like it's going to get bad out there. I'm not sure I could sleep anyway."

"It probably is going to get bad. With the tanks now empty, we're a little on the light side and waves like these could toss us around like a tub toy if I'm not careful. I'm going to need all my concentration to focus on the storm."

She nodded. "I understand. Well, I guess I'll see you in a few hours."

Casting one last covetous glance his direction, she descended the steps and walked toward her bunk. His not sleeping was definitely one thing about this job she didn't like one little bit. Everybody but him seemed to be able to rest at some point. It hardly seemed fair.

She crawled into the bunk, reached above her head and turned out the light. The best thing to do would be not to think about the storm and fall asleep quickly. With any luck, she'd sleep right through it and wake up to calmer seas.

A loud noise pulled Brooke from her sleep. There was movement—her own she believed—but it was the pain rocketing up her arm that finally brought her fully awake. For a brief moment, disorientation claimed her thoughts while the steady hum of the engines slowed and whined to a stop. A shiver of awareness raced up Brooke's spine. The vibration and low whirr of the engines had become a soothing white noise, lulling her with a certain level of comfort. With the engines not running, every hit of a wave, every tiny noise amplified against the hull.

The men yelled to each other, and the sound of people scurrying about had Brooke fumbling to get to her feet. In the pitch black, she couldn't tell what exactly had happened, but she did know she'd been thrown from her bunk and something very bad was taking place.

A loud pounding on the door caused Brooke to jump. "Brooke, are you okay?" Adam's voice carried through the wood.

"Yeah, I think." She struggled to her feet and worked her way over the scattered contents of the room to the door.

When she opened it, she came face to face with the reality of the moment. They were listing heavily to one side. "What happened?"

"We took a rogue wave and it knocked us on our side. Are you sure you're okay?"

Brooke glanced at her arm. "I think so. I hit my forearm on something when I fell from the bunk, but I think it's okay. What can I do to help?"

"Adam, is Brooke okay?" Nathan's voice yelled down from the wheelhouse.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Adam asked a second time.

"I'm fine," she yelled loud enough for both men to hear.

"Good. Find your survival suit and keep it handy just in case."

Her eyes widened and she looked at Adam. "Just in case what?"

"In case we have to abandon ship because we can't get her to right on her own."

Minutes passed while Brooke stood frozen in the doorway holding the bag containing her survival suit under one arm and her injured arm against her. She wanted to do something to help, but with her arm throbbing and fear tumbling around in her stomach she decided staying out of the men's way seemed the way to help.

Without warning or reason, the boat began to straighten. Within seconds, the engines roared back to life and Brooke's shoulders began relax. Her relief was short-lived as she got a look at the mess the wave had caused. DVDs and video tapes peppered the floor of the common area. The few pictures

adorning the walls lay intermixed with other items of the room. Locks on the cabinet doors had buckled under the pressure, spewing the contents all over the galley floor. Brooke raised a hand to her head to rub at the beginning of a headache only to quickly yank it away in pain.

She looked down at her wrist and noted how quickly it was swelling.

Zach paused on his way outside. "What's wrong?" He took a step closer. "Whoa, I think we need to get some ice on that."

"I didn't think it was that bad at first, but now I'm not so sure." She took a long look around the room and pushed back the frustration beginning to mount. "How am I supposed to clean up this mess if I'm injured?"

Zach scanned the room, then turned his attention back to her. "To hell with cleaning, Brooke. First things first." He tiptoed his way into the kitchen, avoiding the landmines of DVDs along the way, pulled a bag of vegetables from the freezer, which thankfully hadn't lost its contents during the wave.

He returned to her. "Here, let's try to get that swelling down so we can get a better look at the injury. Don't worry about the mess in here. We'll help you clean it up when we're done outside." His gaze flicked up to meet hers. "You okay?"

She nodded. "I think so. I just wish I could help somehow."

"Just sit and stay out of the way. We'll take care of the rest. Now I have to go help the guys. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine."

She sank into the booth seat and rested her arm on the table as the men raced between the deck and the engine room. The tension in the air was palpable, and she wondered if they really were out of danger.

Finally, a tired and battered crew slowly trekked back into the galley. Zach flopped into the seat across from her as Adam knelt at her feet. "Let's see that arm," Adam ordered.

She raised the bag of peas and winced at the large bruise starting to form. "It looks worse than what it is," she said, hoping to play off the injury.

"Can you move your fingers?" Zach asked his head resting in his head on the table.

Brooke forced her fingers to move and fought to ignore the pain that raced out in all directions. "See, not broken," she announced.

"Hmmm..." Adam moved in for a closer inspection. "I'm not so sure about that. You could have a fracture and still be able to wiggle your fingers. Either way, from the looks of it, you damaged something." He replaced the frozen vegetables and patted her shoulder. "Keep the ice on it a while longer and we'll have another look later."

Footfalls on the steps had Brooke turning to see Nathan. He looked even more battered and worn than he had hours ago. "The storm has passed and the seas are calming. Kyle's on watch while I survey the damage."

He turned to look at her and that's when Brooke saw the dried blood above his right eye. She pushed up from the seat and rushed to him. "What happened to your head?" she asked

lifting her hand from the bag of frozen peas she was holding on her opposite wrist. The bag slipped off her arm and dropped like a lead weight to the floor.

He caught sight of her wrist and his face contorted with emotion, finally landing in a frown. Anger flared in his eyes as took a closer inspection. "What the hell is this? I thought you said you were okay?"

"I am okay. I just banged up my wrist a bit."

"Honey, it's swollen and turning black and blue even as I'm looking at it. That's a little more than banged up."

"It's nothing," she replied trying to deflect his anger. "Let's talk about you for a minute. How did you get that cut above your eye?"

"The water blasted out a piece of one of the wheelhouse windows. I think we need to have that arm of yours x-rayed."

Furious at how he'd so easily grazed over his injury, she shook her head. "No way. I've heard the crew talk about how much money they lose every time we have to go into port. I won't be the reason they lose a day or more work."

"No, you won't. We can't stay out here with a window busted out of the wheelhouse and deck boards missing, just to name a few of the things that were damaged. I've all ready turned the boat back toward Dutch. When we get there, you're going for an x-ray."

"Only if you go with me and have that cut looked at." She didn't miss a beat.

His jaw ticked, and she could tell he was clenching his teeth, but she wasn't going to back down. So what if she was injured. If he wouldn't go, then she wasn't going either.

"Brooke—"

Despite his anger, she stood her ground. "Don't you dare 'Brooke' me. You may be my boss and I know I promised to follow orders, but no way am I going to allow you to treat me differently. You're also injured. If you go to the clinic with me, I'll go."

He glanced around the room. Brooke followed his gaze to find Adam and the others looking at them. This had become nothing less than a Wild West standoff without the guns. Who would back down first?

"Fine," he finally said. "I'll go, if that's the only way I can make sure you get seen."

Brooke suppressed a smile. Despite her need to go toe-to-toe with him on the topic, she'd never actually expected to win that battle. Doing so meant one thing. He hadn't been lying when he said he cared.

Nathan paced the tiny waiting room floor wondering exactly what was taking so long. It was a simple x-ray, not a complete work up. He paused and looked over at the door leading into the inner sanctum. What if her injury was more serious than he'd thought? Guilt gnawed on his stomach lining like hungry piranhas. He'd talked her into coming with every intention of keeping her as safe as possible. Yes, people got injured every day, and hers wasn't a life-threatening injury, but he couldn't help taking the blame. If she hadn't come, she wouldn't be hurt. *If she hadn't come, she might all ready be dead.* He absently rubbed at his temple, then winced when his fingers contacted the neat white bandage over his eye.

Six stitches. He'd actually needed six stitches to close the wound over his eye. If she hadn't been with them, defying him about coming to the clinic, he'd have tossed a butterfly bandage on it and moved on without a thought.

The door opened and Brook emerged. He noticed right away her arm partially wrapped in an ace bandage and immobilized in a soft cast.

He reached for her, tentatively touching her injury. "It's bad?"

She shrugged. "They say I have a hairline fracture and a bad sprain, but if I take care of it, I shouldn't need a hard cast."

His gut clenched as his guilt grew and he cursed himself for it. If this had been any of the other crew, including Adam, Nathan wouldn't have thought twice about the injury. They all knew the risks and the consequences, but as much as he didn't want to admit it, Brooke was different.

"Hey." She raised her good hand to his cheek. "It's okay. I'm a tough cookie, remember?"

Nathan smiled softly and kissed her palm. "Don't I know it." He drew in a deep breath. "So are we ready to go?"

She nodded and motioned to the door. "Lead the way."

"You know," he began as they climbed into the vehicle in the clinic parking lot, "I generally don't let the crew win battles with me."

"So why did you?"

How could he possibly tell her the truth? He'd already revealed feelings to her on a level he didn't think she was ready to face. Digging deeper right now might push her away.

Choosing diplomacy over honesty, he took several seconds to formulate his thoughts before he spoke. "I couldn't very well force you to come to the clinic when I was injured also and wouldn't go."

"You could have. You're the captain."

He didn't bother trying to hide his smile. "True, but a captain also leads by example. Besides, you were as concerned for my well being as I was for yours."

Her gaze fell to her lap and she began to fiddle with the Velcro strip on the brace. "Are you surprised by that?"

"A little."

"Why?"

He pulled out of the parking lot and headed for the grocery store. "Because I know you don't like letting people get too close to you." He didn't miss her slight nod at his answer.

"That's true, but I'm slowly learning that sometimes no matter how much a person might not want to, everyone needs a good friend now and then."

He hated the word *friend*, mostly because he wanted so much more from her than what a *friend* could give. For now, he'd take what he could get. "I'm honored you now consider me a good friend."

"You should be." She grinned. "It's not every day I let a man into my inner circle."

Nathan snorted. "What inner circle? No offense, hon, but the only people I've ever seen you hang out with are Willow and Michael's girlfriend Kira."

"Okay," she corrected. "My inner triangle then."

He let loose a gut busting laugh. It was wrong of him to laugh when she was being so serious, but he couldn't help himself. "Leave it to you to come up with a new cliché."

She slapped his shoulder and appeared indignant for a moment before also cracking a smile. "What would you call it?"

"I'd call it keeping your heart protected."

The beautiful grin she sported immediately faded and she shifted uncomfortably, turning her attention out the window. "Maybe I'm just one of those people who doesn't make friends easily."

Nathan wanted to kick himself for saying the wrong thing, but sometimes no matter how hard you tried to ease the blow, the truth was painful. Maybe it was time someone forced her to look in the mirror. "Maybe," he conceded. "Or maybe you've suffered so much in your life you're simply afraid to let others in for fear they'll hurt you, too."

Her tentative gaze flicked up to meet his. "How would you know?" The words, though spoken softly, carried a quality of pain and a questioned longing that nearly shredded his heart.

How *would* he know? If only he could share just half the pain he'd endured over the years. "There's a reason why I haven't dated, Brooke."

Her attention whipped from the window to him, her eyes wide in wonder. "You haven't had a date since your family died?"

"Oh, I've dated, but nothing of any consequence. Most of the women I've agreed to go out with have been shallow and materialistic. Buy me this; buy me that." Nate waved his

hand in the air. "They didn't love me or appreciate the love I could give to them. They qualified it by how much I spent on them." He paused and drew in a deep, soothing breath in an attempt to stem the tide of emotion brewing just beneath the surface. "I didn't want to spend the rest of my life proving my love to a woman who defined it by my worth."

"Sounds like you were looking in the wrong places for love."

He shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe I wasn't looking for love at all."

"Fulfilling physical needs doesn't necessarily have to equate love."

"No, I suppose it doesn't."

A long silence fell between them before Nathan made a left into the parking lot at the local grocery store. If nothing else, it would be a nice diversion to a tense situation. "We're low on milk and fruit. Why don't we restock?"

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CHAPTER 10

The ride back to the *Northern Lights* was filled with conversation about recipes and cooking, benign subjects Brooke felt comfortable discussing. She knew Nathan had wanted to continue their discussion about love and trust, and was thankful to him for thinking better of it.

His words about her trusting people had been more accurate than she wanted to admit. Trust only led to betrayal and heartbreak, and she'd been down that road already. She wanted to trust Nathan, to let him into her heart, but simply couldn't risk the fallout if her instincts about him were wrong.

They walked into the galley, to find the crew had not only completed all the repairs but had cleaned up the mess while they were gone. "Wow, you guys work fast."

Zach took the one bag she carried. "Damage wasn't quite as bad as we originally thought. How's the arm?"

"Fractured," she replied, handing over the bag without argument.

"Well, that sucks. Does that mean you won't be able to make your fabulous meals for us?"

One of the many things she'd come to like about Zack was his ability to schmooze. He knew just the right things to say to put a smile on her face. "Don't worry." She patted his cheek with her good hand. "I think I'll be able to manage. Now if you gentlemen will excuse me, I'm exhausted and would like to try and get some sleep." The urge to turn and kiss Nathan before she ambled off to bed pulled at her.

Knowing how inappropriate that would be, she ignored the impulse and headed toward her bunk.

Not bothering with the light, she closed the cabin door and fumbled around for her flannel pajamas. Her arm throbbed something terrible and the only thing she wanted was to sleep for a few hours. After the incident with the rogue wave, she hadn't been able to sleep and was now feeling every bit of the last twenty-four hours.

With them in the safety of the harbor, she knew she'd be able to fall asleep before Nathan again steered the boat into open waters. With any luck, she'd be out like a light and wake up in a few hours refreshed. She'd settled between the covers and nestled into the pillow only to have an uneasy feeling wash over her. Something wasn't right. She rolled over, directly into a large, hard object lying next to her.

Her heart skipped a few beats before she found her voice and let out a scream that she was sure had been heard on dry land. She jumped from the bunk and scrambled for the lights, managing to reach the switch the same time Nathan burst into the cabin. "What's wrong?"

"Someone's in my bunk." She pointed toward the massive lump beneath the blankets.

He grabbed the sheet and yanked, revealing a makeshift dummy made out of hard foam and rope, complete with a trailer buoy head.

Hoots of laughter erupted from the galley and Brooke suddenly realized she'd been the unfortunate victim of a prank.

Fire was in Nathan's eyes when he grabbed the dummy and stormed into the common area. "Whose idea was this?" he demanded.

"It was mine," Kyle volunteered, apparently oblivious to the anger radiating off Nathan's frame. "But Zach helped me execute it."

"Don't you dumb asses have anything better to do with your time than to spend it coming up with ways to harass Brooke?"

The smile faded from Zach's face. "Harass? Boss, we just wanted to have a little fun."

"At Brooke's expense," Nathan shot back before throwing the dummy at Zach's feet.

Zach and Kyle exchanged a confused look. "I don't understand," Kyle said. "It's tradition to prank the greenhorn during their first trip, especially if we like the person. You know, kind of an official *Northern Lights* welcome to the newbie."

Ignoring Kyle, Nathan's attention shifted to Adam, who now stood in the doorway leading to the engine room. "Did you approve this?"

Adam shook his head. "I didn't know anything about it until just now."

Nathan's spine straightened as he turned his wrath back to his crew. "You should've cleared this through me or Adam first." He kicked at the dummy. "Dispose of that thing and then get back to work. If there's nothing to do, then get your asses to bed and get some sleep. This little wave setback is

going to result in you guys spending more time on deck, so get your rest now."

He turned back to Brooke and motioned for her to follow him into the wheelhouse.

Brooke cast one last glance at the dummy, then let her gaze lift to see Kyle and Zach, both seeming extremely perplexed, looking at her.

"It's okay," she whispered. "Actually, it was kinda funny."

Before they were able to reply, she headed up the steps. So maybe she'd lied about the prank being funny. With her heart still threatening to pound out of her chest, amusing was the last thing she'd call it right now. Still, she knew the men didn't mean any real harm with their joke. In a way, she decided she should feel good they liked her enough to want to take the time to prank her. In a few days she'd probably be able to look back on it and laugh...maybe.

He turned to her, his features drawn tight with anger and remorse. "Are you okay?"

Good question. Was she okay? Even if she wasn't, the problem was hers for not being able to take a joke, not Zack and Kyle's. Hoping to ease some of his concerns, Brooke lifted a hand to her heart and smiled. "As soon as my heart decides to stop running a marathon, I'll be fine."

"Fucking boneheads," he muttered.

"Hey"—she took a tentative step toward him—"ease up on them, will ya? It was just a joke."

"One you didn't find the least bit funny."

"True, but they don't know about my past, so how could they have known what they were doing would upset me?"

He arched a brow, shooting her a stern look. "So you *are* upset?"

Brooke sighed. "Yes...but," she rushed ahead when he looked as if he were about to blow his stack again, "don't you see? The problem is mine, not theirs."

Zach's words about playing a joke on the newbie rattled around inside her head. The dummy surely hadn't been easy to construct and probably took some time. The fact they were willing to give up what little sleep and down time they were getting to make it meant something. They no longer considered her an outsider, but one of the crew. "You know, in a sick and twisted way, I could consider it a compliment."

Nathan raked a hand through his hair. "How in the hell do you figure that?"

"Not only have they accepted me as one of their own, but they actually like me enough to play a joke on me. I know this probably doesn't make any sense to you, but for the first time this entire trip, I feel as though I belong here."

The tension in his face drained away, replaced with a small smile. "Actually, that makes perfect sense. He blew out a long breath. "I'm still not happy about what they did, but since you're okay with it, I'll let it go."

"Can I ask you something?"

"You know you can."

"If I hadn't told you about the rape, would you be this upset over what they did?"

Nathan took a moment before he answered. "Probably not."

She feared he would say that. "I see. This is exactly why I didn't want you to know about it."

Nathan's brows knit and a frown tugged at his lips. "Why?"

"Because now you know, you're sensitive to what others do around me." She pointed to the steps. "They were just being themselves, and you're mad at them for it. I could see it in their faces. Neither of them understand why you're pissed over something you probably would've been a part of if I were anybody else."

"I..." He paused and shook his head. "You're right."

Nathan turned away and paced the length of the wheelhouse before stopping in front of her. "Shit, honey, I'm really sorry. It's just, when I heard you scream, I was worried you were hurt. Then when I realized what they'd done, all I could think was how upset it must have made you and I wanted to rip their heads off."

Brooke placed a hand his forearm, holding him in place. "It did upset me, but like I said, that's my problem, not theirs. I know I can't ask you to stop treating me differently because you've all ready proven you can't help yourself, but will you try to not ruin things for me with the rest of the guys? I like them and I don't want to lose what I have here. If they start resenting me because you're giving me special treatment, I'm afraid I'd have to kick your ass." She ended her statement with a large smile.

Nathan's lips twitched, eventually tipping up at the corners. "You never cease to amaze me, you know that?"

The next few days passed without further incident, and after a brief discussion with Kyle and Zach, Brooke felt as

though things with them had finally begun to smooth over. Nathan on the other hand had yet to apologize for yelling at them, but then what could he really say, she wondered as she tied closed the full bag of garbage. He couldn't very well explain himself without revealing her secret. Besides, he was the captain and with that title came certain privileges, such as not having to explain irrational behavior.

She set the bag next to the door, knowing one of the men would dispose of it in the designated trash room below deck. Then she turned her attention to the wheelhouse. Nathan hadn't exactly avoided her over the last few days, a nearly impossible task considering their environment, but he hadn't gone out of his way to make conversation either.

There wasn't any doubt in her mind that his intentional lack of communication stemmed from their discussion about him treating her differently. Still, what was she supposed to do? She stepped onto the bottom riser and drew in a deep breath. She couldn't take back her secret and wasn't sure that, even if she'd been able to, she would. From the moment she'd told him, something inside her had changed. It wasn't anything she could put her finger on, but she'd definitely felt the freedom that came from her disclosure and she liked it.

She stopped on the top step and looked over at Nathan. His hair was once again loose and somewhat mused and he hadn't shaved in a couple of days, the hair smoothing over his hard jaw line. He looked exhausted and tense and if she didn't know better, she would have sworn he'd aged ten years in a few short weeks. "Are you finished with your sandwich?"

He nodded and Brooke moved in behind him to take the plate and scraps. "I really wish you'd allow the men to rest and have a real meal," she protested.

"We only have four days left to catch the rest of our quota. There simply isn't time for pleasantries like a sit down meal."

She started to reply only to be drowned out by the blaring noise of an alarm sounding.

Nathan turned his attention to the monitors on the back wall. The air around Brooke suddenly grew tense. "What's happening?"

"Low water alarm."

"What does that mean?" She could already feel the panic building in her chest. Any kind of alarm couldn't be a good thing. The last alarm that had gone off was the result of the rogue wave and Adam's words about keeping her survival suit handy once again haunted her. She glanced down at her wrist, still encased in a bandage and splint.

His eyes scanned one screen, then the next. "It means we're losing water in one or more of our holding tanks."

"I'm guessing by the alarm that's a bad thing?"

He nodded. "If the crabs aren't completely immersed in water they'll die. We have pumps that continually circulate seawater through those tanks. Something may have happened to one of the pumps."

Before she could question him more, Adam appeared on the wheelhouse steps. "We have a breach in one of the water pipes. We're spilling seawater into the bilge."

"Hell." Nathan slid from his seat and raced past Brooke. "Tell Zach to get up here and take over steering and Kyle that

we need his help down below," he yelled to her on his way through the common area toward the engine room door.

Brooke ran down the steps and rushed out to the deck. "Zack, Nate wants you watching the helm. Kyle, he wants you below deck helping him, Adam and the others."

Both men raced past her. Brooke spun on her heel and followed them back inside only to pause in the galley, unsure of what to do next. Her heart pounded against her chest, causing fear to course through her veins. Panicking wouldn't do a bit of good. She needed to be sensible about the situation. What, if anything, could she do to help? She knew nothing about mechanics or the inner workings of a boat, but standing still didn't seem like a viable option.

She quickly descended the narrow ladder leading to the engine room and nearly went deaf from the cacophony of sounds bouncing around the enclosed space. Nathan and Adam stood next to a large pipe with a hole about the size of her thumb in its side. Water spewed out in a powerful stream, falling into the bilge below to be pumped back out to sea. Knowing he wouldn't easily hear her over the roar of the engines, she yelled to make sure she was heard. "I know this is probably a stupid question, but is there anything I can do to help?"

Nathan spun around to face her, tension and concern pinching his features and making him look angry. "Don't ever come down here without putting on ear protection, and yes, I want you to run out on deck and check the water level in the middle tank."

She nodded, turned to leave, then realizing she didn't have a clue of what he'd just asked her to do, twisted back to face him. "How do I do that and what should the level be?"

"About halfway down the deck right in the middle of the boards will be what looks like a manhole cover. Pull it off. You'll then be able to see the crab. The tank is only half full so the water should completely cover the crab with several feet to spare." Brooke nodded and quickly sped back through the engine room, up the steps and out on deck. She raced across the wet and slippery deck with a single focus in mind. Halfway to the stern, she spotted the cover, slid to a stop and promptly landed on her ass when her feet slipped out from under her.

She hit the deck with an "umph," landing partially on her butt and partially on her already injured arm. For a few seconds she didn't move while she wrestled with the pain that radiated down her legs, up her back and through her arm. Damn if that wasn't going to leave her bruised and sore tomorrow. That is if they made it to tomorrow. Even she knew that a boat taking on water wasn't a good thing.

With a newfound urgency, she scrambled onto her hands and knees and, ignoring the pain in her wrist, tugged at the cover. It was heavy and didn't budge. She pulled harder and vowed to start going to the gym when they returned to Seattle. If she wanted to stay a member of this crew, she'd have to gain some strength. The cover moved slightly, giving her the encouragement she needed. Slowly she tugged at the steel, until eventually it gave way, revealing the crab inside.

The water level was a lot lower than he'd told her. While it still covered the crab, it was probably a good four or five feet below the top.

Leaving the cover off, she struggled to her feet and ran back inside. This time when she entered the engine room, she grabbed the ear protection off the rack next to the door that she'd missed the first time. She placed the muffs over her ears and wove her way around the engine.

With Adam holding a patch over the hole, Nathan was wrapping the pipe in what looked to be strips of some type of rubber. She paused, wondering if she should interrupt them or wait until they were finished.

"Well?" Nathan asked without pause.

"The water level is a good four or five feet below the top, but it's still covering the crab."

He and Adam exchanged looks.

"Slack tank," Adam said.

Nathan nodded. "If we don't get this pipe fixed, we could have a bigger problem than dead crab."

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CHAPTER 11

"What's a slack tank?" Brooke asked from behind him.

Irritation shimmied through Nathan's system. He admired her for wanting to learn all she could about the boat and the job, but now was not the time to ask questions. Prepared to send her away on a promise to explain later, he glanced over his shoulder and found himself staring directly into her fearful eyes.

Some people would argue ignorance is bliss, especially when possibly facing a life and death situation. He didn't agree. As far as he was concerned, knowledge was power and, despite their current situation, he would do his best to answer her question.

"When the tank isn't full of water, it can cause the water that is in there to slosh around. When that happens, it destabilizes the boat and can cause it to turn turtle and sink."

For a few seconds he swore he could actually see the blood drain from her face and worried that she'd faint. The last thing he could handle right now was Brooke passing out. Instead of going down like he feared, she swallowed hard and replied with that same, "I see," he'd heard from her that day back in her apartment.

She was trying hard to keep her composure. He could see it in her body language, her facial expressions and yearned to put her mind at ease. "The sea is calm right now, so there's nothing for you to worry about. If we can get this temporary patch to hold, we fix it proper after the season end. If not,

we'll have to head in now and hope the crabs don't die and the sea doesn't kick up before we're safely into the harbor."

"What can I do to help?"

He finished wrapping the rubber around the pipe while he thought about her question, then shook his head. "Nothing right now. I think the boys and I have this under control. Why don't you go up to the wheelhouse and keep Zach company until we're done?" *Idiot!* Almost immediately he wanted to kick himself for sending her to sit with Zach, especially when she was frightened.

She hesitated, then apparently deciding to follow his orders, turned and headed out of the engine room. His gaze followed her as she went and he wondered what exactly was going through her head. Would she seek comfort from Zach in Nathan's absence? A quick stab pierced his heart at that thought. He couldn't very well leave in the middle of the repair to ease her concerns, though, not when the rest of their season and possibly their lives depended on stopping the leak.

"Hey, you want to finish this before we lose the whole tank?"

Nathan turned to look at Adam. "Sorry. Yeah, let's get this finished."

Once the last of the rubber was in place, Adam tightened down the clamp to hold everything in place. "Okay." He drew in a deep breath and held it. "Let's turn the pump back on and see if the patch can sustain the pressure."

Adam slowly turned the lever, and within seconds, seawater once again flowed through the pipe. Nathan

inspected the patch job. It seemed to be holding. "Now it just has to make it until we fill the tanks and get in to off load. Until then, let's make sure we keep an eye on it."

Adam nodded. "You got it. Now you want to tell me what's going on in that head of yours?"

"What?"

"Don't 'what?' me. You know what I'm talking about."

Nathan frowned. "No, actually I don't."

"Fine. I'll spell it out for you. What's going on between you and Brooke?"

Nathan sputtered, before his mouth hung open like a fish out of water. "There's nothing going on between us."

"If that's true, then why the looks?"

"What looks?"

Adam gaped. "The looks that make me think you have feelings more than friendship for her."

"I think you're seeing things."

"Am I?"

A tense silence fell between them and then, for the first time in recent memory, Nathan conceded. "My feelings don't matter, and even if they did, they are in no way going to interfere with our work here. My job is to keep you guys as safe as possible while we do this. I simply don't have time to think about her right now."

After several seconds, Adam nodded. "While I'm not against seeing the two of you end up together, I'm glad to know you still have your priorities straight. So when this trip is over what are you going to do?"

Nathan looked over his shoulder at the engine room door. "I don't have a clue."

Even as they sat in port a week later, after offloading the remainder of their catch, Nathan still didn't have a clue what to do about the diminutive redhead who consumed his thoughts and rocked his heart.

He rolled onto his side and punched his pillow for what seemed to be the hundredth time. It was simply the let down of having the season over and not the fact he still couldn't shake Brooke from his thoughts.

Nathan fell onto his back and stared up through the darkness at the ceiling. He'd had his reasons for bringing her along, none of which at the time had anything to do with love. *Love? It couldn't be love.* That feeling had died a long time ago, or so he thought. He recognized the unfamiliar need burning low in his belly, but couldn't bring himself to label the long dormant emotion. To do so would bring him nothing but trouble.

Brooke was a volatile mix of emotions churning inside a tiny body. She had more baggage than a 747 could carry. None of it changed the fact that his body ached for her and his heart craved a love he knew only she could provide.

Therein was the problem. From what Willow had told him, Brooke had never been in a real relationship with the opposite sex. Whenever possible, she made a point to avoid men in general and other than he and Adam, Nathan couldn't think of any other man who she'd allowed to get close to her, until she'd agreed to come aboard the *Northern Lights*.

He hadn't actually expected her to come or make it much past the first trip, but she'd not only surprised him by digging in her heels and working through her fears, she'd successfully bonded with this crew. Much to his chagrin, she'd connected more with Zach than he might have liked, but to know she could overcome her own self-imposed obstacles gave him hope for something more.

Facing the ugly truth she might be more attracted to Zach was another problem entirely. It only made sense, since she and Zach were about the same age and shared many of the same interests, whereas there was a decade separating him and Brooke. Despite what he'd hoped were signals of interest from her, he had to face the real possibility they were just too different to make a go at a relationship.

What am I thinking? Nathan kicked the covers off and swung his legs over the side, planting his feet on the floor. He already had them in a doomed relationship and didn't even know how she really felt about him. The entire point might be moot if her feelings were only platonic. Still, with her past, he doubted she'd make the first move, even if she were interested. Which left him right back at square one.

How could he possibly test the waters with her when she was so skittish? Any move he made that asked for more than the friendship they already shared might frighten her away and cost him everything he'd worked so hard to achieve. Then again, maybe it was simply a matter of her not knowing how to express her true feelings.

He scrubbed a tired hand over his face and stood up. His head was spinning and, despite his exhaustion, there wasn't

any way he would be going back to sleep anytime soon. It was good thing they'd be heading back to Seattle tomorrow and not back out to fish. Nathan slipped from his bunk, careful not to wake the others, opened the door and walked out into the common area. He glanced over at the door to his cabin and stopped dead in his tracks. It sat wide open, the light from the galley shining through the opening just enough to reveal an empty bunk. Her blanket and pillow were there, but she was gone.

A sudden rush of panic flooded his body and he tried to stay calm. She couldn't have gone too far, could she? With them docked next to Danny's boat, anything farther than the deck would require her crossing the *Talisman* to get to the dock. After reprimanding her on the hazards of boat jumping alone, he didn't think she'd actually disobey his orders. Besides, it wasn't as if she knew anybody on land, so there wouldn't be any reason for her to leave the boat. So where was she?

A noise from the wheelhouse caught his attention. He paused, then turned and slowly climbed the stairs. Through the darkness, he saw her sitting in the co-captain's chair staring out the window. She cradled her knees to her chest, her arms wrapped around them like a blanket.

"Brooke?"

She jumped, turning a quick gaze toward him. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to." Her cheeks glistened in the moonlight, and his heart clenched. Had he or his men done something to upset her? "Are you okay?"

She quickly swiped a hand under each eye, but didn't answer.

He stepped up into the wheelhouse. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head.

"It might make you feel better."

"I doubt it."

He turned and sat on the top step and leaned back against the front wall.

She stared out the window.

"Did one of the guys say something to upset you?"

"No. They've all been amazing."

"Okay, then is it something I've done?"

Her attention jerked to him. A horrified expression preceded an, "Absolutely not."

"Well, if it's nothing to do with us or the boat, then does it have something to do with going back to Seattle? Is it about that trial you were involved in back in Florida?" He'd promised Willow he wouldn't say anything, though he'd already broken that promise with his warning to her at the beginning of the season. She'd been shocked by his words, but she'd never asked how he knew and he'd never offered up an answer, instead, choosing to let the subject drop without additional comment.

Her eyes widened for a moment before she cast her gaze back out the window. "I meant to ask you how you knew about that. Then I decided it was probably Willow's doing."

"She was worried about you."

"She worries too much."

"Well, after she told me what was going on, I was worried, too."

"Is that the reason why I ended up on your boat? Was this supposed to be your way of protecting me?"

Nathan laughed. "Rogue waves. Broken pipes. Sinking boats. Yeah, I really offered up some protection."

"If it's so dangerous, then why did you allow me to come along?"

"Because I couldn't stand the idea of knowing you could possibly be in danger and not do something to help. While it isn't the safest environment to work in, most of the fleet does return to port every season intact. In my eyes, the danger you were facing in Seattle trumped what you might endure out here."

"So the conversation we had about me losing my job and you needing a cook was just a ploy to get me to say yes?"

He grinned. "It worked, didn't it?"

She returned his smile with a slight one of her own. "That it did."

"It would've killed me if this bastard you helped put away managed to get a hold of you because I did nothing."

"That bastard is my stepfather."

He paused, wondering if he'd heard her correctly and not liking one little bit where the conversation was heading. "Your stepfather? Why would your stepfather want you dead?" He held his breath hoping the answer he got wasn't what he thought it was going to be.

"Because I testified in a rape trial against him."

"Rape?" That's what he was afraid she was going to say. An ugly awareness worked its way into his system and it was everything he could do not to punch something. "Was he the one?" He didn't bother to finish the sentence, already knowing the answer.

She nodded and swiped a hand beneath each eye to clear away her tears.

That son-of-a bitch. That fucking bastard. Nathan gritted his teeth and worked to keep his hands from balling into fists. What could he possibly say to her after a disclosure of that magnitude? "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I really don't have a clue what to say."

She shook her head. "You don't have to say anything. It was a long time ago, and I've learned to deal with it."

This was how she'd dealt with it? "You call sitting in my wheelhouse in the middle of the night crying in the dark dealing with it?" He extended a hand. "Come down here."

She slid from the seat and joined him on the floor. "Okay, so maybe I'm not handling it as well as I'd like. But then it's not every day that my life is in danger."

"And you've never told anyone about it?"

She shook her head. "Like I told you before, I've always hoped if I pretended it didn't happen I'd eventually forget it."

"And how's that worked for you so far?"

She turned her head, looked up at him and gave Nathan a sad smile. "Not so good."

"I know you don't want to hear it, but I'm telling you, talking about it does wonders for working through it."

"Is this more of your Bering Sea therapy?"

"Maybe. But I can tell you that when Casey and the boys died, I felt like my world stopped spinning. I didn't want to eat, shower or even get out of bed. My brothers made me talk about her and the boys. It was painful and though I'm still not fully over them, I realize it did help me learn to deal with their deaths."

She picked at the edge of the carpet where it met the wheelhouse steps. "So what you're telling me is you're speaking from experience?"

"You could say that. So how about it? I've got some big shoulders for you to lean on."

Seconds ticked by like heartbeats before she spoke again. "Okay. Doing it my way has gotten me nowhere, so we'll try it your way."

"Why don't you start by telling me how old you were when this happened?"

"Seventeen."

For a second time his fists curled into balls and Nathan wished he could get his hands around her stepfather's neck.

"It was the night before my eighteenth birthday. He'd been pawing at me for years, leering at me with those horrible eyes filled with hate. I'd told Mom about him making advances and she flat out accused me of lying."

She shrugged as if brushing away the memories that came with her words. "Anyway, that particular night, mom had gone to work the late shift at the factory so she wasn't home when he came in drunk and slobbering all over himself."

Nathan slipped an arm around her shoulder, and, much to his surprise, she leaned into him. "He came home late and

stumbled into my bedroom reeking of beer. He told me that since I was turning eighteen, it was time for me to become a woman."

"How did he know you hadn't been sexually active already?"

She sniffled as she wiped an errant tear from her face with the back of her hand. "I was a bookworm. He knew I'd never had a boyfriend and even if I'd had, I was a good girl and wouldn't have done such a thing."

She paused and he could feel her gathering the strength to speak. "He'd been out all evening drinking with his buddies and reeked of cigarette smoke and beer when he came into my room, turned on my bedside lamp and woke me up."

She stared down at the steps and for several seconds didn't speak, then began again. "I remember he closed the door with his foot and nearly lost his balance and fell on his face. Instead, he landed on my bed, and I shifted to get away from him, but he snagged my arm. He told me that no man would want me because I didn't have experience and if I had any hope of ever finding a husband I needed to learn how to pleasure a man."

She blinked, releasing more tears, and sucked in a long breath. "He made it sound as though he was doing me a favor. I begged him to stop, but he hit me and told me if I didn't take it like a good girl he'd hurt my brother. He knew that since my father had died Brent meant everything to me."

"So you laid there and let him have his way with you?"

She nodded and a small sob escaped. Nathan pulled her tight against him, cradling her, protecting her. All of his

previous thoughts dissolved into one focus. No way would he allow that sick bastard ever to place another grubby paw on Brooke again. "What he did to you was wrong, baby. You did the right thing in testifying, and I'm going to do whatever I can to help you get through his."

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CHAPTER 12

Finally, docked back in Seattle, Brooke puttered around the galley, tidying up the last few dishes left in the sink and bagging up the unused groceries that would spoil before they headed out again. Since the boat would stay docked until the next fishing season began, each of the guys would take a bag with them when they left, ensuring that none of the food was wasted.

She looked around the room and felt a certain amount of melancholy settle over her. When the season had started a few short weeks ago, she was sure she'd been in over her head. Looking back now, she realized that not only did she survive her first crabbing experience, but she'd enjoyed it to a certain degree.

It hadn't been anything she could use to pad her resume, but the amount of satisfaction she'd gotten out of feeding five hungry men outweighed even the best experiences she'd had as a sous-chef. She set the last clean cup in the cupboard and closed the door. Adam had generously volunteered to take her home, but before she left, she needed to tell Nathan thank you.

Brooke climbed the wheelhouse steps for what she knew would be her last time and fought the sadness washing over her. It was stupid, really, but she'd meant it when she'd told Nathan that she felt like she belonged. The men liked having her around, and she enjoyed taking care of them. Still, Nathan had only offered her the job to protect her. Now the

trip was over. The best she could hope for was that the police had caught her stepfather while she'd been away.

At the top step she cast her gaze toward the helm. Nathan sat staring at his logbook, his eyes focused on the numbers in front of him.

"Hi," she managed to squeak.

He looked up and smiled. "Hi."

"I..." She made the last step into the wheelhouse and drew in a deep breath to steady her voice. Emotions churned inside her, threatening tears and an upset stomach. "I just wanted to come up and tell you how grateful I am for everything you did."

Nathan set the pencil down and shifted his body so he faced her. "You're welcome. I'm glad I could help and I'm happy this trip worked out as well as it did. I have to admit I had my reservations at the start."

She scuffed her foot over the threadbare carpet and cast her gaze downward. "Me, too."

Unable to formulate the correct words, for several seconds she said nothing. Could she possibly tell him her true feelings? How, when he held her, she felt safe and warm after so many empty and cold years. Would he appreciate the fact he'd been able to chip away her emotional barriers until she'd finally allowed him into her inner sanctum? Would he even know? Not many people had ever been able to breach her defenses, and he'd been the first man.

"Well..." She angled her thumb toward the steps. "I'll let you get back to whatever it was you were doing. I just wanted to say thank you and goodbye."

"Goodbye?" He slid from his seat and took several hurried steps toward her. "I thought I was taking you home."

She shook her head. "Adam offered to drop me off on his way home and I hated to inconvenience you."

"It's not an inconvenience. Actually, I was hoping to talk to you about maybe coming back next season?"

Her heart leaped. "Really?"

He smiled. "Yeah, really. We all loved your food, and I have to admit it was nice to have someone to keep me company on those long shifts. Just don't tell my crew I said that. It would ruin my reputation as a hard ass."

She laughed. "I won't say a word."

An uncomfortable silence fell between them, and she chewed on her bottom lip wondering if she should follow her instincts or logic. In the end, instinct won out. Rising up on her toes, she cupped his cheek in her palm and brushed a soft, chaste kiss over his lips. "Thank you for everything. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I have a purpose, like I belong, and for that I'll always be grateful to you."

She pulled back and turned to go, but before she'd taken a step, he snagged her by the wrist.

The look in his eyes when she turned back to face him spoke volumes. Fear. There was definitely fear, but also something else. Something more dominant. Something she couldn't quite identify. Her heart pounded, a gong inside her chest, sending the residual vibrations through her body, causing her to shake. He stepped forward, and she was more than a little surprised when her legs moved toward him, bridging the distance.

He stroked a knuckle over her cheek. "Let me take you home."

It wasn't an order or a request, but more along the lines of a plea. A plea she would have a hard time denying. Sure, she could say no and he would accept her answer—for now, but did she want to say no? No man had ever caused her to want with the same depth and desire that Nathan did.

A yes would mean so much more than a simple ride home. With it would be all the responsibilities of a real relationship, including sex. She pushed away the need to shiver with fear in response to that thought while she continued to consider his request. It was inevitable, she supposed, that her issues would eventually need to be addressed, especially if she ever hoped to have a relationship of any meaning and permanence. If she were going to face her past, she couldn't think of a better man to have by her side.

She'd never been one to make the first move in a relationship, which was precisely what drove her to kiss him in reply. For a split second, he stiffened, apparently shocked by her aggressive move, then relaxed by wrapping his arms around her waist to pull her close. The contact should have sent her scurrying from his grasp, but all she could think about was more. She wanted more of Nathan and everything he had to offer, regardless of the consequences. Stars went supernova behind her eyes, causing her knees to wobble as he took control of the kiss, deepening it on a moan that Brooke swore poured directly from his soul. It was a sound she knew spoke both of his desire and fear, and one she hoped she'd never get tired of hearing.

Urgency raced through her, tugged at her self-control, and pushed her to ask him for more. She whimpered at her own long ignored needs and slid her fingers through his silky hair, relinquishing her last bit of control to him. He groaned in response, tugging her closer with one hand while lacing his fingers through her hair.

Fire ignited something low in her belly, sending the residual warmth radiating through her extremities. This wasn't the same gentle whisper of a kiss he'd brushed over her in the cabin before. No, this time it was fierce, demanding and should have made her take a step back in fear. Instead, she sank farther into his embrace, going nearly pliant in his hands.

It was time to enjoy the moment, to feel again for the first time in years and revel in the knowledge that despite being damaged goods, Nathan wanted her.

Somewhere inside her own haze, she heard Adam's amused voice carry through the room. "Brooke, are you ready? Oh... Well, um...I take it Nathan will be driving you home instead. Don't worry. I know my way out."

"So." Brooke shifted in the passenger seat and ran a shaky hand through her hair.

"So?" Nathan repeated as he pulled out of the parking lot.

"That was some kiss."

He couldn't help the smile stretching across his face. "That it was. How do you feel about it?"

"I'm not sure. I mean I really like being with you, but I'm not sure I'm ready for the kind of a relationship a kiss like that would dictate."

He understood completely. Despite his feelings for her, the last thing he'd expected was for her to initiate such an erotic and sensual kiss. Now she had, he'd be damned if he was going to let her pull back into her shell like some scared turtle. "Yeah, neither am I, but if I remember correctly, you kissed me? Which means you have feelings for me, right?"

"Yes, but—"

He shook his head. "No buts, Brooke. You know how I feel about you. At least I hope you know after my babble fest during the first offload."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he wasn't finished and he wasn't going to give her a chance to make up some lame excuse about why they couldn't be more than friends. "If we wanted to, both of us could find a million reasons why a real relationship between us wouldn't work. Personally, I don't want to do that. I know this is probably a very uncomfortable and frightening step for you. It is for me, too, but I'm willing to see where it takes me. Are you willing to do the same?"

She appeared to mull over his words, and he hoped she understood how hard this was for him. Life had scarred him as deeply as she was, yet he was willing to put those emotions and his very heart on the line. Was she? Could she possibly face her demons and give them the chance they deserved at happiness?

"I don't know. There's a lot to consider and I have a ton of baggage I'd be bringing with me. That would hardly be fair to you."

He brushed a thumb along her cheek. "Like I don't have my own baggage to deal with? I know that because of the rape you're scared. It's okay. I'm not in any hurry to rush you, sweetheart."

"B...but I've never had a real relationship, Nathan. I don't have a clue how things are supposed to progress."

Since when were there rules about how relationships worked? The light changed and he turned onto her side street and pulled into an empty spot in front of her building. He put his truck in park, shut off the engine and turned to face her. As much as he didn't want to push her, he decided maybe some pressure might be necessary. It wouldn't be fair to shortchange them both because of her past. "Then we take things slow and just follow our instincts." He leaned forward and brushed a gentle kiss against her lips, hoping it would be enough to persuade her.

When he pulled away, she smiled. "You win. I'll try this thing you call a relationship, but I'm warning you now, I'm probably going to suck at it."

He laughed. "Well, that makes two of us, so we can suck at it together."

"You want to come in?"

"Sure."

Nathan stepped out of the truck and rounded the back. About to pull her bag from the truck bed, he noticed she'd almost frozen in place. He turned and placed a gentle hand on her arm. "Something wrong?"

"My door is open."

The tone of those four little words revealed just how much fear still haunted her and Nathan's attention quickly shifted to the front door. His skin prickled with awareness. "You're right. Does anybody else have a key?"

Brooke shook her head. "Only my landlord, but he's elderly. He wouldn't be able to climb the flight of stairs to make it into my place."

If someone had broken into her apartment, no way would he let her go inside until he could be sure it was safe. Nathan pushed in front of her, then slowly moved to where he could toe open the door. "You stay back."

She tugged at his arm, doing her best to pull him away. "What if somebody is still in there?"

He could only hope Wayne was still inside. Wouldn't it be sweet to finally get his hands on the sick bastard and beat him into a bloody pulp? "All the more reason for you not to be the first one inside. No offense, honey, but I could pick you up and toss you around like a doll. Do you really think you'd have a chance against some intruder?" He shook her off his arm, reached into his pocket and handed her his cell phone. "Now stay here and call the police."

Inside the doorway, he paused and listened for the rustle of clothing or the sounds of footfalls upstairs, only to come up with nothing. Careful to make as little sound as possible, Nathan eased up the steps and peered through the wrought iron railing into the darkness. He didn't see any movement, but if somebody had heard them talking or seen his truck pull up, they might be hiding. Wishing he had more than just his fists for protection, Nathan slowly walked into the room and

worked hard to ignore its destroyed contents. He couldn't afford any distractions until he was sure the place was clear.

If Wayne was here, then he was a coward, Nathan decided as he flung open the bathroom door, prepared for a fight. The only thing that greeted him was a small spider, which scurried beneath the cabinet when he flicked on the overhead light. Nathan let out a long, frustrated breath and checked behind the curtain before he moved on to her bedroom. It only took a few minutes for him to realize that whoever had inflicted the damage was long gone. Unfortunately, there wasn't going to be any easy way to tell Brooke about her belongings.

He pivoted on his heel to head out of the bedroom and stopped in the doorway when he spotted Brooke standing on the top step. Even with only the dim light from the bathroom casting shadows through the room, he could see the complete devastation etched into her features. It pained him to see her that way, but it also angered him that she hadn't listened to his orders. "I thought I told you to stay outside."

She shot him what he knew was a forced smile. "I didn't want you to have to face the danger alone."

Typical, he thought, for her to think of others even when she was the one facing danger. He sighed and crossed to her. "The place is empty. Whoever did this is long gone."

Sirens sounded in the distance and Nathan's gaze shifted from her to the staircase and back. "I'm guessing you followed some of my directions and called the police."

A lump had formed in her throat, preventing her from talking. She nodded, drew in a long breath and held it.

Despite her shattered belongings, she wasn't going to break down. Crying wouldn't change anything.

"Brooke?" Detective Morrison's voice carried up the stairwell.

She turned her head to see him ascend the steps, weapon drawn.

He stopped next to her and scanned the room, his gaze finally settling on Nathan. "You her boss?"

Nathan nodded and extended his hand to shake. "Nathan Lowery." He motioned to the room behind him. "I already checked the place. There's nobody here."

"Right." He narrowed his eyes at Nathan. "Coming in here alone wasn't the smartest thing to do Mr. Lowery. Not only did you potentially contaminate a crime scene, but if the perpetrator had still been here, you could've been injured."

"I apologize for mucking up your crime scene, Detective, but I'm not sorry for protecting Brooke."

The detective gave Nathan's words a huff. "Well, my men will have another look around and see if we might be able to learn who did this."

Ten minutes passed while Brooke answered questions from an officer who barely looked old enough to drive, let alone carry a gun. Police milled about her place, picking through her belongings, searching for the one clue that might reveal who committed the crime.

A second officer appeared at her bedroom door. "Um, Detective, I think you should see this."

Careful not to disturb anything, Brooke stepped over and around her belongings and followed Detective Morrison into

her bedroom. Inside, dresser drawers now lay on their sides or upside down on the floor, clothing ripped from her closet had been strewn through the room and pictures lay smashed on the floor, but her bed remained intact, the comforter and sheets folded down, almost in invitation. One wilted red rose lay on the pillow with a note.

Her stomach churned as she looked at the sight.

With gloved hands, one of the officers picked up the note and slipped it into a clear plastic bag before handing it to Detective Morrison.

He read the protected note, then handed it to Brooke.

You destroyed my life by testifying. Now it's my turn to destroy yours. I started with your apartment, but I left the bed intact because I need somewhere appropriate to end your life. You can run, Brooke, but I will find you.

"Brooke?"

She turned to find Nathan standing in the doorway.

"He did this," she whispered as a decade-old terror gripped her by the throat and threatened to cut off her oxygen.

"Who did this?" Nathan asked, crossing to her.

"My stepfather." She drew in a ragged breath while anger warred with fear, mixing, churning inside her.

Detective Morrison placed a hand on her forearm, garnering her attention. "I think it's time we place you in protective custody."

"No!" She yanked free of the detective's grip, then pulled away from Nathan, too, so she could face them both. "I don't care how afraid I am. I'm not going to hide anymore."

"I think he's right," Nathan reached up to squeeze her shoulder.

She shook her head and stepped out of his reach, determined to make them both understand. Despite being terrified of what might happen, she was done running. "I'll be damned if I'm going to let that bastard come into my space and turn it upside down. I've spent too many years letting him control me and I'm finished being that seventeen-year-old cowering under the covers.

"This time, I fight."

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CHAPTER 13

Nathan unlocked the door to his condo and motioned for Brooke to enter. On the ride over from her apartment, she'd barely uttered a sound except for the obligatory thank you when he opened the door. The argument that ensued at her apartment over where she would stay wasn't one of his finer moments, but he'd be damned if he was going to stand by and let her stay, unprotected and alone in that dump she called an apartment. While it would have broken his heart to see her squirreled away in protective custody just as their relationship was finally starting to solidify, at least she'd have been safe.

As it stood, with her being so adamant about standing her ground and fighting, he had little choice but to step up and take on her battle. Not that defending her was even a question. Without a doubt, he'd willingly lay his life down to protect her, but he also knew his limitations. While he would do his best to keep her safe, he knew the police could have done a better job.

He set her bag down and turned to lock the door behind him. "Are you okay?" he asked, then winced at the stupidity of his question. Of course, she wasn't all right.

She nodded, but he noted how her arms remained crossed, as if she was trying to comfort herself. It rubbed his heart raw to see her so upset and he wanted more than anything to wrap her in his love and never let go. Her current stance had him thinking better of it. What she needed was

space and time to process earlier events and, by God, no matter how much it frustrated him, he was going to give it to her.

"Do you need anything?"

"No. Thank you," she whispered, her voice edgy and strained.

God, this was killing him. The need to comfort her, to fight away all her fears pushed him forward. He took a step toward her only to watch her step back. "Brooke?"

She held a shaky hand up. "Please don't." She shook her head. "I may have agreed to stay with you, but I can't do this right now. I need some time. All I want to do is go to bed. I promise we'll talk in the morning."

It nearly broke him to see her closing him out and he couldn't help but feel a bit hurt by it. "Okay. Let me show you the guest room."

Two hours later, Nathan found himself lying in bed, staring into the darkness, with sleep completely evading him. He'd watched her take a sleeping pill before she'd told him goodnight and he could only hope it was working for her because there wasn't any way he would sleep.

His heart skipped a beat when Brooke's agonizing scream broke the silence. He threw off the covers and raced for her bedroom. Had somebody broken in? Was she hurt in some way?

He flung open the door and paused for only a moment while he took in the scene in front of him. Alone in bed, Brooke writhed beneath the covers, flailing her arms.

"No, please," she begged to who- or whatever held her hostage in her dream.

Nathan skirted the bed. Careful to avoid her swinging fists, he eased down next to her. "Brooke." He placed his hands on her shoulders and shook gently.

She flung her head to the side, as if someone had struck her. A sob rushed past her lips, and Nathan's heart cracked a little more. "Brooke." He shook harder.

Her eyes flew open and she screamed as she sat straight up in bed. Her arms were wild, swinging out, fighting him.

"Brooke, baby, stop. You're okay."

She paused, blinked several times and looked up at Nathan, wild-eyed. "Nathan?"

"Yeah, honey, it's me. You're okay. Nobody's trying to hurt you."

"I'm at your place," she stated as if she couldn't quite believe it.

He brushed a thumb along her cheek, wiping away the tears. "That's right. You're in my guest room."

A sudden awareness fell over her and she grabbed his hand, pulling it away from her face. "I'm sorry I woke you."

No! Don't shut me out. "It's not a problem. Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head.

Please? "Brooke?"

She gazed up at him. The wary and cautious look in her eyes hurt him. "If you don't mind, I'd like to try and go back to sleep."

He stood up and stepped away from the bed. "I'll leave my bedroom door open. If you change your mind, don't hesitate to wake me, okay?"

She nodded.

"I mean it, Brooke."

"Okay. Good night, Nathan."

He closed her door and turned toward his bedroom. Finding her in the middle of a nightmare so intense it made her scream tore him up inside. Having her put up her invisible walls as soon as she was fully awake drove him crazy. It was obvious she was suffering deeply, a tortured soul in need. He wanted to be the one to soothe her worried mind and drive her pain away. He couldn't do that if she wouldn't let him in.

As he promised, he left his door open, stalked to his bed and dropped onto the mattress. Relegated to the sidelines for now, unable to help her, he hoped she'd change her mind and want to talk. His brow creased on that thought.

Brooke hadn't even told Willow and they were best friends. Yet, she'd entrusted him with her secret. That had to count for something.

He rolled onto his side and tried to calm his racing mind. He could be reading more into Brooke's motives than was there. After all, he'd pushed her into a corner and left her little choice but to tell him about her past. But she could have returned to Seattle instead and she didn't. Was that because she trusted him or did fear dictate her decision? *The lesser of the two evils?* Unable to sleep or to fight his spinning mind, he gave up and allowed his thoughts to wander.

Before long, an image of Casey settled behind his closed eyes and a small pain tugged on his chest. This January would mark ten years that she and the boys had been gone. It was a long time for anyone to mourn, but mourn he had. The first couple of years, his family and friends had been so supportive. Not once had they pushed him to move on. Each one of his brothers had taken turns staying with him, keeping vigil by his side through those first rough months.

After a few years, the questions arose about when he was going to move on. Statements were made about how Casey wouldn't want him to suffer like that. None of it made a difference to him. His heart had died that night with them and he was sure he'd never love anyone again...until now.

What was it about the innocent little minx tucked away in his spare bedroom that twisted his stomach into knots? It was more than simply the need to protect her, though his instincts did run hot when it came to her safety. No, the feeling he got when he looked at her was more akin to way he'd felt when he'd first started dating Casey.

What did that mean? Surely, he couldn't be in love again.

A soft knock permeated his conscious. He opened his eyes and found Brooke standing in the doorway. Silhouetted by the hallway light, her diminutive frame barely took up half the space of the doorway. He pulled himself into a sitting position against the headboard and reached to turn on a light.

"Come in."

She took a tentative step into his room. Even with the distance between them, he could tell she was shaking.

"I..." She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "I was wondering if that invitation to talk was still open."

Nathan slid over to make room for her and patted the empty space he'd made on the bed. "Absolutely."

She crawled onto the bed and tucked her legs beneath her. "I'm sorry about earlier."

He shook his head. "I told you it wasn't a problem. Please stop apologizing."

"No, I mean about shutting you out. It's just..." She paused. "I've never been one to share my problems with others."

"Not even Willow?"

She shook her head as she picked at the edge of the blanket.

"Why not? She's your best friend."

"Yeah, but she also likes to gossip, and I've always been afraid she'd tell everyone."

"So what if she did? What happened to you wasn't your fault, Brooke. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"I guess I've always been afraid everyone would treat me differently. I mean it's bad enough I had to experience it, but to have my friends treat me differently because of it would be more than I could take."

"Believe it or not, I understand and I'm honored you feel you can trust me. Now do you want to tell me about your nightmare?"

She shrugged. "It's always the same. I dream that Wayne finds me and well..." She looked up at him and he swore she was about to cry. "I'm so tired, Nathan, so sick of him holding

me hostage. I want to make it go away, but I don't know how."

Nathan slid a hand over hers. "Do you trust me?"

She paused for a moment, then nodded.

He pulled the covers back, inviting her into his bed. Much to his surprise, she didn't hesitate and crawled beneath the covers. She curled into a ball. "I hate this." Her voice cracked. "I hate that ten years later I'm still as scared of him as I was that horrible night."

He tucked a stray hair behind her ear. "He's put you through hell. Personally, I think you have good reason to be afraid."

She blinked, finally allowing tears to stream down her cheeks. "All I've ever wanted was to have a normal life. I've never had a boyfriend because I knew, eventually, he'd want sex. I know I'm being irrational and that it can be a beautiful act, but all I know is the violence and pain of it."

She turned into him and snuggled against his chest. "How can I ever truly be in love if I can't get past the pain?"

Lingering just inside a dream, Brooke snuggled against the warmth that had made her feel safe enough sleep well for the first time in years. She burrowed closer, only to have a warm arm wrap around her.

"Sweetheart, I'm trying very hard to be a good boy. Please stop before it kills me." Nathan's gravely, sleep heavy voice filled her ears.

Slowly she opened her eyes and stared at the room. Much to her surprise, she didn't have one of those where-am-I

moments and was even more shocked by the fact she wasn't the least bit uncomfortable wrapped in Nathan's embrace.

"Sorry." She turned over and looked up at his heavy lidded eyes. His hair was wild this morning, disheveled from the pillow and a fair amount of tossing and turning, she figured.

He smiled. "Good morning."

"Good morning."

"Did you sleep well?"

She gave a languid stretch and took a moment to evaluate her current physical and mental state. "Actually, I think I did. I don't know what it is about your bed, but I didn't have any more of those dreams."

He lifted up on his elbow and looked down at her. "Does being with me make you feel safe?"

"Yeah, I think it does. Actually, I've never slept with a man before."

He arched a brow. "Considering what you've been through, that's not surprising."

She shook her head. "After that night, I never let anyone get close enough for our relationship to evolve that way. I have to say, I think I like it."

"Well, I'd be lying if I said I didn't like waking up with you in my arms."

She lifted a hand and gently trailed a finger along his jaw line. "And I'd be lying if I said I didn't like waking up in your arms."

His expression changed, growing hot, and he turned into her touch when she cupped his cheek. She knew all too what could happen if she allowed it. Yet, for the first time in her

life, that prospect wasn't quite so scary. Nathan did something to her that no other man had been able to do since her father. He made her feel safe.

His lips hovered mere millimeters above hers. She closed her eyes and lifted her head to bridge the distance. His soft lips closed over hers. The kiss was gentle, and barely there until he opened his mouth and drew her bottom lip between his teeth. His sucked on it, pulling a need from her she didn't know existed.

She lifted her arms, wrapping them around him, pulling him down to her. He went willingly. The warmth of his body pressed to hers seduced her, teasing her with hints of the pleasures only he could give her.

Her nails grazed along his back, inciting a shudder from him. Inwardly, she grinned at the idea the she could have such an effect on him. Embolden by his reaction, she allowed her hands to trail downward along his back, raking her nails over his skin as she went.

Propped on one elbow, his other hand began to wander along her side, lightly brushing along her breast. Her breath caught as the instinct to pull away warred with the need to feel loved.

His hand fell away and he pushed up onto his palms. "Did I frighten you?"

The compassion in his voice, combined with the concern in his eyes, squelched her fears. How could she possibly be afraid of him when he only wanted to make her happy, to show her the best that making love had to offer? "No," she murmured. "I'm just not used to being touched like that."

"Do you want me to stop?"

Yes. "No. I want you to kiss me again."

His lips tipped into a grin as he lowered himself to her again. "We can take this as slow as you want, baby. I won't deny I want to make love to you almost more than I want my next breath, but I *will not* push you into anything you're not ready to do."

His declaration touched her heart and nearly caused her to cry. He really was the sweetest man on earth. "Thank you, Nathan. Now please kiss me again."

Her eyes fluttered, then closed when his lips covered hers a second time. The possessiveness of the kiss, the heat and hunger mixed to create a perfect storm of need. This time when his hand brushed along her breast, she tried not to flinch. She might not be ready for what he wanted to give her, but perhaps she'd never truly be ready. This moment had presented itself and despite her lingering issues, she'd be a fool not to at least try and take it.

The shrill ring of the phone interrupted her thoughts just as Nathan pulled away uttering a few choice words under his breath. He twisted and looked at the clock. "Shit, it's past ten. I was supposed to have a meeting with the guys at the lawyer's office about the new boat purchase." He raced from the bed and snagged the phone. "Hello? No, everything's fine. I overslept is all. Right. I'll be there as soon as I can. Go ahead with the meeting, and I'll catch up when I get there."

He hung up the phone, then turned back to her. Brooke tried not to look as disappointed as she felt. It certainly wasn't his fault he had a meeting.

"I suppose you need to go?"

He nodded and ran a hand through his disheveled hair.

"Afraid so. Why don't you get dressed and come with me? After we're finished we'll grab some lunch and then stop by Willow and Adam's so you can pick up your mail."

She forced a smile. "Sounds like a plan."

She climbed from the bed and headed for the door, only to have Nathan block her exit. "Just so you know"—he slid his hands into hers—"I could tell you weren't really ready to go all the way today."

She swallowed down the sudden lump in her throat.

"I...I'm sorry, Nathan. I want to make love to you. I really do. It's just that I'm not..." She shrugged and hung her head, not liking the feeling of guilt. "Well, you're right...I'm not ready."

He curled a finger beneath her chin, lifting her gaze to meet his. "No need to be sorry, sweetheart. While I'll admit to being a bit frustrated, I also completely understand."

"You do?"

He placed a gentle kiss on the tip of her nose and smile. "I do, and just so you know, when you *are* ready, I plan on being the one to show you how making love is supposed to be."

Her heart leaped for joy and this time she gave him a genuine smile. "When I'm ready, I think I'd like that."

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CHAPTER 14

It was early afternoon when they stepped into the foyer at Willow and Adam's house.

Willow enveloped Brooke in a hug. "Nathan called last night and told us about the break-in. Are you okay?"

Brooke nodded. "I'm fine. Whatever happened took place while I was gone."

"Did they take anything?"

"I don't think so, but it was hard to tell in all the mess. I'll be able to know for sure once I get things cleaned up."

Placing a hand on Brooke's shoulder, Willow shook her head. "I can't believe somebody would be so brazen and ransack your place." She paused as a horrified expression crossed her face. "Do you think it was the same person who they thought might be stalking you?"

"There's a good chance."

"Well, what are the police doing about it?"

Brooke shrugged. "There isn't much they can do. I'm staying with Nathan for now while they keep a lookout." Feeling the beginnings of a headache starting Brooke rubbed her temple. "I'm really sick of thinking about it. Can we change the subject, please?"

"Okay, if that's what you want."

"I'd appreciate it."

"No problem. So how was the trip?"

"Hasn't Adam already filled you in?"

Willow nodded. "Sure he has, but I want the scoop from you. The perspective is sure to be different from a woman's point of view."

Brooke laughed. "Like my perspective is going to be that much different."

"I'll make you a cappuccino...and we have pastries." Willow wagged her brows.

"Well, how can I turn down an offer like that?" Brooke followed Willow down the small hallway into the kitchen. "So did you go for your ultrasound yet?"

Willow shook her head. "Next week. I wanted to do it when I was sure Adam would be home to go with me. Just think..." She paused with one hand on the cabinet door. "Hopefully this Thanksgiving we'll know the sex of our child and we'll have just one more thing to be thankful for. You are coming to Thanksgiving, right?"

"Of course."

Willow's attention shifted to a small basket on the counter. "Oh, by the way, I have all your mail." She passed the basket to Brooke. "Honestly, I expected to have to put everything into a big box, but once I sorted out the junk mail there wasn't that much."

"I'm not the social butterfly you are," Brooke replied, eyeing the stack of envelopes. "Besides my utility bills and letters from my brother, I don't usually get much mail."

Willow glanced over her shoulder at Brooke. "Kinda makes getting the mail every day a bit depressing if you know all you're going to get is bills."

Brooke shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not one for surprises, so knowing what I'm facing is a good thing."

"I suppose." She turned back to the cabinet and pulled out a bag of cappuccino blend. "Okay, so dish. I want to know how the trip was."

Brooke slid onto one of the bar stools at the island separating the kitchen from the dining area. "It was interesting. Hmm...let me think." Brooke tapped her finger against her chin. "Well, we took a rogue wave that momentarily put us on our side and threw me out of my bunk and into a small dresser." She raised her arm and pulled her sleeve up, revealing the fading black-and-blue bruise on the inside of her forearm. "I was going to suffer through it, but Nate insisted we have x-rays done. I guess it's a good thing since it turned out I had a hairline fracture."

Willow inspected the remnants of the bruise. "Damn, Brooke. This must've been really ugly when it first happened. You're lucky it wasn't worse."

Brooke snorted at her words. "I'm lucky the boat was damaged enough we had to go back in for repairs. Otherwise, I'd have been gritting it out until the end of the season."

Willow paused, her eyes wide. "God, you're starting to sound like Adam."

Brooke began thumbing through the stack. "They work on little to no sleep, through the least hospitable conditions on the face of the earth just so we can eat crab legs and crab cakes and shit." She shook her head. "After the first couple of days, I found myself wanting to do everything I could to make things easier for them."

Brooke began making two piles, separating out the bills from her other mail. She'd been behind in her utilities before a month away, so the stack probably included a few past due and service shut off notices.

"I'm getting the impression you actually liked working on the boat?"

"I kinda did. It was weird being on the boat with all men, and I had to get over the sea sickness, but once that was out of the way, the trip was pretty cool."

"Cool?"

"Okay, maybe cool isn't the right word, but I have to say for the first time in my life I felt like I was needed. Every time they came in to eat, they couldn't praise me enough. When they stepped into a clean shower and had dry clean clothes to change into, every one of them made a point to tell me how much they appreciated everything I was doing."

"That's awesome, but I can't believe you weren't even a little scared. Adam said they hit some storms and had a few problems. Didn't it frighten the hell out of you to be out in the middle of nowhere, knowing anything could happen?"

Brooke paused at an oversized envelope. "Doesn't it frighten you to know Adam is out there in the middle of nowhere, knowing anything could happen?"

Willow cocked her head to the side. "Touche."

Brooke flipped the envelope over looking for a return address and frowned when she didn't find one.

"Did Nathan ask you to come back for the next season?"

Brooke smiled. "Actually, he did."

"And?"

"I'm probably going to do it." She ripped open the end of the manila envelope and pulled out the contents. A paper was folded over, protecting something inside it.

She opened the paper and a photo fell onto the counter.

Brooke glanced down at the picture and froze. With shaking hands, she picked up the photo and stared at it. The picture was an old Polaroid of her lying in her childhood bed naked, bloody and bruised.

"What's wrong?" Willow skirted the counter, moved behind her and gasped when she caught sight of the photo. "Oh, my God!"

Tears blurred Brooke's vision, turning the scene before her into one giant inky blur. She sucked in a ragged breath and fought not to let out a cry. She picked up the paper to find only one word scrawled across the page.

REMEMBER?

She hadn't noticed Willow's disappearance until she felt a warm hand on her shoulder. Brooke looked up through blurry eyes to see Nathan standing behind her.

"What's happened?"

Unable to speak, she handed him the paper, then picked up the photo and cradled it to her chest. "He's never going to leave me alone," she finally managed to cry.

"Who?" Willow asked, looking from Brooke to Nathan and back. "What's going on? Who is the girl in the picture?"

"The girl is Brooke," Nathan replied.

Willow gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. She shook her head and looked from Nathan to Adam to Brooke.

"Who sent it to you?"

"My stepfather."

"Why?"

"To torment me." She shook her head. "It wasn't enough that he raped me. Now he has to ruin the rest of my life by never letting me forget it."

"Raped you? Brooke, what are you talking about?"

"He raped her when she was a teenager," Nathan said.

Willow reached for the empty bar stool and leaned against it. "Oh, my God, what a horrible, evil man—"

"Honey," Nathan interrupted, "this is just some sick way of trying to get at you. You can't let him."

She blinked back the tears and stared up at him, but words had left her.

Nathan took the picture from her and studied it for several long seconds before shaking his head. "I think you need to call Detective Morrison about this."

Brooke took the picture back from him and closed her eyes. First her apartment, now this. It was too much, too quick and she was struggling to keep up. "Not right now," she managed to whisper as she eased down from the bar stool and walked to the sliding glass doors leading to the deck. What she needed was some time alone to think and cry.

The cold November air hit her square in the face, but she barely felt it. At this point, becoming numb would be the only way she'd survive the pain. She stared out over the yard to the small wooded area beyond. Her mind once again pulled her back to that agonizing night. Over the years, her memories had faded some, giving her much-needed distance between her current life and her past. It never went away

completely, but the feel of his hands on her, the smell of his foul breath brushing across her skin had dissolved, leaving fuzzy images behind.

Brooke looked down at the photo. Everything from that horrible night flooded back into her mind like a swollen river after a storm. The pain and humiliation she'd endured that night slammed into her, like a wrecking ball toppling a building, creating a physical pain greater than anything she'd felt since. How emotions could create such a strong physical response she'd never know. She simply wanted it to go far away.

Even now she could see the flash from the camera behind her eyelids, hear the noise the camera made echo in the silence of the room. Why hadn't she remembered it before? Her vision tunneled, threatening to go completely black as realization hit her. No matter how far she ran, no matter what she did, she'd never be rid of him. Death was the only answer, his or hers. A fight to the end would be the only way she'd ever truly be free of Wayne's grip.

Her knees gave out, but before she hit the hard deck, arms wrapped around her, pulling her into a tight embrace. Too exhausted to care who'd caught her, she closed her eyes and let go.

"It's okay, baby. I've got you," Nathan whispered as he gathered her close. Her eyes were closed and her head lolled to one side, coming to rest against his chest when he cradled her in his arms. She looked so tiny, so fragile. If he ever managed to get his hands on Wayne, he'd make the bastard paid for everything he'd done and was still doing to her.

He turned back to the house and carefully angled them through the door.

"What happened?" Willow asked a panicked look on her face.

"She'll be okay." He said the words, hoping to convince himself also. "I think this is more than she can handle right now and I'd really rather not drive with her like this. Can we use your spare bedroom?"

Willow nodded. "I'll go with you and turn down the sheets."

Careful not to rock her too much, Nathan carefully climbed the steps to the second floor and entered the spare bedroom. Willow scurried around the bed and pulled the quilt and top sheet back, then stepped out of the way, giving Nathan the space he needed to place Brooke gently on the mattress. "I'm going to stay with her a while," he said, kicking off his shoes.

Willow nodded, apparently understanding Nathan's need to be alone with Brooke. "Adam and I will be downstairs if you need anything."

He waited for her to close the door, then crawled onto the bed with Brooke. He pulled her back against him and held her tight. For a long time she didn't move, didn't speak, didn't do anything but lay there and breathe.

Struggling to find the right words, he strung and restrung together sentences in his head. In the end, he decided there wasn't anything he could say to make the situation better for her. All he could do was be honest with his feelings and let her know she didn't have to go through this alone.

"I can't claim to know how you're feeling right now, but I want you to know I'm here for you, honey. I'm not going anywhere."

She began to shake. She wept against him, gut wrenching sobs wracking her body until, emotionally drained, her cries quieted. Fearful of disturbing her, Nathan didn't move. Only after he heard her soft snores did he slowly extract himself from the bed and head downstairs.

When he entered the kitchen, Willow and Adam were sitting at the table, cups of coffee in hand. Willow looked up. "How's Brooke?"

"She's sleeping." He motioned to the mugs. "Regular or decaf?"

"Decaf. I'm not supposed to have caffeine."

Nathan wrinkled his nose, then proceeded to snag a mug from the cabinet and pour a cup. He'd take what he could get. He joined them at the table.

Willow shook her head in disbelief. "I've never seen her like that. I mean, she's had bouts of depression over the years, but this was downright scary."

Nathan ran a hand through his hair. "While we were at sea, she spent quite a bit of time talking with me in the wheelhouse. To say she hasn't had a good life would be an understatement. Even so, I really don't think she was prepared to handle something so devastating."

Anger welled inside him and he smacked his balled-up fist against the table. "I want to kill that bastard for putting her through the hell she's in."

Adam leaned back and folded his hands behind his head. "You'd just end up going to jail for murder."

"It would be well worth it if I knew she'd be free from his grip." Nathan shook his head. "I'm telling you, guys, I've never seen a person with the inner strength she has. With everything she's been through, it's amazing she's not locked away in some mental health facility."

"I can't believe she never said anything to me or anyone else about her stepfather raping her." Willow shook her head. "I can't imagine carrying around that secret all these years. It must be like having a never ending weight on her shoulders."

Adam picked up his mug. "I think the best thing we can do for her right now is to let her know we're here for her."

Nathan nodded. "I already told her I'm not going anywhere. As far as I'm concerned, that bastard is going to have to get through me if he's coming after her."

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CHAPTER 15

Brooke opened her eyes and blinked several times as her world came into focus. Realizing she was in one of Willow's guest rooms, she nearly groaned out loud. If she was here, that meant the last few hours hadn't simply been a bad dream.

The familiar pain in her chest started again, reminding her that fear and heartbreak were close behind. She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. There wasn't any use in putting off the inevitable any longer. No doubt, Willow would have a million questions and so would Detective Morrison. Bile rose into her throat and, for a brief moment, Brooke feared she'd throw up.

Instead, she forced down the reflex and pushed up from the bed, surprised a little at how unsteady she was on her legs. She was tired, that was all, she told herself as she crossed to the room to check her image in the mirror. Puffy, bloodshot eyes stared back at her. While she'd seen the person staring at her in the mirror more times than she could count, it still didn't make it any easier to take. Once again, she'd allowed Wayne to ravage her, leaving her empty and hollow, without ever laying a finger on her. The cycle needed to end, and while she'd been saying that for years, now was the time to make it happen.

She walked to the bathroom and filled the basin with cold water. With a washcloth, she soothed the heat from her cheeks and eyes until she almost looked normal, then wrung

the cloth out, released the water and headed downstairs to face her friends. For years, she'd managed to keep her secret from them, creating an invisible barrier between her current life and her past. As if the break-in hadn't put a big enough strain on her bid to keep her present and past separated, that damn photo had blown what was left all to hell, once again leaving her to pick up the pieces.

Gathering the courage to face her friends, she slowly descended the steps and ambled toward the kitchen. They'd have questions, difficult questions with ugly, gruesome answers that would bring all those horrible memories and feelings flooding back. Still, she knew she'd tell them, not only because they would ask, but because they were her friends and they didn't want her to be alone through this ordeal. For that fact, above all others she was thankful. With each new encounter, it was getting harder and harder for her to deal with situation on her own.

She stopped in the doorway and gazed at the three figures around the table. Concern and worry etched deep lines in each of their faces and guilt tugged at her heart. This wasn't their fight, but she knew they'd never let her continue the battle alone any more.

Nathan was the first to look up and meet her stare. Several emotions flickered over his features before he managed a small smile. "Hey."

His single word brought Adam and Willow's attention to her. She saw the concern in their gazes and tried hard to ignore the churning in the pit of her stomach.

"Hey," she finally managed to reply when she realized neither of them was going to speak.

Nathan pushed away from the table and walked toward her.

Instead of recoiling from his touch like she would have before the trip, she embraced it, giving over to her overwhelming need to lean on someone. Nathan guided her to the table, where she sank into the chair and waited while he poured her a cup of coffee.

She lifted the mug to her lips and savored the flavor as she gathered the rest of her courage. After taking a long sip, she returned the mug to the table and drew in a deep breath. "So," she said looking from one to the other, "what do you want to know?"

Several hours later, Brooke walked into Nathan's condo with one thought on her mind—sleep. After years of living with constant nightmares and sleepless nights, she'd have thought she'd be used to working on less sleep. Sadly, that wasn't the case and Brooke swore she could hear every weary muscle in her body crying for rest.

She bypassed the couch and headed down the hall to the guest room. Before she managed to close the door and lock the world out, Nathan appeared in the doorway. "You okay?"

The concern in his voice matched the worried look on his face and she couldn't help but reach out to touch his cheek. She could tell him yes, but he'd know it was a lie. For reasons she couldn't quite comprehend, he always seemed to know when she was lying. "No, but I will be once I've had a good night's sleep."

"Are you sure you don't want to maybe stay up and watch a movie with me to get your mind off of things?"

She'd spent the better part of the afternoon and evening talking first to Nathan, Willow and Adam, then to Detective Morrison and his crew. They were no closer to finding Wayne. The fact was she didn't feel any better and wasn't interested in watching some movie. Still, Nathan had been so kind, she hated to turn him down. "Tell you what"—she raised her other hand to his cheek—"I'll watch a movie with you tomorrow night. Right now, I just want to get some sleep."

He eyed her warily, but nodded. "I understand. I have some business to work on anyway. If you need anything, come get me, okay?"

She smiled. "Okay."

He started to turn away, then paused and pulled her into a hug. "I wish I could make everything better for you."

So did she.

She lost track of time. That was how long Brooke sat on the edge of the bed, thinking about her decision. Going on with the way things were wasn't an option because she knew her stepfather would continue to haunt her. Her only choice was to end the cycle and begin again, hopefully forging new and wonderful memories with the man she cared very much for.

Nothing worth having came without risk, so it would be natural for her to feel some hesitation, right? She looked down at her hands and drew in a deep breath. After what happened today, she knew there wasn't any way Nathan

would initiate anything on his own. If she wanted this night, she'd go to him.

It was time. She rose and crossed to the small dresser where she pulled out a soft yellow silk chemise. It had been an impulse purchase she'd made years earlier while shopping with Willow. She'd justified her purchase by saying she didn't need a man around to wear something sexy, but by the time she'd arrived home with her lingerie she'd had second thoughts. Instead of taking the garment back, though, she'd tucked it away in the bottom drawer of her dresser. Why she'd shoved it in the bottom of her bag she'd never know, but now as she stood looking at herself in the mirror, she was glad she had.

She stripped out of everything except her panties, then slid the soft satin over her head.

Chiffon ruffles circled the bottom and brushed against her mid-thigh, while the satin hugged and clung in all the right places. She adjusted the ruffled straps, then pulled at her hair. *No*. She always wore it up. This time she would leave it down.

Inhaling deeply, she turned and walked to the door. She could do this. She would do this. Without giving herself time to rethink the moment, Brooke opened the door and turned down the hall toward the sound of the television.

Nathan lay propped against the headboard of his bed, watching the small television atop his dresser. His eyes widened when he caught sight of her.

"Hi." She gave him a tiny wave.

"Hi." He swung his legs over the side of the mattress, concern etched deep into his features. "Is everything okay?"

She smiled at him, lacing her fingers together.

"Everything's fine. I... Well, I was wondering if you might be willing to help me with something."

"If I can I will. What do you need?"

"You."

The look of shock on his face had Brooke wanting to forget her entire plan. Why had she thought she could do this?

Intent on making some excuse and a quick exit, she opened her mouth, only to close it again when he rose from the bed. He slowly crossed the room, his gaze traveling over her as he did, as if she were the only thing in the world that existed. She let her hands fall apart, then clasped together a second time. She didn't *want* to be nervous, but her mind wasn't cooperating.

He paused mere millimeters from where she stood, his look never wavering. "Why now?"

A valid question and one Brooke had no idea how to answer. Would he possibly understand the battle going on inside her head? Could he know how desperately she wanted to be rid of those haunting images or how much she wanted to love and be loved in the truest sense of the word?

"I've been thinking about it for a while now, but it occurred to me this afternoon that I've allowed Wayne to hold me hostage for too long and not just with the threat of physical retribution. I want to be rid of that night."

He started to speak, but she shook her head and held up a hand stopping him. "I know I can't erase the images, but I can bury them beneath new ones."

"If it's that simple, why haven't you done so before now?"

"Because it's not that simple. I didn't want to have sex for the sake of it. I'm smart enough to know it's not so much the act that matters, but what it represents. It's supposed to mean something to those involved." She cast her gaze away, then, drawing on her courage once again, met his stare.

"Trust is a big issue for me. I've never known a man I could trust completely, until you. Even more than that, I care about you, Nathan, and for the first time in my life I'm willing to risk heartbreak to feel love."

She reached out, taking his large hands in her trembling ones. "I know it's a lot to ask, but will you take me there, Nathan? You've said you love me. Will you give me that love? Will you show me what I've been missing?"

"Of course I will, but are you sure this is what you want?"

"I can't remember the last time I was so sure about something. Make love to me, Nathan?"

Wordlessly, he wrapped his arms loosely around her waist and lowered his head.

She raised her face to meet him, her lips parting in invitation as he kissed her.

A potato chip commercial played on television in the background as they stood bathed in the flickering light, giving and taking in a kiss that would lead to so much more. Her breath came and went in short bursts, while her body trembled beneath his touch.

Cupping her face in his hands, he urged the kiss forward, nibbling first her bottom lip, then her top, then brushing his tongue lightly along the soft flesh. Brooke's fingers clung to his forearms before sliding up his arms around to his back. Desire tumbled its way into her heart and she let out a sigh, allowing his tongue on a journey of discovery.

He trailed hands along her sides, his thumbs brushing against her breasts. She shuddered and worked to suppress the need to pull away. *He won't hurt me.* The words became her chant, her mantra, and would, hopefully, help her overcome any moments of trepidation. Fear couldn't cloud her thinking. She wouldn't let it get in the way.

Striking a slow and deliberate path, Nathan worked his way down the nape of her neck to the swell of her breast exposed above the silk and chiffon. "Slow and gentle, baby," he whispered as he softly mouthed her skin. She whimpered a reply and slipped her fingers through his hair.

When he palmed her breast through the fabric, rubbing his thumb across her nipple, she started to jerk away, but before she could break free, a new and wonderful sensation descended on her, causing Brooke to gasp.

Reaching up with his pinky finger, Nathan pulled the strap off her shoulder, allowing the fabric to fall away from her skin. He paused and Brooke could feel his gaze roaming over her. Instinctively, she covered her breast with her arm. His eyes drifted to hers. "If you don't want to do this, I'll understand." He guided a knuckle along her cheek.

The adoration in his eyes touched her at her core. Love filled her heart and she moved her arm letting it drop to her side. "I want to."

He smiled and began again, drugging her with kisses. This time she closed her eyes and opened herself to the sensations rippling through her body. Her skin tingled at his touch and warmed beneath his lips. He closed his mouth over her nipple, and Brooke held her breath as he gently sucked.

White, hot pleasure stole the remainder of her rational thoughts. Glorious, wonderful sensations descended on her. She relaxed, grabbing his shoulders for support.

"That's it, baby, just let go," he murmured, as he moved from one breast to the other. "I have so much more to show you."

More? She could do little more than breathe while currents of pleasure electrified her body. She knew there was more, but that thought didn't seem possible. Could it actually get better than this?

She shrugged from beneath the other strap, letting the silk gown drop and puddle to the floor. *No more barriers.*

Nathan paused, then lifted his mouth back to her lips. "You humble me," he whispered against her ear as he his fingers continued to knead her breast. She grabbed his hand, stilling him beneath her touch. "Show me how to love you the way I want to in my heart."

He scooped her into his arms, turned, and gently placed her on the bed. Beginning again, he took his time as if they had forever. Minutes ticked by while he worked his way down her body. Every touch was purposeful. Every stroke gentle.

When his fingers grazed the thicket of curls nestled between her legs, she couldn't stop from tensing.

He gazed lifted to hers, revealing the desire flooding through him. It wasn't violence, but a cloaked need just below the surface. No matter how aroused he was, how much he wanted to take her, she knew he wouldn't continue without her permission. "Relax, baby."

"I'm..."

"I know you are." Nathan moved, adjusting himself so he again lay behind her. Pulling Brooke into his arms, he spooned against her, holding her close. "He hurt you," he whispered against her ear.

Brooke gulped and nodded her affirmation, thankful he didn't make her say the words.

"It won't hurt this time. I promise," he said, running his fingers lightly along her arm before trailing across her belly and brushing against her.

Fear and desire waged a full-out war inside Brooke's head. Pain dominated her thoughts, making her common sense fight for every inch of space. Still, she knew she'd been missing something wonderful, and it was time she discovered what it was.

She parted her legs slightly, allowing him access.

"I promise," he whispered as his fingers began to work a magic Brooke had only dreamed of experiencing.

He was right, she managed to think though the haze of desire and sensation flooding her mind and body. Pressure built, growing stronger, driving deeper into her and for a moment she couldn't decide if it was pain or pleasure. Then

the first wave crashed into her, sending Brooke tumbling right off the reef of sanity.

Crying out, she fisted the pillow, as sensation after sensation raced through her, spreading itself through every cell of her body.

When the aftershocks began to subside, Brooke opened her glassy eyes. There was nothing, nothing but him, and the incredible feelings he'd stirred in her.

Driven only by instinct, she rose from the sheets and reached for him. Kissing him hungrily, feasting on his mouth.

He lowered himself to her and rested his forehead against hers. The warmth of his skin seduced her. "I need you, honey," he professed even as her own desire gradually burned away her fear.

Several seconds passed while she lay still, contemplating his words. Then she pushed past the tattered remnants of fear that had held her hostage for way too long and nodded, giving him permission to take her where she'd never been.

Easing himself between her legs, he tried to offer words of comfort. "Tell me if you have any pain at all and I'll stop."

"Okay," she managed to squeak though a tight, dry throat. She felt him push against her and held her breath. There was pressure as he made them one, but no pain.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded.

"Then breathe, baby."

She released the breath she didn't know she'd been holding and drew in another.

Nathan moved slowly, trying to give her a chance to adjust. "You're sure I'm not hurting you?"

She wondered how it could possibly be any better than this as she smiled up at him. Wrapping legs around his hips, she stomped on the grave of terror and pain and gave herself, mind, body and soul to him. "I'm sure."

His mouth tilted in the corners, lifting into a smile. "You're amazing," he replied as he rested his elbows on each side of her head. His mouth consumed hers as he filled her. "Follow my lead and do what comes naturally, okay?"

Emotions welled inside her, filling her heart and flooding her thoughts. Finally, after ten long, painful years, she was free of the dread the idea of sex conjured. No longer would she need to fret over the concern of pain.

She nodded and blinked hard to keep her tears at bay. She'd done enough crying. Now was a time to celebrate.

As they rocked together, she watched his eyes go dark with passion and wondered if it reflected her own. Slowly she learned his rhythm and followed her instincts. Before long, her hips rose to meet his thrusts and her nails clawed into his back.

His breathing grew shallow against her ear. "Sweetheart, I'm getting—" A groan replaced his last word as he reached his peak.

Hers quickly followed and she cried out, her body pulsing with life.

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CHAPTER 16

Brooke glanced down the steps at the private security guard Nathan had hired for the day. "I can't believe I need to have security outside my apartment while I try to piece my life back together."

"You heard the police, honey. They didn't want you back here at all. The only way I could get away with bringing you back to clean up was to make sure you were protected."

She picked up the torn lampshade from the floor and sighed. *Security guards and police protection.* Had her life really been reduced to this? "I wish you'd at least let me pay for the guard."

Nathan took the broken shade from her hand and tossed it into a trash pile they'd made near the kitchen, then he wrapped her in a warm embrace and kissed her on the forehead. "You're going to need your money to replace things, since I'm betting you probably didn't have renters' insurance."

How in the hell did he know these things? She shook her head against his chest. "You know, sometimes it really pisses me off that you can figure me out so well. Am I really so transparent?"

He pulled her back and planted a kiss square on her forehead. "Of course not. I just happen to be an excellent observer. It's another one of those special traits that makes me different from most men."

She wanted to smack him for the grin he wore, but instead shot him a return smile. He was trying to make light in a very difficult situation. There wasn't any need for her to make it harder than need be. "Ah...still trying to protect your ship's captain image."

"Ah." He tugged her to him again. "Not really since only you have to know the truth."

"I suppose I can keep that secret. It's the least I could do since you're keeping mine." In a split second, the air surrounding her grew heavy and the mood turned dark. She immediately bit down on her lip and wished the words back inside her head. Why did she always have to go and ruin things? "Um." She turned out of Nathan's arms and took several small steps away from him. "We'd better get started. I don't want you having to pay that guard for any more hours than what's absolutely necessary."

He snagged her wrist, his eyes questioning. "Don't, baby. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"I know."

"Then why do you look as if you are?"

"I'm just sorry I ruined the moment by bringing it up. This is hard enough without making it worse."

"Tell you what?" Nathan's lips twitched, eventually twisting into a quirky smile. "After we're through here, we'll stop and pick up some dinner somewhere, then I'll take you home and make love to you until morning."

Heat flashed through her at his naughty suggestion and she grinned. "I think I'd like that. Now the sooner we get started, the sooner we can make that happen."

Nathan laughed. "A girl after my own heart. Where do you want to start?"

"Why don't you take the kitchen and I'll start in the bedroom?"

Nathan shook his head. "Knowing what's in the bedroom, maybe it'd be better if I cleaned up in there."

She raised a hand to his cheek. "Knowing what's in the bedroom is the exact reason I need to be the one to clean it up. I can't let him win, Nathan. I'm not sure if you can understand that or not, but I feel as though my life depends on it."

The hard lines around his eyes softened. "Actually, I think I can. If you need me, just give a yell, okay?"

"Okay."

She stepped into the bedroom and paused in the doorway. It would take quite a bit of work to put the room back together in a way that would erase the mark Wayne had left behind. Disposing of the current sheets and comforter would be a start. She could take some of the money she'd made working for Nathan and indulge in a new bedding set, maybe even matching curtains. That would certainly make a dent in the ugly image of her stepfather touching her things that she desperately wanted to erase. So would rearranging the furniture, but it would take more muscle than she had to move the furniture. Maybe she could sweet talk Nathan and his brothers into coming over one day and helping her.

She drew in a deep breath and held it. No point in wasting more time standing around thinking about all she needed to do. Stripping the bed was first priority. Brooke made quick

work of the sheets, pillowcases and comforter, stacking it in a pile for disposal. Then she sank to the floor next to the bed and began picking up the contents of her nightstand drawer. Reaching for a pen, which had rolled under the bed, her hand banged into the side of a box and her heart leaped.

Carefully, she dragged the small box out and opened it. Inside sat a small white-and-brown teddy bear her father had given her when she had her tonsils out. She picked up the bear and smiled. She'd been eight years old and terrified when they'd wheeled her away for the surgery. Her father had promised if she was a good girl and did what the doctors asked he'd bring her a surprise. She'd gone in that day with tears in her eyes and a promise in her heart she knew her father would keep.

When she'd come to a few hours later, nauseated and in pain, he'd been by her bedside holding the bear. Only a few short weeks later the pain was all but forgotten, but the bear remained and was the one thing she'd refused to leave behind the night she escaped into the darkness.

Setting the bear in her lap, she peered once again into the container and pulled out a small box containing the birthstone necklace and matching earrings, a present from her father on her tenth birthday. She opened the lid and studied the amethyst charm hanging on a gold chain. He'd taken her shopping for it, just the two of them, and even now, she could still remember how happy she'd been that day. Who knew it would be the last birthday he'd lived to see?

Tears swam and she placed the items back in the box, thankful Wayne hadn't looked under the bed. She'd take the

precious items with her when she left, but for now, there was work to do.

An hour later, she paused to gauge her progress. With the exception of the still stripped bed, the room was once again beginning to resemble a bedroom instead of a war zone.

"I think I managed to get your kitchen counters back in order. Several of your plates and cups are broken, but there's still enough for you to use. I started in the living room, but the sofa isn't salvageable."

She glanced up at Nathan and nodded. What was one more thing to add to that list, especially something as meaningless as a secondhand davenport?

"I'll get Adam or Danny to come over and help me dispose of it for you. In the meantime, why don't you help me set the bookshelf back up and we can start picking stuff off the floor?"

She followed him out to the living room and, careful not to re-injure her nearly healed arm, she helped him right the small freestanding bookshelf. "With all the destruction he did do, I'm surprised he didn't feel the need to rip the pages from my books and throw them all over the room."

"That would've taken more time than he probably thought he had."

Intent on picking up the books strewn all over the floor, Brooke turned and stepped down onto a small picture frame. The glass inside gave way with a crunch that had her back up in surprise. "Oh, man." She sank to the floor next to the photo and picked it up to cradle it in her hands. The picture inside was of her father with her and her brother Brent, taken

just weeks before his death. She gently touched the broken glass.

Nathan sat down next to her. "Honey, are you okay?"

She nodded while she forced the tears from her eyes. "I'm just thinking about how happy we were when this picture was taken. It was Brent's sixteenth birthday and Dad had taken us to our first NASCAR race for Brent's present. Mom took this picture after the race."

She removed the picture and dumped the broken frame in the trash bag, then turned her attention back to the photo, stroking a finger over her father's image. "I had nightmares about his accident for years," she said, her voice barely louder than a whisper. "I think it was because up to that point it was the single worst day of my life." She drew in a deep breath and began removing the photo from the frame. "That, of course, changed the night of the rape. That night changed everything."

"How did you end up here?" Nathan motioned to the room.

"The day of Wayne's sentencing, my mother told me never to come back. I was eighteen and had been staying with a friend and her family. With no one to lean on, I decided it was time to leave, so I packed all the clothes I could get into a suitcase. Then I threw my photo album and trinkets into a backpack, grabbed my favorite teddy bear left."

"With no money, you just up and left?"

She gave him what she knew was a sad smile, but couldn't muster anything better. Staying strong took effort and it was about drained for the day. "Oh, I had money. I'd been planning to move out as soon as I turned eighteen anyway

and I'd saved every bit of birthday, babysitting, and odd job money I could get. I think I had a couple thousand dollars stuffed into my purse and jeans when I headed to the bus depot. I remember asking the lady at the ticket booth where the next bus leaving was headed. She said Seattle, and I asked for a ticket."

"Why didn't you go live with your brother in North Carolina?"

She shrugged at his question. "Brent was trying to work his way up the ladder in NASCAR so he was always on the road. His ultimate goal was to own a race team." She smiled as she thought about him. "I'm so proud of him that he made it."

"So how did you end up here, living in an old, rundown apartment above a pastry and ice cream shop?"

Her smile remained in place as her thoughts drifted from her brother to her landlord Charlie. "I stepped off the bus just a few blocks away and began wandering around. I had no idea where I was or what I was going to do. All I knew was I felt safe for the first time in years."

She picked up a stack of books and positioned them back on the shelf. "I stopped in Charlie's shop to grab a bite to eat and get out of a passing rain shower. After about an hour, Charlie came over and started talking to me. He was in his sixties then and reminded me a lot of my grandfather. I guess that's why I was so willing to trust him. When I explained my situation to him, he offered up a proposal—I work in his shop and I could rent the apartment from him dirt cheap."

Nathan laughed. "He'd have to rent it dirt cheap because nobody in their right mind would pay much to stay here."

"Hey." She gave him a shove. "It might not be much, but it's been mine for the last nine years." She knew she was probably sounding ridiculous about the dilapidated space, but she'd built her new life here. Despite the peeling paint and chipping plaster, it had been a home, a safe haven for her to start over, dream, and work toward her goals. Now Wayne had managed to shatter that, too.

"Baby? Why do you suddenly look so sad?"

"I just realized he's managed to take this away from me, too. Even if he's caught, no matter what I do, I'll never feel safe here again."

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CHAPTER 17

Much to Brooke's surprise and utter enjoyment the days following the break-in passed uneventfully. There was always the threat of Wayne hanging over her head, but with each passing day came the hope that maybe, just maybe, he'd lost interest and moved on. Nathan's interest on the other hand seemed to be a mixed bag of messages, which confused the hell out of her. One moment he'd pour his heart out to her and the next he'd become moody and withdraw completely. Did he regret taking their relationship to the next level or was he simply wrestling with his own ghosts?

She stared out the window of his pickup truck, while Nathan drove toward Adam and Willow's for Thanksgiving dinner. No matter how much she wanted to believe what they had was forever, she wasn't naive enough to think their relationship would last. He was over a decade older and still wounded from losing his family. Anything more than now might be asking more of him than he was capable of handling. It would be enough simply to be with him, to enjoy the indulgence of a real relationship in a manner she'd never experienced until now. And today, to enjoy the holiday with the people she held most dear.

Nathan pulled behind Adam's four-by-four and parked. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

Brooke nodded. "As soon as they realize we're a couple and not just coming here together, there's going to be an inquisition. Might as well get it over at one time when they're

all together, instead of having to repeat the story over and over."

He smiled. "That's my girl, practical to the end." He leaned over and brushed the softest of kisses across her lips. "Stay put and I'll get your door."

She grinned. "My knight in shining armor."

Hand in hand, they headed to the house for Thanksgiving dinner.

Without knocking, Nathan turned the knob on the front door and waited for Brooke to enter. Inside, hoots rose from the living room, and Brooke could imagine the men huddled around the television watching the football game. The smell of turkey and pies drifted through the warm air and wrapped around her like a blanket, tempting her toward the kitchen.

"Why don't you go join your brothers and I'll head into the kitchen to help Willow?"

Nathan nodded. "Sounds like a good idea. If you need me for anything?"

She grinned and leaned into him, rising up on her toes to capture his mouth. "Yeah, I know," she replied, pulling away. For a moment, she hesitated, torn between kissing Nathan again and her duty to help Willow finish dinner. With Nathan's parents away traveling in Europe until Christmas, Willow would only have Michael's girlfriend Kira and Brooke, to help. Being nearly six months pregnant, she shouldn't stay on her feet for too long.

Sighing, Brooke headed to the kitchen where she found Willow toiling away over a pan of dressing. "Need some help?"

Willow's head rocketed up and she smiled. "Thank God, the cavalry has arrived."

Brooke laughed and moved into the kitchen. "You act like you've never cooked anything before. You seem to forget I was with you in those cooking classes at community college."

"Which I will remind you," Willow said, wiping a stray hair from her face, "were the only cooking classes I've ever taken. You're the one who went on to culinary school and is a big fancy chef."

Brooke snorted at her words. "I'm not a fancy anything, but thank you for the vote of confidence."

"Well, you're welcome. Do you want a cup of coffee? I made a pot, but right now the men are more interested in swilling beer while they watch a bunch of Neanderthals beat up on each other."

Brooke cast a gaze in the direction of the living room and thought of Nathan sitting around with his brothers watching football. A slow smile crept across her face at the image. So typical. So normal. So male. "Who's winning?"

"The Cowboys are up by a touchdown in the first quarter after they sacked Seattle's quarterback and forced a turnover," Willow replied, then smiled.

Brooke let loose a laugh that soon had Willow giggling, too. "Geez, I missed this," she said. "I missed having you around."

"Me, too." Brooke paused and looked around the room. "Where's Kira? I know I saw Michael's car out front."

"Her father is ill and she wanted to spend Thanksgiving with him and the rest of her family," Willow answered as she

turned back to the stuffing. "She insisted Michael come here and spend the holiday with his brothers. I really like her, Brooke. I hope Michael proposes to her soon." Willow set down the spoon she was using and stared up dreamily. "It would be nice to have a sister-in-law."

"You act like you're desperate for a sister. Have your forgotten you have one already?"

Willow rolled her eyes and turned back to the stuffing. "Meadow hardly counts considering I haven't spoken to her in five years."

"And whose fault is that?"

"Hers," Willow shot back angrily. "She's the one who stubbornly believed that bastard boyfriend of hers when he told her I tried to come on to him. I was an engaged woman, for God's sake. All I was trying to do was protect my sister from a man with a roving dick and, instead, I got the shaft."

"She learned her lesson, though," Brooke was careful to point out.

"Yeah, but do you think she ever once tried to apologize to me?"

Brooke started to reply, only to stop when Nathan wandered into the kitchen. Her heart jumped and her stomach hitched with nervous anticipation that eventually pooled low in her belly. Funny, she thought, as she turned away from him to stir absently at whatever was cooking in the pot on the stove, that his mere presence could trigger such a strong reaction from her. Especially considering she was living under his roof, sharing his bed. Was this what it felt like to be in love? Would she still feel the strange little

pull in her nether regions if they managed to stay together five, even ten, years?

"Adam wanted me to grab a couple more beers."

Willow nodded at the refrigerator. "Help yourself. They're on the bottom shelf, right hand side."

He crossed toward the refrigerator and sidled up behind Brooke. His arm snaked around her waist, pulling her back so his groin nestled nicely against her bottom. She barely suppressed the shudder of need that raced through her when his warm breath drifted over the nape of her neck. "What'cha cooking?"

She turned her head and smiled. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

He snuck a peek over her shoulder. "Looks like potatoes to me. Just make sure you add lots of butter. I love potatoes with lots of butter." The kiss that followed wasn't much more than a soft mouthing of her neck, but still it was enough to have her dropping her head back against his shoulder. "As soon as we can get out of here, I'm taking you home," he whispered.

Brooke shivered at the thought, understanding the words not spoken. She turned to watch as he pulled the beer bottles from the fridge, then disappeared through the door.

"What was that?" Willow leaned up against the counter next to Brooke.

"What?"

"Don't play coy with me. Are you and Nathan...you know, an item?"

Brooke worked to suppress a grin and failed miserably.
"Define item."

Willow's eyes went wide. "Oh...my...God! You slept with him!"

The smile she'd been struggling to hide broke completely through.

"Oh, wow, Brooke, this is huge. Why didn't you tell me?"

Brooke shrugged. "I don't know. With everything going on with my stepfather, I haven't really had much of a chance to talk to you about other things."

Willow glanced over her shoulder at the door, then turned back to Brooke. "So, how was he?"

Brooke gaped at her friend. "I can't believe you just asked me that. You're married and pregnant."

"I'm also a woman who is curious. I love Adam, but let's face facts here. Nathan is the best looking of the Lowery boys. Not to mention he's built like a brick shit house. What woman wouldn't be even the least bit curious?"

Brooke shook her head. "I'm not going to share."

"Aw, come on. We're best friends. We're supposed to share everything."

Brooke rolled her eyes and shook her head. "You're not going to stop hounding me until I dish the dirt, are you?"

Willow grinned.

"Okay, I'm not going to give you all the details, but I will say this. He was gentle, caring and he made it special for me."

"Are you in love with him?"

Brooke paused and considered the question. Was that the unidentified feeling she'd been experiencing? "I don't know. I think I am, but it's all so new for me. I have all these feelings I've never experienced before and, honestly, with everything else going on, it's all a bit overwhelming."

Willow's grin widened. "Well, Adam and I have been together for six years and in all that time I've never see Nathan look as happy as he does today. If that's any indication of his feelings for you, I think you two are onto something. Maybe I'll be getting more than one sister-in-law."

Nathan tossed a cold bottle of beer at Danny, then handed one to Adam and one to Michael before dropping back onto his designated spot on the sofa. With one quarter remaining in the battle between the Cowboys and the Seahawks and his beloved Seahawks loosing by two touchdowns Nathan had lost interest.

He glanced over his shoulder toward the kitchen and despite his concerns couldn't help the smile that tugged at his lips. When was the last time he'd smiled over a woman?

"Earth to Nate." Danny snapped his fingers mere inches from Nathan's nose.

"What?" he snarled and slapped Danny's hand away.

"I asked if you'd had time to read over the agreement on the purchase of the *Celtic Lady*."

"Oh, uh...no. Not yet," he mumbled, feeling a bit like a heel. After all, he'd been the one to spearhead the idea of purchasing a third boat for the family fleet. Now, when the deal was about to close, he'd nearly forgotten the most important part. "I've been a little busy lately."

Adam smiled and crooked his head toward the kitchen. "I'd call that a bit of an understatement, bro. You've pretty much had Brooke's troubles dumped in your lap from the moment you let Willow badger you into taking her fishing with us."

Nathan took a long pull from his bottle while he considered his brother's words. "I suppose you're right, but when I said yes, I didn't know about the rape and her stepfather's involvement."

"And now that you do?" Adam asked, his brows raised in question.

"I'm going to stick by her," Nathan replied before downing another gulp.

"We know that," Danny interjected. "I don't think any of us would walk away from her when she's being stalked by a madman. Hell, when I first found out, I wanted to storm out and hunt the bastard down. What we all want to know is how do you feel about her? After all, it's not every day you have a woman living under your roof."

Nathan shrugged. "I care for her a lot."

"Do you love her?"

"I don't know. Maybe." He shifted and brought his right ankle to his left knee. "I'm not sure I'm ready to love again."

"Ten years is a long time," Michael said from the loveseat. "You went through hell when Casey and the boys died, but you can't let that factor into your feelings for Brooke."

Hadn't he been telling himself those same words since he'd realized just how much in love with her he was? Now, as he remembered the trust she'd placed in him just a few short nights ago, he could think of an easy dozen reasons why their

relationship wouldn't work. "I know that, Mike, but she's over a decade younger than me. When this nightmare is all over for her and she can move on with her life she's probably going to want kids."

"So?"

"So, I'm two years shy of forty, damn it. I don't want to be a senior citizen with children still in high school."

Danny shook his head. "You want to know what I think?"

Nathan took another long pull from his beer. "Not particularly."

"Well, tough shit, 'cause you're gonna hear it anyway. I think you're afraid of getting hurt again. Brooke is young, beautiful, intelligent, and from what I can tell, she adores you. You'd be an ass to push a woman like that away." He paused and cocked his head to the side. "Of course, you're already an ass, so it's inevitable that you'll probably screw this up and hurt her somehow."

Nathan wasn't the least bit interested in what his brother had to say. After all, Danny had been through more relationships in the past ten years than Nathan could count on his fingers and toes combined. "This coming from the man who hasn't been able to keep a steady girlfriend since junior high," Nathan shot back.

"Go ahead and mock me if it makes you feel better, but you know I'm right."

Nathan shook his head. "No, I don't, bro. This situation is way more complicated than any relationship you've ever had. She's got baggage." He swiped a hand at his face, then pressed his thumb and finger against his closed eyes. "Hell,

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we both do. It's a lot to ask from either of us. I know I told her it didn't matter and maybe it doesn't, but what if..." He paused and drew in a long deep breath. "What if I'm wrong?"

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CHAPTER 18

All through dinner she'd felt the stares, seen the pity in Nathan's brothers' eyes and fought back to urge to scream in frustration. If she hadn't overheard the men talking, maybe, just maybe, she wouldn't have been as self-conscious as she currently was.

The problem was, she *had* heard them talking and realized somebody had told Danny and Michael about her situation. If that breach of trust wasn't enough of a blow, she'd then endured the trauma of hearing Nathan waver on his commitment to their relationship. The same commitment he'd challenged her on just days earlier, before they'd made love.

She'd barely managed to choke down enough of dinner and dessert to keep the concerned looks from becoming questions. Now as she sat in the passenger seat of Nathan's truck while he drove home, all she wanted to do was pack up her things and leave.

He pulled into the empty space in front of his first-floor condo and put the truck in park. "Are you sure you're okay? You've barely said three words since dinner."

She choked back the urge to shout and barely gave him a passing look. "I'm fine," she managed, even though she knew her voice sounded gravelly and strained. Without waiting for him to open her door, she exited the truck and worked not to stomp her feet all the way to the front door. A battle between anger and control took place inside her while she waited for him to open the door and, unfortunately, anger was winning.

"Come on. Something's bothering you," he said and pushed opened door.

"How perceptive of you," she snarled and stalked past him into the unit.

He closed the door and flicked on the light. "Brooke?"

Unable to hold her temper any longer, she wheeled on him. "Who told Danny and Michael about my situation?"

He frowned. "What?"

"Danny and Michael. I saw them at dinner and they kept looking at me like I had three heads. They know about the rape."

"So what if they do? They care about you. They're worried."

"Is that what you'd call their stares of pity?"

"Pity? Oh, come on, baby. I didn't tell them, but they do know and they do feel bad for you, but the last thing either of them is going to do is pity you. I can't believe you're mad over just that."

"I heard you," she murmured.

"You heard me what?"

"Before dinner, when you were talking with you brothers. I heard what you said."

"So you heard us talking. I don't understand..." The end of his sentence trailed off as awareness crept into his features.

"Willow badgered you into taking me on the boat. You didn't want me there anymore than the crew did. Maybe less because at least by the time the trip was over they'd accepted me."

"That's not true. Well, not all of it anyway. It's true I argued with Willow about taking you, but only because I was worried about your safety. I thought the police could do a better job protecting you and I wouldn't have to worry about your safety on the boat."

"Then why didn't you say no?"

"Because I knew how you are—stubborn, bullheaded—and you'd probably refuse the protection and then I'd have to worry about you while I was gone. At least if you were with me I felt like I had some control."

"You said you loved me. You said the baggage didn't matter, but it was all a lie, wasn't it?"

"No!" He shook his head and grabbed her by the arms. "I do love you. I don't want to because it scares the hell out of me, but I do. I know I said the baggage didn't matter. I didn't think it did and I certainly don't want it to, but it does. This entire argument is all because of the fear I'm lugging around, the fear I can't shake."

He let go of her and scrubbed his hands over his face. "I'm afraid, Brooke. Can't you see that? I'm terrified if I allow myself to love again something bad will happen and I'll lose you, too."

"So better to push me away with a broken heart than take the chance of being hurt again? You're a crab fisherman, for God's sake. You're supposed to be the toughest of the tough. This is the most cowardly thing you've ever done." She turned to stalk away, but only managed a few steps before she wheeled on him again. "I believed you. I pushed away my

fears, faced my demons and gave body, heart and soul to you...and this is what I get in return."

"Brooke?"

She held up a hand and shook her head. "Don't, okay? I don't want to hear any more of your lies, Nathan. I don't think my heart could handle it. Tomorrow, I'm calling Detective Morrison and agreeing to the protective custody. After they find Wayne, I'll be leaving."

"What about us? Please, baby, don't walk away like this!"

"There never was an us, Nathan. There was only ever you. Now I'm tired and I smell like stale turkey. I'm going to take a shower and go to bed."

She managed to hold her tears until she closed the bathroom door and started the shower. Thankfully, the sound of the water would mask any sobs she might utter. At least she hoped they would.

Watching herself in the full-length mirror on the back of the door, she slowly stripped. After making love to Nathan, she'd no longer saw her body as something to hide away. He'd made her feel beautiful that night, made her see the sultry woman who hid beneath the pain. Had that all been a show for her benefit? The ache in her heart grew. She turned away from the image and stepped into the shower.

It wouldn't have be an easy road for either of them, of that fact she was sure. After all, she still had demons to battle and Nathan obviously had a few ghosts of his own to face, but together she'd been sure they'd come out with a love deeper than either of them had ever experienced. Now she wasn't so sure. So much for the old saying that love conquers all.

Sometimes the past won.

Nathan waited for the bathroom door to click closed before uttering a string of curses under his breath that would put the saltiest of sea dogs to shame. He hadn't meant to hurt her, but hurt her he had. And now she wanted out of the only relationship that had meant anything to him since his marriage. Could he let her go without a fight, without trying to make her see his side of things?

Muttering again, he stalked to the den and snatched up the purchasing contracts for the *Celtic Lady*. He trusted that everything was in order. His lawyer was the best, and Nathan knew nothing would be in the document that could hurt him or his brothers. Still, he scanned the pages, barely managing to take in what he was reading.

Damn her! He slammed the papers down and leaned back in his chair, tipping the front legs off the ground, then steepled his fingers together in front of a frown. She'd called him a coward. Nobody, not even his brothers, had ever screwed up the courage to call him a coward. If she'd been a man, he would have throttled her for such a comment, determined to prove her wrong.

But in this particular instance, she'd hit the mark with her words, and he knew it.

Love wasn't nearly this complicated. So what was the problem? His frown twisted into a scowl as he considered that question and realized he wasn't going to like the answer. He was the problem. In an effort to protect his wounded heart, he'd all but pushed away every woman who managed to work herself into a relationship with him. None of those women had

meant anything to him, so moving on was easy when one grew too close.

Brooke had managed to get close to him, to burrow directly into his heart, before he knew it had happened. Now he was head over heels in love and desperate to protect his heart.

He turned his gaze down the hallway to the closed bathroom door. Wounded on the most elemental of levels, she knew his pain probably better than anyone did. If he thought for one nanosecond that she would intentionally hurt him, he was the biggest jackass on the face of the earth. She loved him and wanted nothing more than his love in return, no fancy jewelry, no elegant dinners out or outrageously priced clothes as gifts, just love.

Life was a gamble, one he took every time he steered the *Northern Lights* out to sea. So why should this situation be any different? If he took the gamble and won, he'd finally find the happiness he'd been denying himself. If he lost, at least he could say he'd played and had one hell of a ride.

Slowly he eased his chair back onto all four legs and stood. The next problem would be convincing Brooke. He'd have to grovel to talk her into staying. At this point, he could think of worse things to do than beg her forgiveness.

He was halfway across the living room when the rapping at the front door stopped him. *Who in the hell would be knocking at this time of night on a holiday?* Knowing Wayne was still on the loose, Nathan cautiously eased up to the door and checked the peephole.

A man with a scruffy beard, wearing a baseball cap stood in front of his door. Struggling for a better look through the tiny hole, Nathan noted the grey uniform with a condo complex name written over the left breast and a tool belt slung low beneath what appeared to be a slight beer belly. *Maintenance.*

Nathan eased the door opened to get a better look. "Can I help you?"

The man lifted a hand to his old ratty ball cap and nodded. "Condo maintenance. The unit in 12B suffered a burst bathroom pipe. I know it's an inconvenience, but need to check your unit for water damage. Don't want the water shorting out any wiring and causing a fire." "Somebody is in the bathroom right now. How about I call maintenance in the morning to come back over and check it?"

The man shrugged. "You could, I suppose, or I could take care of it now and you wouldn't need to waste your time tomorrow waiting around for someone to show."

He had a point and Nathan did have the final meeting with the lawyer tomorrow about the *Celtic Lady* purchase. "Well, I suppose it'd be all right, if you don't mind waiting for a few minutes."

The man smiled. "I have all night."

The hot water helped ease the tension in Brooke's back and clear her mind. She turned her face from the spray and allowed the water to pelt her shoulders again.

Using the time to think, she looked back on the past few weeks, only to realize that the love between them was all ready there. Whether it was patiently answering her incessant

questions about crab fishing and the *Northern Lights*, or his willingness to stand with her and fight against her past, Nathan had done it with a gentle patience steeped in love.

Maybe it was wrong of her to be so angry at Nathan over the things he'd said. He was right that they both had ghosts to face, and in a way his were even scarier than hers. Maybe he hadn't handled it the best, but she certainly couldn't fault him for how he felt.

He did love her. She'd felt the sincerity in his words just as she'd felt his pain. If she turned tail and ran now, wouldn't she be the coward?

That thought didn't sit well at all. Did she really want to continue her life as it was and know she'd end up living with questions and regrets, or was she willing to stand up and fight for those she cared about most?

Quickly she scrubbed her hair and body, rinsed and shut off the taps. It was time for her to face Nathan and work things out, time to stop running from her fears, stand her ground and fight for what she wanted. Whatever the future held for them, they'd face it as a united front. She dried off, then threw the towel aside and began slathering her scented cream all over. The bathroom quickly filled with the smell of wisteria as she rubbed in the last of the lotion.

Intent on dragging him from whatever he was doing, she checked her long silk nightgown in the mirror, then opened the bedroom door and ambled toward the living room.

Male voices filtered down the hallway, causing her to pause. One was Nathan's, the other was deeper, rougher, and

set her teeth on edge. Who would be at Nathan's place this time of night on Thanksgiving?

She took a tentative step into the living room and gasped. Even after ten years, she recognized his face instantly.

Nathan turned to look at her. "Baby, what's—" His last word disappeared beneath an "umph" when Wayne hit him in the back of the head.

Nathan dropped to his knees as his eyes fell closed and his mouth gaped open.

Brooke screamed and, before she could move, Wayne struck him a second time, sending Nathan face first to the floor.

His head bounced softly against the carpet, then he didn't move. "Nathan!" She rushed to his side, but before she could reach him, she felt a tug on her hair.

She smacked Wayne's hand away and jumped out of his reach. Her heart pounded in her ears as she glanced between where Nathan lay and Wayne stood hovering over him gun in hand.

"You've been a tough little bitch to track down," he snarled.

"How did you know I was here?" she squeaked out.

"I've been watching your place since the day I trashed it." He smiled. "By the way, did you get the little message I left for you?"

She remained silent.

He shrugged and continued, "I waited and watched and then you showed up with pretty boy here." He kicked Nathan in the ribs.

"Please don't," Brooke begged.

Wayne arched a brow at her. "So pretty boy means something to you, does he?"

He pointed the gun at Nathan's head. "How much to you love him?" he asked, his lips curling into an evil grin.

Tears burned her eyes and blurred her vision as she looked from Nathan to Wayne and back. She knew what Wayne wanted.

She also knew it was the only the only way to save Nathan's life.

"I'll do whatever you want. Just, please, don't hurt him."

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CHAPTER 19

Wayne unlocked the door and shoved her inside. He closed it behind her and flipped the lock.

She looked up the steps leading to her living room and couldn't help but notice the symbolism, that he would end her life in the one place she'd once considered her sanctuary.

He towered over her with an evil grin spread across his face. "I've been watching and the police haven't been by here since the day you called to report the break-in."

Her mouth fell open and she knew she probably looked like a fish out of water. She shouldn't have been surprised he'd been stalking her, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike.

He grabbed her by the back of the neck and pulled her against him, then licked a trailed up her cheek. "For years I sat in that filthy cell, planning my revenge. All you had to do was keep your mouth shut and leave if you didn't want me touching you. But *no*, you had to go to the fucking police." His grip tightened, his fingers biting into her skin. "You caused your mama all sorts of stress having to face her friends and neighbors."

"No, you caused her the stress. I did nothing wrong," Brooke spat.

His eyes flared with anger and he leaned in closer until she could smell the cocktail of alcohol and stale cigarettes on his breath. "You little bitch, you lead me on with all your short skirts and tight shorts and then you have the nerve to blame

me? Don't you think it's time to stop denying you wanted everything you got?"

Fury flared deep inside her and she pushed against him, prepared to fight back. "You ruined my life, you bastard."

She never saw him raise his hand, but felt the impact of his fist against her cheekbone. An explosion of pain ripped a scream from her as she lost her balance and tumbled into the steps.

"You could've continued living your life, Brooke, but you had to agree to testify against me and embarrass your mother and your entire family."

"I knew you'd rape again if I didn't stop you. My conscience wouldn't let me stand by and do nothing."

"I didn't rape you, you little dick tease. For years you'd come on to me. I just gave you what you were asking for." He snared her by the arm, yanked her to her feet and dragged her up the remaining steps into the apartment.

He paused and glanced toward the door leading to the bedroom, and Brooke couldn't stop the shiver that claimed her body. It wasn't death she feared as much as the torture she was going to face first.

His ranting broke through her thoughts and pulled her back into the moment. "Lucky for me, you're still all close and shit with your brother. If your mother hadn't found your address when she went to visit Brent, then I'd have had no idea where to look for you."

He laughed, and Brooke absently wondered if that was what the devil sounded like.

"Guess you could say it was the love for your brother that would eventually lead to your own death."

"Even if you kill me, the police will find you. You'll get the death penalty for what you're doing." Her words were barely out of her mouth before she felt his wrath a second time against the side of her face.

"Shut up. I'm not interested in your opinions. The only things I want to hear out of your mouth are the sweet sounds of you begging for mercy."

She struggled with her balance, trying desperately to fight back. He continued to hold onto her, absorbing her blows like a sponge as he dragged her toward the bedroom. For a split second, she thought about screaming, but knew the chances of somebody actually hearing her were slim. The pastry shop was closed and her elderly landlord had probably taken his hearing aids out to go to bed. If there were any chance of escape, she'd have to make it happen herself.

"I want them to find your body. I want the cops to know I snuffed you out. Let them stew over the fact I won and they'll never catch me."

She closed her eyes and tried to steady her ragged breathing. Despite her best efforts, a whimper escaped from somewhere deep inside, while an internal war brewed between fear and anger. Anger won. If she was going to die, by God, she was going down fighting. Managing a kick, she struck him squarely in the back of the knee, forcing one of his legs to buckle. Roaring in pain, his grip tightened until she was sure he'd simply snap her arm like a twig.

"Don't make this harder on yourself than need be, Brooke."

"No way am I going to let you rape me again. You'll have to kill me first." Despite the pain, she twisted away from him, using her body and forward motion as leverage to pull him off balance. The trick nearly worked, except for the fact he promptly let go, allowing her to crash face first into the entertainment center. Stars exploded behind her eyes, sending her into a crumpled pile on the floor. Then he was on her, and jagged flashes of pain bombarded her senses, one right after another as the sound of him beating her rent the air.

She opened her mouth to scream, only to find she couldn't. A copper taste coated her tongue and dripped down the back of her throat causing her to gag instead. There was a sharp tug on her hair as she was dragged across the carpet. Her back burned where her shirt rode up.

Barely conscious, she fought not to black out completely as he picked her up and tossed her onto the bed. She landed face first on the bare mattress and worked to draw in even a single breath against the pain in her ribs.

He rolled her over and straddled her legs, pinning her in place. "No more running, Brooke. Finally, you get what you deserve for telling all those lies in court." His words echoed as if he were far away talking into a tunnel.

Her stomach pitched and rolled beneath his touch. Inside, she was screaming, kicking, biting and clawing her way to safety, but her battered body refused to follow commands.

An image of Nathan sprawled across the floor popped into her head. While it broke her heart to know she'd probably never have to chance to set things right with him or to even see his beautiful face again, she'd done what she had to do to ensure his safety. Before their argument he'd said he loved her. She'd now cling to that love, draw from it to fight this battle until the bitter end. *First...* She closed her eyes as the world began to spin away from her, leaving behind only an eerie blackness. First, she just needed a little rest.

Nathan opened his eyes and stared at the blurry legs of his coffee table. His head hurt like hell. He pulled himself off the floor and blinked a few times, clearing the fuzziness from his eyes. *What in the hell happened?*

He looked toward the front door. He'd answered a knock by one of the condo facilities maintenance men. There had been a discussion about the unit above his busting a bathroom pipe, then Brooke had emerged from the bedroom and gasped.

Brooke! On his feet in an instant, he barely managed to steady himself before he began racing through the unit, stumbling around on wobbly legs. "Brooke!"

Dizzy and nauseated, Nathan limped back to the living room and dropped into the recliner. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, head in his hands and fought to get a grip on the situation. He lifted his head and stared at the coat rack next to the front door. Her coat was missing, as were her shoes.

Damn it! Anger tore through him with the speed of lightning. He'd been duped by that asshole Wayne and now,

because of his own stupidity, Brooke could die. For the first time in his life, fear paralyzed him and he sat in the middle of his living room staring blankly at the front door.

There wasn't a doubt in his mind the bastard had taken her. *But where?*

I left the bed intact because I need somewhere appropriate to end your life

Nathan stomped into his boots, yanked his coat off the rack and snagged his truck keys from atop the television stand. He punched 911 on his cell phone and relayed his information to the dispatcher asking her to contact Detective Morrison and send a unit to Brooke's address, then headed out the door. Ignoring both his pounding head and the police instructions to stay put, Nathan made his way to his truck. He could only hope the bastard really had been stupid enough to take her back to her apartment.

Less than ten minutes later, he pulled to a stop directly in front of the old storefront building. He looked up at the second-floor windows. A faint light showed. Nathan shoved open the truck door and headed to her apartment door. He used the key Brooke had given him and unlocked the deadbolt.

He left the front door ajar and quietly started up the steps. The living room light was on, giving some illumination down the stairwell, making it easier for Nathan to see his way into the apartment. A couple of low thuds echoed through the space.

Nathan clenched his fingers into a fist. Despite wanting to race across the living room and burst in on them, he knew he

needed to keep his control. It wouldn't do either of them any good if he lost his cool.

He turned the bedroom door handle slowly, careful not to make any sounds or sudden movements. What he saw through the crack in the doorway made his stomach roll. Brooke, his Brooke, lay on the bed, unmoving. Her eyes were closed giving the appearance she was unconscious. Then he spotted the tears streaming down her cheeks and his rage nearly overpowered his common sense.

Wayne hovered above her, gun in one hand. His incoherent mumbling was a telltale sign of just how insane the man actually was. He paused and raised his free hand, striking her across her all ready bruised and bloodied cheek. The sound of flesh hitting flesh rent the air and sent a chill up Nathan's spine.

"Open your eyes. I want you to see the last moments of your life. Just think it about it. My face, not your pretty boy boyfriend's, will be the last one you ever see."

Her eyes slowly flicked open, and Nathan's heart broke a little more. He wanted more than anything to barrel into the room and take down the son-of-a-bitch, but with Wayne still holding the gun, he'd be putting Brooke in even more danger. What he needed was a distraction, something to get Wayne away from her.

Nathan glanced around the room, searching for anything he could use. His gaze fell on the small bookshelf set against the wall between the bedroom and bathroom doors. He reached out and knocked the items off the top shelf, sending books, picture frames and trinkets flying in all directions. The

items spilled off the shelf and scattered, making various noises as they hit the floor. He raced to hide behind the open bathroom door.

"What in the hell was that?" Wayne's voice echoed in the empty space. Within seconds, he opened the bedroom door and inched his way into the living room. Waving the gun in front of him, he stepped toward the bathroom. Nathan seized the moment and swung the door, hitting Wayne in the face. He stumbled backwards and the gun discharged, lodging a bullet in the ceiling. Plaster rained down from above, landing on Wayne, confusing him further. Nathan raced from behind the door and swung. Still off balance, Wayne took several steps back, attempting to right himself.

Nathan swung out, clipping Wayne on the chin and he tumbled backward through the bedroom door. Not wanting the man to get too far away and have time to regroup, Nathan followed. Prepared to strike him again, Nathan grabbed Wayne by the forearm and spun him around, only before he could strike, Wayne reared back and butted Nathan in the head.

With the probable concussion he was already nursing, the effect was enough to knock Nathan backwards. He stumbled a few steps and struggled to rid himself of the ringing in his ears and the throbbing behind his eyes that threatened to push him back into darkness.

Blindly he swung out, satisfied when he made contact. The whoosh of foul air that followed led Nathan to believe he'd caught Wayne in the diaphragm, hopefully buying him a couple of minutes to regroup. Slow, unsteady footsteps

echoed through the silence, moving away from where Nathan battled the haze still threatening to take him under. What was Wayne planning? As Nathan's vision cleared, his heart jumped in his throat at the sight of Wayne pointing the gun at Brooke. No way would he let it end like this.

From behind, Nathan snagged Wayne by the arm, banging his wrist against Nathan's knee. The gun popped from Wayne's grip, skidded across the old wooden floor and ricocheted off the nightstand legs. He leaped to retrieve it, only to have Nathan lunge for him. The two men hit the floor with a thud. Wayne pulled back and swung, making contact with Nathan's cheek. Nathan punched back, nailing Wayne in the jaw.

Wayne yelled and rolled off Nathan. He once again headed for the gun, but turned back when Nathan made it to his feet. Wayne had pulled back to hit Nathan again when a shot rang through the air. Wayne's entire body stiffened and he pivoted on his heel toward the bed. A second shot assaulted Nathan's ears. Only then did he see Brooke standing at the far edge of the bed pointing the gun at Wayne. Anger and determination mixed with the blood and bruises peppering her face.

A circle of blood appeared on Wayne's shirt and began to flower. He stood transfixed for a moment before his knees buckled and he collapsed, falling to one side. Still, Brooke remained riveted in place, pointing the weapon down at him, ready to shoot again if he moved.

Nathan inched forward, reached down and placed a hand on Wayne's neck. Not feeling a pulse, he quickly moved away from Wayne and stepped toward Brooke.

"Baby, he's dead. He can't hurt you anymore. Please put the gun down."

Tears streamed down her cheeks and her face twisted with long pent-up emotions. The gun dropped from Brooke's grip and clattered to the floor. She raised her hands to her face, muffling a sob and sank to the bed. Nathan climbed across the mattress and gathered her into his embrace, hugging her tight to his chest. He pressed his lips against her hair and cradled her head, while trying to steady his own nerves. She shook against him with gut-wrenching sobs that wracked her entire body.

"Shhh, it's okay, baby. It's all over now."

She lifted her head and looked at him, through dark and swollen eyes. "He said if I went with him he'd let you live. I knew what he was going to do, but I couldn't let him hurt you. I love you."

Her words ripped his heart into tiny pieces. She'd not only been willing to give her own life for his, but did it knowing she would suffer first. "I love you too, baby. More than you'll ever know."

Shouts and the sounds of feet running up the stairs filled the room and within seconds, Detective Morrison and his crew entered the room.

"I want the paramedics up here now," he shouted over his shoulder as he hurried toward the bed. "Emergency services will be here in a second."

Through bruised and swollen eyes, Brooke stared at the stark white ceiling and watched the shadows from the hallway light twist and move while she listened to the steady

breathing coming from the bed next to hers. Considering everything that had happened to her in the last few hours, she should have been exhausted and already drifted off into dreamland. The adrenaline rush from earlier in the evening hadn't worn off yet, though, leaving her more restless than sleepy. Tonight she'd taken a life. That fact alone weighed heavy on her. To know firsthand how fragile life is and how quickly it can be snuffed out was downright frightening.

For the last few silent hours, she'd searched her conscience, looking for any remnants of guilt or remorse. There weren't any. Wayne had been a sick, evil man who'd have killed them both if she hadn't stopped him.

She turned her head slightly, ignoring the ache in her neck, and smiled at the sight of Nathan sleeping in the bed mere feet away. *Safe*. For the first time in ten years she was safe and tomorrow, when they were both released from the hospital, they would start over, this time on even ground.

The severity of his concussion dictated he stay overnight for observation. Even now, she still couldn't understand how he'd managed to drive from his place to hers without wrecking, or how he'd managed to fight Wayne off as he did. She was only thankful he had.

Her gaze raked over him and she noted the darkening bruises along his jaw and around his eye. Nobody had ever fought for her before. He'd taken blows defending her and risked losing his life to protect her. He loved her.

A lump formed in her throat as she pushed off the bed to stand. Bruised ribs screamed in protest even as her aching

head threatened to spin the room once again. Grabbing the side of the bed, she paused until she could get her bearings.

The time they'd spent in the emergency room seemed like an eternity, especially when they whisked Nathan away for a CT scan and other tests. It seemed as though hours had passed before she'd heard him making noise in the room next to hers again. He'd thrown a fit over being separated from Brooke, then another one about the doctors wanting to keep him overnight for observation.

The ruckus he'd caused when they tried to put them in separate rooms had been enough to wake the dead. She could still hear the yelling and threats he'd uttered, until desperate to regain control and end the chaos, the nurses had agreed to allow him and Brooke to share a room.

She smiled, which stretched the skin over her swollen lip, and she winced in pain. She hadn't realized exactly how much punishment she'd endured at Wayne's hands before he'd gotten his.

She made her way to Nathan's bed and eased down onto the mattress. He opened his eyes, smiled and inched back to make room for her. Curling into him beneath the covers she relished the feel of him against her battered body. The wounds would eventually heal, fading into the past to join her memories.

"I don't think I ever had a chance to apologize for being such an ass earlier."

She closed her eyes, savoring the secure warmth he provided. "I think you more than made up for it. Just answer me one question."

"What's that?"

"Who told Danny and Michael?"

"Promise you won't yell?"

"I promise."

"Willow. She was still upset after we left her house the day you found the picture in the mail. Danny came over for dinner and she told him. He, of course, told Michael and Michael confronted me about it."

"I wish someone had told me they knew, but I think I understand why she did it."

"She loves you like a sister and it hurt her to think about everything you'd been through." His arm gently wrapped around her bruised ribs. "While I know both Danny and Michael feel badly for you, neither of them pity you. So please, don't hold it against them."

"I won't. It's finally over and as far as I'm concerned, it no longer matters. I was just curious."

Several long seconds of silence passed before he spoke again. "So I was thinking," he whispered against her hair, his voice still heavy with sleep, "how about a Christmas wedding in Vegas?"

Love broke through the protective damn she'd erected and filled her heart with an unspeakable joy. "What about all our baggage?"

"Maybe the airline will lose it."

She snickered. "That would be nice, but it would be wrong of us to ignore our ghosts. Unless we face them head on, they'll continue to haunt us."

"You're right and it probably won't be easy, but I've never been one to walk away from a challenge. How about you?"

Brooke considered his words. Facing the remainder of her pain and his would be easier if they had each other to lean on. If she had any hope of ever leading a real life and possibly having a family, their issues would need to be resolved. "Are we going to tell your family before we go traipsing off to Vegas?"

"Nope." He shifted, wrapping his arms a little tighter around her. "I'm a selfish bastard. I want you for myself on that day and every day thereafter."

"Until we grow old together?"

"Uh-huh." He brushed his lips over her hair. "It's forever or nothing."

She snuggled closer and placed a kiss directly over his heart. "I don't think even forever would be long enough, but I'll take whatever I can get."

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Michelle Cary

When Michelle isn't engrossed in her favorite hobby of scrapbooking pictures of her family and friends, she usually can be found with a laptop attached to the end of her fingers. That is when she's not working to maintain a functioning household or running her two children to and from play dates.

Artistic from an early age, she spent her childhood dabbling in different artistic media. A lover of romance novels, Michelle decided a few years ago to try her hand at creating fictional worlds through words instead of paint. The result has given her an entirely new perspective on the world. Every day affords new opportunities for ideas and new ways to create the perfect happily ever after.

Raised in "small town" Illinois, Michelle now lives in New Jersey with her extremely supportive albeit somewhat neglected husband and their two beautiful children.

For updates on Michelle's latest work, check out her website and blog at www.michellecary.com, or you can visit her myspace page at www.myspace.com/authormichellecary.

Don't miss *Dirty Love*, by Lacey Savage,

available at AmberHeat.com!

Isabel Warren wouldn't dream of defying the morality statutes that forbid women over forty from ever making love again. As a medical practitioner, she understands the need for laws preventing "dirty love." The S.O.S. virus of 2030 left

most of the male population infertile and turned human DNA into something resembling a microscopic jigsaw puzzle. The virus itself is undoubtedly dangerous, but older women are perhaps the most significant threat humanity has ever faced.

Yet knowing what's forbidden and keeping her feminine urges under lock and key are two different things. Especially when Isy's most recent assignment requires her to run intimate tests on Connor Flynn, a man sixteen years her junior, who seems determined to prove she's not the monster everyone else thinks she is. And if such delicious temptation wasn't bad enough, she's also got Trevor Jones to worry about. It seems he, too, is willing to risk everything to be with her.

Two sexy men, and one woman who could destroy them both...if they don't destroy her first..

Don't miss *Orientation*, by Rick R. Reed,

available at AmberAllure.com!

Robert and Jess may just be the world's most unlikely couple—a gay man and a lesbian. But there is something more complex going on here: Jess may be the reincarnation of the lover Robert lost to AIDS more than two decades ago.

Can they transcend sexual orientation and find true love...again?

But before this question can be answered, both must confront a deadly peril just waiting to pounce...

Don't miss *Dressed For Dying* by Janet Quinn,

available at AmberQuill.com!

In 1892, reporter Sean Madigan is pitted against the New York police when he's assigned his first high-profile murder story, the slaying of the wealthy Marshal Haversham, clothing industry mogul and sweatshop owner. While Sean hunts for the killer in order to prove his worth to his newspaper editor, the madman goes on a violent spree, burning down Haversham's warehouses and sweatshops and killing young women who work within them. Each victim is found dressed in a fancy ball gown that was secretly made within the sweatshops themselves.

When Madigan's sweetheart, Bridget, becomes the killer's next target, Sean determines he will find the man and his connection to the ball gowns. But the murderer has other designs, and it soon becomes a race against time and the police to discover the fiend's identity before he silences Sean or Bridget...permanently..

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