



# HONESTY *and* ARTIFICE

An Egan and  
Atherton novel

**S.H. Allan**

————— Don't Read in the Closet 2014 —————

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## HONESTY AND ARTIFICE

**By S.H. Allan**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# HONESTY AND ARTIFICE

By S.H. Allan

## Photo Description

A muscular, dark-haired man lies prone on a sandy beach, waves frothing and swirling around him. He is naked save for a tiny bikini or underwear that is barely clinging to the round globes of his backside. He also has on a small, dark, braided bracelet. If not for a mound of sand beneath his head, his face would be immersed in the water. He appears to be unconscious.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I found him in the edge of the surf one morning, on one of my many solitary treks down the beach. Naked, battered, unconscious—just another bit of discarded flotsam on the sand.*

*Who is he? How did he get here? Is he telling me the truth? Can I trust him at all? Can I help him—or can he help me? Or maybe we can even save each other...*

*(I'm very flexible on locale and genre. Ocean-front condo or beach resort or remote coastline or desert island or water-planet or whatever—any would be fine. Contemporary, historical, action/adventure, paranormal, flat-out fantasy—any would be fine. Please no BDSM between the MCs, although abuse or other trauma to either character by someone else, either before or during the story, would be fine but not required. Please no helpless-waif-needing-rescue—these are both strong men. A pronounced sense of isolation at the beginning would be a plus. Also, I enjoy first person POV—but it isn't a requirement. Thanks!)*

*Sincerely,*

*Plainbrownwrapper*

## Story Info

**Genre:** action/suspense/adventure

**Tags:** first time, masturbation, past abuse, strong HFN, Alaska, series, isolation, boats

**Content Warnings:** mentions of childhood abuse, violence

**Word Count:** 59,602

*Dedication*

To Robert Lavigne, an incredible artist and beautiful human being. He didn't hide his sexuality, despite the era during which he was in the public eye. I am honored to have met him.

*Acknowledgements*

Thank you to Allison and Trisha, who were truly there for me throughout the entire process. I literally couldn't have done it without you.

To my sister Renee, and JJ my foster care case manager for getting me through a nightmare so that I could write again. I would never have finished if you hadn't kept me sane.

To Deb, Kris, and Nan for being there at the end to save me from my own angst.

I'm grateful to PlainBrownWrapper for creating this wonderful and open prompt, and for her support and understanding.

Special thanks to the M/M Romance group's Don't Read in the Closet managers and editors that worked so hard to make Love's Landscapes a reality, and the rest of the group members who kept the excitement and momentum going.

# **HONESTY AND ARTIFICE**

**By S.H. Allan**

## **Type 1: Offshore Life Jacket**

### *Finding*

Finding a body on the beach amid the kelp, sand, and driftwood was not the typical or preferred end to my day. It hadn't been there two hours before when I had passed by on my way to the point to check the traps, so it was a recent and unwelcome addition. I would rather have found a pretty bit of beach glass or a solid chunk of hardwood.

I admit I stood there in the rain for a minute staring at it stupidly. My only excuse was that it wasn't every day that a person showed up on my stretch of the coastline. In fact, it had been more than four years since another human being had graced these shores. Human remains were a little disconcerting. Just their presence disrupted my solitude, yet somehow it emphasized my loneliness.

Embarrassingly, my first reaction, when it came, was fear, and a chill shot through me. What if the thing had been sent as a message to frighten me? Had I somehow been found and now it was time for it all to end? Of course that was ridiculous. There was no need to scare me; I was already terrified and *he* knew it. There would be no warning. I would already be dead. But that didn't stop me from painting a morbid picture in my head, or from a little adrenaline being released into my blood.

Still shaking from my thoughts, I looked at the body which had come to rest in a pile of flotsam just at the wave line. Most of the coast was a mixture of pebbles and crushed shell, but somehow this body was nestled on one of the only expanses of pure sand on the whole beach. It was like a scene from a myth; some godling crawled up the bank following an epic journey only to expire upon the shore. The fact that it was whole without missing limbs was part of the mystery. Numerous feet had washed up on beaches south of this one in recent years, which had generated national media attention, but a whole person?

It was only when I stepped forward to get a closer look that I thought of the body as a man, not just a corpse. I felt a little guilty for my insensitivity, regardless of the fact that there was no one within miles to see my behavior. Senseless death saddened me. If the man had been wearing a life jacket, he might have survived.

The leading cause of death in cold water was drowning, not hypothermia, I remembered *him* telling me. If the initial cold shock passed without the victim

inhaling water, he or she had at most ten minutes before being unable to move. The only way even the strongest swimmer could last was with a flotation device. I pictured this man drowning, unable to move, and I shuddered again.

Judging by the man's skin, still red from the cold, he couldn't have been dead very long. Waves swirled back and forth around him with only a small mound of sand holding his face above water. Wouldn't it be ironic if he were to have survived the harsh and unforgiving ocean only to drown at the beach edge? Reaching down, I pulled away seaweed clinging to his back and neck, and very gently rolled him over. That was when I saw the goose bumps covering his mostly naked body. Was he...? It took a good thirty seconds before I found a pulse, and I was so startled I slipped and one of my knees landed in the cold water. *Alive!*

There wasn't a whole lot of guesswork as to what was wrong. He wasn't shivering, his pulse was beyond slow, his breathing almost indiscernible, and he was unresponsive. He was clearly hypothermic. His hands and face were scratched and he had a few bruises, but the wounds were superficial, and nothing was more critical than his dropping temperature.

As fast as possible, I slid my arms under the man's shoulders and lifted him just enough to drag him carefully and steadily up the beach until we were well above the tide line. It had been harder than I had thought it would be, and when I looked back I saw why. A strap led from his leg to a life vest tangled with what looked to be a pair of slacks and maybe a jacket or shirt, which were in turn snarled with seaweed and driftwood. So he had been wearing a flotation device after all which explained how he had survived his journey. One mystery solved.

I used the hunting knife I always carried to sever the harness from his leg and took another two seconds to cut off the underwear which was the only thing he was wearing. Cold cloth was the last thing he needed against his skin. I dismissed the corded bracelet around his wrist as being irrelevant. Maybe one day he would thank me for saving it. Some people thought baubles were more important than life itself.

One of the most dangerous parts of a life-threatening situation is the rescue itself. A body changed when it was in shock or hypothermic. Blood collected in different tissues than usual, adrenaline sped up the organs, and the heart overcompensated. My mind went back to the time we had pulled Zebudah from the lake and how when she came to, we let her get up and five minutes later she was dead from heart failure. She was fifteen.

I pushed the thought aside. I refused to think about anything other than what I was doing to help this man, because if I stopped to think about it, the possibility that I would be the cause of his death would have nauseated me. That mental place where I was solely focused on the solution and not the danger, where my mind was sharp and my emotions minimal, was what I called survival mode. I had spent a lot of my life in survival mode.

I concentrated on keeping the man alive. The most important thing was to warm him up so I started by turning him on his side and pushing his knees up against his chest to keep him from losing any more body heat. The air temperature was around fifty, fairly warm for a summer evening around here, so I wasn't wearing a jacket, only a long sleeved T-shirt. It was better than nothing, though, so I yanked it over my head and laid it over the man.

He was muscular, and taller than I was, far too big to haul back to the cabin quickly. I probably couldn't even carry him more than a few hundred yards. By then the rain had taken a breather. I reasoned that I could run the mile or so round trip to the cabin in far less time than it would take to drag him there. The best course of action was whatever raised his body temperature the soonest, so I sped back as quickly as was possible on a sandy beach at half tide.

I'm fast but I still had a few minutes to plan what to do when I got to the hut and in what order. Then my mind turned to my usual self-indulgent reverie, and I wondered what had happened to him. Had he fallen off one of the cruise ships that passed by on their way up the Inside Passage? That was a very long distance for his body to travel. He was incredibly fortunate that he'd survived and made it to the island, that he hadn't been swept out to sea.

When I arrived at my tiny shack, I stopped thinking and did what was necessary. It took less than a minute to grab a handful of plastic garbage sacks and a sleeping bag, as well as throw an emergency pack of pellets in the wood stove along with a lit book of matches and a handful of kindling. I had efficiency down to a science. *He* made sure of that.

On my return trip, I again planned exactly what to do and in what order when I reached my destination. I wasn't sure how long the man had been in the water. The island was pretty far from those cruise lanes, but not far enough that my imagined scenario was impossible. A person could stay awake in freezing water for up to an hour. Now, at the height of summer, these waters averaged about 54 degrees Fahrenheit. At that temperature, a person could last considerably longer before even losing consciousness and perhaps hours before heart failure.

Once when I was a child, I had made it nearly two hours in water that was turning to ice around me, wearing only a sweatshirt and pants. Those had been controlled circumstances where others had kept an eye on me, but no one was allowed to help me as long as I was still breathing. The experience had been terrifying, but I had survived with no deleterious effects. Being fit helped in survival, and this man was fairly buff, plus there was the fact that these waters weren't even close to freezing.

He was still lying where I had left him. No big wave had rushed in and carried him off. I didn't quite understand my feeling of satisfaction—I loved my solitude, didn't I? The thought of someone invading my private world nauseated me. I rid my head of the thought, and looked at the man's chest to see if he was still breathing. He was, so I pulled my T-shirt off him and began to quickly dry him off.

Then I heard a kind of whistling gasp followed by silence. I lifted the T-shirt to see the man's chest had stilled. A quick check with my ear over his mouth confirmed the fact that he was no longer breathing; his lungs had stopped even as I bent over him. Damn. I fell to my knees, rolled him onto his back, and began CPR.

The powers that be changed the specifics each year, the ratio of breaths to compressions, what to do first, etc., and I had no idea what the latest instructions were. The last time I had trained, rescue breathing had been eliminated for the first few minutes, but what if that had changed? What if I did it wrong? My worst fears had become reality. Survival mode had disappeared and doubts had flooded me. I had become complacent and out of practice, and no longer had any of the survival skills I had been taught.

No. No way was I letting this man die if there was anything I could do. There had been too many needless deaths in my life. I told myself to stop with the self-recrimination. Each CPR method must have worked to some extent or they wouldn't have kept teaching it to people, and I had been trained to do each method properly.

I continued chest compressions. *Focus. Assess.* Why had his heart stopped? Was it caused by a massive rush of blood to his extremities because I moved him, or did it just slow to a stop because his body had been cold too long? As I continued pushing on his chest, I got into a rhythm as my locked arms moved up and down.

Usually CPR was used to keep someone alive until help arrived, but there was no chance of that happening here. He needed my expertise. I knew that the

chance of success with CPR was many times higher when the responder knew what he or she was doing, and I did. Hopefully if I got his heart beating again, the rest of his body would wake from its stupor and keep it going.

Although thirty more seconds of me pumping his chest assured that at least some oxygen was getting to his tissues, he still wasn't breathing on his own when I checked. "No! Who do you think you are, coming to my beach only to up and die when you get here? That's extremely rude." I tended to resort to gallows humor in emergency situations. Sometimes it was the only way to get through them.

I continued compressions. Was the skin beneath my hand warmer? Maybe my own hands were just getting really cold. It was possible that he was too cold for his heart to start working again, so I paused long enough to grab the sleeping bag and fold it over him. Only my arms passed the fabric to touch skin as I restarted CPR.

"Don't you dare die on me. I will take that very personally." My voice sounded rusty and grating, it was so ill used. After another minute of CPR, I pulled the bag back a little to check for signs of breathing. No. I got back to it.

CPR was exhausting, even for a fit man like me, and I was already beginning to flag. If I weren't so stubborn—and an optimist about most things outside of my own situation—I might have given up by now. This thought was spinning through my head, when I thought I felt the man's chest move. My fingers were shaking as I held them over his lips. Air. He was breathing, but he was still much too cold.

Quickly, I spread out the sleep sack and layered it with plastic bags for more heat retention. The man was big, but I lifted him without too much trouble and laid him on the pile. I strewed another layer of plastic bags over him before folding the other half of the bag over and zipping it up.

Then I contemplated how long it would take me to drag him back to the cabin to the heat of the fire, assuming it had caught. I really didn't know if there was enough heat still emitting from his body to fill the bag and keep him warm enough until then.

The only thing I could think of was to warm the bag with my own body, so I unzipped it a little, slid between the sheets of plastic, and lay over him, covering him almost completely. His skin was so cold against mine, I would have thought he was long dead if I hadn't just checked that he was still breathing.

"I haven't seen you around before. Do you come here often?" Holding a nearly dead man was awkward even if the man wasn't awake to notice. I had to entertain myself somehow, if only to distract me from the situation. I pulled him up a little and wrapped myself around his body.

"This is a first for me. Usually the other guy is more responsive." A bigger fabrication was difficult to imagine. I hated lying and avoided it unless it was absolutely necessary. However, making stuff up when talking to a nearly dead man was probably not a big deal.

We lay there for a few more minutes, wrapped in the bag as his body leeched heat from mine. He thankfully continued to breathe. "Don't get any ideas." I was probably losing it since it felt perfectly reasonable to talk to an inert body. Although it was inappropriate to even think such things, it didn't escape me that it took a man almost dying for me to be this intimate with someone.

Finally I felt he was warm enough to survive the journey back to the cabin. I climbed out and zipped up the bag around him, after making sure the plastic bags were again spread evenly over his body. Despite my efforts so far, the man's skin was still icy cold, and I knew he wasn't out of danger, not even close. A thread of fear worked its way down my spine. *This man will not die. This man will not die.*

I reached into the bag and checked him again. He was still breathing, and his pulse was easier to find this time with its slow but steady beat. A surge of relief lessened my anxiety a little.

The survival rate for people who have received CPR wasn't very high, but most of the time it was performed on people because they had suffered a catastrophic event in an already broken body such as cardiac arrest in an older man with heart failure and diabetes. Victims generally were elderly or their bodies were giving out, and CPR could only do so much.

But this man was clearly in good shape, and if he had only succumbed due to the cold, he might be okay. Although it had seemed like forever, I had only been doing CPR a few minutes, and had begun within seconds after his lungs stopped. His brain had continued to receive oxygen without a break. The man looked fit and hardy, so I had reason to believe he might be fine, and hopefully wouldn't suffer any permanent neurological damage.

The sleeping bag had a head flap, and I used that as a handle to drag the man back to the cabin. Once there, I pulled the mattress off my bed and put it in

front of the stove, then laid the living mummy on top of it. The fire had caught so the room was fairly warm, but I put more kindling and a couple of logs on it to get it blazing.

After that, there was nothing left to do, and I became jittery as the adrenaline wore off. I figured less than half an hour had passed since I first found him lying on my beach, and yet it felt like hours. Every minute detail was burned into my memory.

Part of me welcomed the intrusion of another person into my self-imposed exile, but my isolation had become familiar if not comfortable, like an old sweater that was scratchy but kept you warm and dry.

The thought of the man fully awake and expecting me to have conversations with him like a normal human being, was enough to make me dry-heave. Food was the last thing I wanted despite the late hour, but I forced down a glass of water to quiet my stomach before returning to sit on the mattress next to my patient.

I was grateful he was unconscious for now. Talking wasn't my strong suit. There had been few opportunities to speak growing up. When I first faced the real world, I was oblivious to how stupid and ignorant I sounded, how my lack of appropriate education presented me as a backwater rube, and more than that, how I had purposely been left ignorant and isolated. It took me years before I became confident enough to speak around adults. How would I talk to my visitor and not sound like an idiot?

I pulled back a corner of the sleeping bag to get a better look at him. The man's dark hair curled a bit at his face and neck, and I pulled a tendril away from his brow. It was softer than I expected, not coarse like mine, and I suppressed an urge to run my fingers through it. Instead I found a watch cap among my things and put that on him to keep in more body heat. I sat back, but my eyes strayed again.

He was good looking, strong boned and masculine, and he made my heart skip a beat. He was maybe a little older than my own thirty-four years, probably upper thirties, and he had smile lines around his eyes and mouth, softening his masculine, stubbled jaw.

His skin was unblemished and free of scars, his teeth straight and white. I had noticed earlier that his hands were neither callused, nor scarred, and the nails free of the striations that might indicate poor nutrition. (It was important to note such things even in the midst of a life or death struggle. Small

observations could save your life.) This man had not spent his life in the muck and mire of the backwoods. The signs indicated someone affluent and well-bred, or at least living such a life. What could I possibly have to say that wouldn't expose me as an ignorant yokel?

In the nine years since I had... left... my childhood... domicile, I had spent most of my spare time schooling myself, making up for the education denied me. Everything was interesting, and I gobbled up knowledge like pancakes. (There's really nothing better than pancakes, except maybe fry bread.)

I earned two degrees by correspondence. I read the classics and made a dent in the *Guardian's* top 1000 list. A few years ago, I even sold an article to a national journal, anonymously of course, but someone had deemed my words worth reading. I was proud of whom I had become, but how would this man feel?

Looking at him, I realized that what he might think of me mattered more than I thought it should. Perhaps it was because I was so drawn to him, maybe because he was the first person other than a couple of clan folk I had even seen in four years.

Here was a strong, brawny man, turned helpless by the forces of nature. He was a victim, in danger, and for the time being, was helpless without me. I couldn't remember the last time someone had needed my help, if ever. It was both terrifying and appealing to have someone finally depend on me.

"What will you say to me when you wake up?" Understandably, he refrained from answering, which was probably for the best at this point.

When I went for supplies every three months or so, I picked up a large stack of newspapers *Dzóox'*, always accumulated for me between trips. I never wanted to appear ignorant or stupid again. But it had been four years since I had last had a real conversation, and I had never been particularly good at having one to begin with.

How would I come across now? Maybe if we just wrote notes to each other he wouldn't notice. But I knew my solitary education and lack of proper socialization had made me stuffy and bombastic in my writing. Instead of a hayseed, I would come across as a windbag.

As I sat there navel gazing, the man started to show signs of life. They were minor at first, a twitch or two, then a tremor and another, until finally he was shivering so hard he was moving across the mattress. I tried to steady him, but it was impossible without injuring either of us.

Finally I treated it like a seizure and just removed anything potentially dangerous from his vicinity and sat back. His shivers were so violent, it was as if he were on a boat in a hurricane. Although it was terrible to watch, it was actually a good sign. It showed that his body had warmed enough that it was trying to heat itself.

A few minutes later, his head moved a bit, and I sucked in a breath as his lids lifted, revealing startlingly deep, dark eyes. He turned his head a little as if looking for something, but it was obvious he wasn't actually aware. Within the sleeping bag, his hands pushed against the fabric, and he started thrashing feebly when he found he was trapped.

It took me a minute to free him with all the wriggling, but I managed and pulled most of the plastic bags out of the way before loosely re-covering him with the sleep sack. He wasn't trying to go anywhere; it was more like he was having a nightmare or a fever where he was struggling against some unseen force but was trapped in the covers.

The comparison was further emphasized when he started flailing and mumbling through chattering teeth. "No, n-no. I'm d-drow-n-ning. St-stop." He pushed the covers off. "It's s-so d-dark... c-cold, s-s-someo-one h-help-p m-me-e. I'm-s-so-c-cold-d."

With those words, he looked at my face, but his eyes weren't focused and he obviously didn't know where he was. He was weak, though, and I was easily able to pull the sleeping bag around him again. He kept trying to fling it off and get up, but he didn't have the strength to stand, let alone fight me.

My body heat and the warmth from the stove helped, but he still needed to be covered; his skin was still chilly. After a while, his struggles slowed, though he continued to shiver fiercely. His eyes slid around the room, and he ducked something invisible that he probably imagined flying at him.

"Shh." I sat comforting him, crooning nonsense and humming soothingly while gently rubbing his back as he clung to me and gasped. It felt insanely good to hold someone in my arms.

When it came, it was the screaming that undid me. High-pitched cries of pain filled the room as feeling came back to his extremities. That was so hard to take, sitting there, not able to do anything as the man scrunched his eyes and shook, howling through clenched teeth.

If he had been at all lucid, I would have given him pain medication, but as it was, I didn't dare let him have even a sip of water lest he choke. My kit held

only standard first aid supplies, no morphine injectors or IV bags to rehydrate him and lessen his pain. I felt powerless.

It had been a long time since I had felt that way, and a long time ago, I had vowed never to again. Much of my childhood was spent defenseless, hurting, and scared; that was horrible. But I wasn't a child any longer, and it rankled that I could still experience those feelings. I wanted to scream myself.

Eventually his cries died down and his shivering slowed until he had a moment of stillness between each one. I continued to hold him until he fell asleep, at which point I got up and covered him again. My own muscles burned when I stood and stretched because I had been in one position for so long, holding a man who was experiencing such violent symptoms. I was exhausted. Rescue and recovery was hard on the responder as well as the victim, and it was well into the night by now. I had been at it for hours.

I put a big pot of water on the stove to heat while I went about preparing the house for the night. The weather on an ocean beach in the northern Pacific is rough, and it's necessary to bring as much as possible inside, tie down anything that has to remain outside, shutter and latch windows and doors tightly, and check ropes and bolts to make sure they're tight and secure. Yes, a lock on a deserted island was probably overkill, but I was nothing if not paranoid, another thing I learned from them.

It took me long enough to finish my chores that the water on the stove was almost warm. I filled a bowl with cold water from the water container which I used to clean myself of sand, saltwater and sweat. I then dressed in loose nightclothes. My nausea had retreated and been replaced by hunger which was sated with some leftover salmon and bannock.

My thermometer assured me the man was no longer hypothermic, although his core temperature was still too low. He really needed a hospital but that wasn't possible right then. It was up to me to make sure he recovered safely.

Cold water was fine for me because I was used to it, but the man needed to be bathed in water that was a little warmer, tepid not hot. Too much heat applied directly to the skin would be dangerous. When the water was lukewarm, I used a little to wash out the bowl I had dirtied, then poured the remainder into it. I gathered a washcloth, towel, soap, and the water, and sat down beside the man again.

He barely moved as I opened up the sleeping bag, although he shivered once. He lay on his side, his knees pressed to his chest as I had left him. I washed his

back first, and then his arm, shins, and face. When there was no more exposed skin to clean, I laid him out flat on his stomach and began on his lower half.

It was hard not to stare as I bathed him. His body was exquisite under my fingers, his muscles firm but yielding. When even his toes were clean, I rolled him onto his back. It was hard not to feel I was violating him by looking at his body, but I found it hard not to. DaVinci had never painted a more beautiful man, nor one so well-endowed. I really had no frame of reference, but I had always thought the Vitruvian Man was a little lacking in that area.

As I continued to bathe my patient, I couldn't help but notice the firm contours of his chest as the water trickled across the grooves in his abdomen and down his sides. I had never seen another man naked before, at least not in person. Boys, yes; we were frequently forced to stand unclothed and unprotected in order to toughen us up. But we were not men. The one time I had touched someone in any kind of intimate way, clothes had remained on, and hands had roamed only briefly where eyes couldn't see.

With such limited experience I could hardly make a scientific comparison, but I was hard pressed to imagine a better looking body. When the man shivered, I realized I had stopped my ministrations to stare. When had I become so obsessed with a man's anatomy?

Sure I was gay, and despite my past, was perfectly happy about it, but besides porn (which I got through mail order packaged in plain brown paper with a generic label as there was no way I would let Dzóox' see that) I had never drooled over anyone before. This was ridiculous and I felt mildly ashamed. I quickly but carefully finished washing him before covering him with the sleeping bag while I washed his hair which only took a few minutes.

The sleeping bag was now filthy, and I threw it in a corner to wipe down in the morning, and I slid the man between the sheets on the mattress. He was shivering again, so I piled all of my blankets on top of him and stoked the fire in the stove. By that point, I could barely keep my eyes open, so I crawled onto the armchair—the only other seating in the whole place was a stool—and covered myself with my jacket.

For a moment, I watched the man. His back was to me as I had wanted the heat on his front and so had positioned him facing the fire. He was quiet, and I could hear him breathing, which was good, even though he still wheezed a bit. But he was alive, and I had done all I could for now, so it was time to let go and close my eyes. Within minutes I was asleep.

*Fighting*

Midmorning the next day, I heard him wake up before I saw him move. I had only been dozing since there was a stranger in my home, and the change in his breathing was enough to pull me from sleep. Well truthfully, it was the coughing. The movement of his hand toward the fire poker, though, was much too obvious, so when he tried to leap and swing at me, I was there to catch him as he fell.

“Well shit.” He looked more annoyed than scared. “That didn’t go quite as planned. And fuck that hurt.”

I eased him back into a sitting position on the mattress and got my first look at his face awake. People always looked different when they were asleep. Their muscles relaxed, their faces went slack, and the overall look was softer. Now that I saw him alert with open eyes, it occurred to me that I was completely wrong when I thought he was good looking. No, he was drop-dead gorgeous, even with the mild scratches marring his skin.

“The least you could have done was try to stop the poker and let me pretend I fell as a result.”

I snorted. “Next time.”

He coughed a bit. He was still breathing heavily, and I was a little concerned about that, but it made sense if he had swallowed seawater.

“Where am I? Who are you?” The energy he showed when he first moved was already gone, and he looked like he was about to pass out.

“An island. I live here.”

His eyes narrowed then blinked like he was dizzy. “Could you be a tad more specific?” He rubbed an arm. He had to be in a lot of pain.

“It’s remote. I’m the only one here.”

“What do you mean?” The look he gave me almost made me laugh. Almost.

“No one else lives on this island.” The paleness of his cheeks was worrisome. “Maybe you should lie down.”

“That was my plan.” He sort of collapsed into a heap, and I rearranged the blankets over him before putting the kettle on to heat. “I was going more for the graceful but macho, ‘I’m just going to lie down now’ kind of thing rather than

the 'I'm going to collapse into a pile of goo,' though." He grimaced. "What the fuck happened? How did I get to this 'island' you say I'm on?"

"You washed up on shore."

"Aw crap." He rubbed his eyes with his fingers. "I did? I seriously washed up on shore like a piece of driftwood?"

I nodded. For someone recuperating from nearly dying, who didn't have the energy to stay upright, he was insanely alert. I was reassured that he would hopefully be one of those who survived CPR without any harm at all. It did happen, although it could be years before any neurological damage showed.

"So you're a modern day Robinson Crusoe and I'm, what, Friday?" It was pretty clear he had never read the book. "Movie shipwrecks have been done to death. Can you come up with a new scenario, one the buying public will want to see?"

What? The guy didn't make any sense. I sat back in the chair because he was almost making me dizzy.

"I'm not thrilled with this scenario. I want to try something else, preferably with a lot of people and a lot less sand." He stopped talking long enough to stretch his arms out. "Where—fuck!" His face went taut as he blanched and breathed through his teeth for a minute. "Why do I hurt so much, Crusoe?"

*Crusoe?* Perhaps I had cracked a rib or two. Broken bones and ripped cartilage were pretty common with CPR when done imperfectly. Regardless, it was really too long a story to go into at that point. He was clearly nearing the end of his ability to function and needed to go back to sleep, so I tried to cut the conversation short. "Too many questions for now."

He glared at me again. "I need to know..." He rubbed his eyes again. "Damn. Why am I so tired?"

The kettle was beginning to steam, so I figured the water was warm enough. Last time I went to the village, Dzóox' had stuffed a bunch of packets of hot chocolate mix laden with dried marshmallows in one of the boxes of supplies. I didn't like things floating in my beverages, especially slimy white things, so I had plenty to spare, and I made up a cup for him. It smelled okay. "Drink this."

He took the cup from me and sniffed it suspiciously. "What is it? Is it safe?"

I shook my head, surprised. Saving his life wasn't enough? Now I had to prove I wasn't trying to poison him? This man would do *him* proud. I took the

cup back and had a sip before handing it to him again. "If I'd wanted to kill you..."

"Sorry. I'm not thinking clearly at the moment." After taking a sip he made a face. "Wow, that's sweet."

"Best way to get calories into you right now."

"I'm not hungry."

"No problem. Drink."

He laughed at that and finished the cocoa quickly. While he drank, I got him a cup of water, too, and made him drink it all. When I tried to give him more, he pushed my hand away, then lay back down.

"I don't even know your name. I'm Eric, by the way, with a 'C.'" *Eric*. "I kind of like the 'K' spelling. I don't think it's quite as common, but then it really wouldn't be me, would it? Crap, I'm babbling."

"Eric." The name rolled pleasantly across my tongue.

He nodded and shifted, adjusting the blankets. As he did so, a wide band of skin at his hip was exposed. My eyes followed it to the blanket edge, at which point my imagination took over. "And you are?" He moved again, covering up the silky flesh once more.

Distracted by the thought of him naked under that blanket, I answered his question. "Boaz." Damn. I hadn't meant to tell him that. I would rather put up with that silly nickname, since if he didn't know my real name, maybe no one would connect that weird man he met in the middle of nowhere with the guy from that court case a few years ago. It wasn't a name easily forgotten. I watched him to see his reaction.

He blinked. "Bo as? As what?"

"As in the Bible." All of our names had been biblical, and not Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Mary. We all had been given heavy old school names like Tishbite, Hukkok, and Misrephoth-maim, no joke. Boaz was rather pleasant by comparison.

"Oh shit. You're not one of those right wing-nut bible thumpers are you? Just my luck to end up on a desert island with an extra from Deliverance. Crap, what's your name again?" Apparently the name actually was easy to forget.

Not sure what Deliverance was, and not fond of his assumption, I just schooled my features. "Boaz." Rarely was my name spoken aloud, and when I heard it, I was flooded with memories—ones best forgotten.

“Shit. I’m sorry. There I go again being an ass. I swear; this isn’t like me. I’m not usually rude.”

Was he a little unnerved by me? Huh.

“You don’t look like a Boaz, although I don’t know what a Boaz should look like. Is that where the city in Wyoming got its name? Bozeman? Boazman.” I didn’t know, but it didn’t matter because he kept going. “That would be kind of funny. Bo-az man. The hick castaway from Montana. I guess you’d have to be from Montana. And a hick.”

That really wasn’t a picture I wanted associated with me; it was too close to the truth.

Maybe Eric saw my expression because he looked like he knew he had said the wrong thing. “I mean, not that it would occur to me that you were a hick or anything. The only person I ever knew from Montana, well that I know that I knew because really, how often do you know where someone is from? Anyway, the only person I knew from Montana was a redneck named Duke, like Bo Duke from that show with the cars. I think Duke is a rather ironic name in general.”

He laughed then looked a little surprised at himself, again followed by an expression of chagrin. “Not that being from Montana makes you a hick. I mean, I’m sure there are lots of great people who come from Montana: philanthropists, scientists, patrons of the arts. And not like living rustic makes you a hick, or that being one means you’re not a great person or anything.”

Fortunately his ADD method of communication moved on without requiring comment from me because I had no idea what to say to any of that.

“Boaz. It’s an interesting name for an interesting man.”

He had no way of knowing I was anything more than dull. Then again, I supposed living on a desolate island alone was a little out of the ordinary. I frowned but he didn’t appear to notice.

“I’m trying to think if I’ve ever known someone called that. I don’t think so. Well, pleased to meet you, Boaz, although I personally wish it had been under better circumstances. Maybe I’m dreaming.” He massaged his forehead. “I feel like crap, like I was stuck in a cement mixer for a week with a caseload of rocks. I think I could sleep for a month.” Yawning, he pulled the covers closer. “I have a lot of questions but I can’t keep my eyes open any longer.” Another yawn. “Shit, I should call... Fuck, who should I call?” His brow furrowed.

“No phone.”

“What? You don’t have a phone? Really?”

I shook my head.

“Not even a satellite phone?”

“Nope.”

“But how do you—never mind. I’m too tired to think anymore.” His head flopped back down on the pillow. “I figure you haven’t tried to kill me, and that you may have even saved my life. I’m sorry I took a swing at you.” Another yawn.

“But you can understand where I’m coming from, right? It was a bit disconcerting waking up in your bed.” That presented an interesting image. “I need to know what’s going on. But first I’m going to take a little nap. Just... just please be ready to really answer my questions when I wake up, okay?”

I smiled but he was already out.

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*Frivolous Flights of Fancy*

When I came back from my morning chores, the man was sitting up on the mattress looking decidedly more human and alive. He wasn't coughing, either. One hand was using the little poker to stoke the fire, and the other was clutching a blanket around him.

"There you are. I thought maybe you'd abandoned me. Like maybe only one person can be on the island, kind of a *Survivor* epilogue or something, and now that I've arrived, you can take off, and I'm stranded here until the next poor sap washes up on shore."

I just blinked at him.

"Are you ready for questions yet? Because I've got a gazillion of them. First off, how do I get out of here? How do I call for help? Got any flares? Do I have to use smoke signals? You have a raft you built from logs or something? How far away from civilization are we anyway? Where are we exactly?" It was fascinating how he didn't wait for an answer before asking the next question.

"One at a time."

"Oh, sure. Okay, uh, first question: How do I escape this... this... island in the middle of nowhere?"

"Escape?" That was weird and yet oddly close to the truth. My legs felt weak so I sat in the chair.

"I mean get out of here. When can I leave?"

Maybe I could avoid answering for now. "Anytime."

"Okay... How?"

I pointed at the door.

He narrowed his eyes. "How do I get off this island? You said it's an island, right?"

"Yep."

"Can you give me a little more detail?"

I thought for a moment. "It's about two point two square miles, forested. Uninhabited."

He took a deep breath and held it for a moment before letting it out. "Yes, I know, except for you. What I'm asking is for more information about how to get off the island."

Not a lot of options there. My stall tactics weren't working. He was certainly persistent, but I supposed that was to be expected. I would have been too. "Swim. Hitchhike."

"Stick out my thumb and hope a boat goes by."

I shrugged.

"Anything else?"

"Helicopter."

"You have a helicopter?" That was said with appropriate skepticism.

"No."

This time there was a little growling with his sigh.

"But the Tlingit kwáan next island over have a float plane." I fiddled with a frayed edge of the chair arm. I didn't like being so indirect—it wasn't me—but I needed to annoy him enough that he changed the subject. I wouldn't lie to him, and I didn't want him to ask the questions I couldn't answer, at least not the way he wanted.

Wary, he paused for a moment before speaking. "Who has a plane?"

"The kwáan, a clan of the Tlingit people. I would tell you the name, but it's too hard to pronounce. The village is Yáxwch'."

"And that's easier to say?" He sighed. "Fine. How do I get in touch with them?"

"Phone."

"But you don't have a phone."

I shook my head.

"Are you being obtuse on purpose?"

My lips conspired to smile without my permission, but I got them under control quickly. They were also demanding to do other things that really weren't appropriate with someone I had just met.

Eric was clearly exasperated. He would be too frustrated to ask questions any minute now. He glared at me. "You must get off the island somehow. This pile of magazines is only a couple of months old." He pointed to a stack on a small shelf near him. "The treads on your boots are barely worn." I had laid them by the fire and he held one up.

“And you left the tag on this blanket that has the date the thrift store priced it, which was just in March.” Huh. A tag. Dzóox' told me it was an extra she was getting rid of. “So unless you just arrived, and I don't get that newly moved in feeling for this place, there is some way you restock.”

That surprised me. “Observant.” That was a desirable quality in a man. *Stop it.*

“I make my living by being observant.”

That was the opening I had been looking for. “What do you do?”

“No, no, no. Don't change the subject. How do you get your stuff? Do you go get things or does someone drop it off?”

Smart man. “I take a boat.”

“Whose boat? Yours? You have a boat?”

Hell. I would have to answer now. “Technically the bank's.” Not really. I had paid the money; I just didn't want to go in person to sign the papers. The glare I received was almost chilling. Fine. “Mine.”

“Finally.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, his beautiful, thick, dark hair. I was really drawn to that hair as were my fingers. “So how much do you want to take me to the mainland?”

“Not very much at all. Last time I went was less than a month ago.” No one would expect me for at least another couple of months.

“I meant money. How much cash do you want?”

The snort just erupted from me; I couldn't help it. I traced his body with my eyes as I tried to think of where he could possibly be hiding money, and the thought of the only possible place it could be made my groin grow warm.

He narrowed his eyes. “I have plenty of money, just not here. You can take me to a bank as soon as we get there, and I'll give you the money, I promise.”

Like I could trust that. Like there was a bank in Yáxwch'. “I don't need money.”

“Well what do you want then? A cake? A skateboard? Maybe a phone? More weapons and guns?”

Guns? I felt the blood drain from my face. Well that was one way to change the subject. Unfortunately it was worse than the original one.

“Yeah, I saw them. When you’re lying on a mattress on the floor, the area under beds and bookshelves is at eye level.”

I had strapped holsters to the undersides of the furniture so those guns couldn’t be seen standing up but I could get to them easily. I hadn’t thought of someone lying on the ground.

“By the number of weapons I can see from this one spot, I’m guessing you have an arsenal hidden in this place. Are you planning for World War III? It’s like you’re some crazy—”

“I’m *not* crazy.” Oh yeah, sore spot there. “You can barely stand up. How did you figure all this out?”

“Well you left the tin from the cocoa out for one thing, and I have a sweet tooth, so I’m kind of riding a sugar high.” He grinned. “But in addition to the four handguns you have hidden under the furniture, the painted saw blade over there has a few of the teeth missing on one edge making it safe to hold before throwing. By the way, really? A painted saw blade? Rather gauche, don’t you think? It really doesn’t fit with the natural rustic thing you have going here.

“Anyway, the ‘star fish’ in that three dimensional seascape you have on that wall have only four points, and from here, they look like dead ringers for, what are they called? Throwing stars, I think.” Shurikens was the technical term actually, although his term would do. “Again with the painted metal? At least those go with the beach theme, but there is plenty of legitimate art out there that would fit in here just fine. Like the carvings you have. This one on the shelf here of the rodent and the face? It’s exquisite.”

Exquisite? That was one of my frivolous flights of fancy. It wasn’t much more than a simplified carving of a shrew, almost an impression really, that I had made out of a piece of Pacific yew that had washed up on the beach. The wood was a little difficult to work with, but I had been able to fashion something reasonably identifiable and sanded it to within an inch of its old life so it was very smooth.

But it was still boring. I tried to see what Eric saw. On a whim, I had carved an abstract basic line drawing of Shakespeare’s face into it, almost taking up the whole surface. The disproportion of the image to the size of the piece made the squiggly lines look random. You had to move it around to see the likeness. A professional sculptor I wasn’t.

Eric had already moved on. “...not to mention you carry a huge knife strapped to your leg. On the same shelf as the carving, there are shot gun ammo boxes with labels that don’t match the contents. Sorry, I snooped. The—”

"I get the point." Locating and identifying weapons was not a common skill, and I wasn't sure how comfortable I was with him being so savvy. "Why did you think to look for weapons?" I wonder if he'd searched through my go bag and found the weapons there. I would have to check later when he wasn't looking and make sure everything was there.

The point of a go bag was to be prepared for any anything. A typical one was an easily carried backpack stocked with emergency supplies like a flashlight, Mylar blanket, and food rations. For me, "prepared" meant that right beside the first aid kit and water filter, were a gun and ammo.

Actually, you could do without the filter in this part of the world. The water was all clean, cold, mountain run off, or strained well-water cleaned of bacteria by years of sand and silt. But I wouldn't feel safe without weaponry. Sometimes it made me sick that I thought like that. But not usually.

Eric was still talking so I needed to pay attention. I would have to check the bag later. "Part of my job. Keeps me safe. Some of my... let's call them clients, are less than savory."

I tried to remember what I had asked him. The man frazzled my brain.

He continued. "I don't know why your stuff doesn't freak me out, but somehow you don't come across as dangerous." Only to someone like Eric who wasn't dangerous himself. Someone with my training would see me for what I am. "But you don't get to change the subject yet again. You're way too good at that, by the way."

What was the original subject again? Oh yeah. It was time to come clean. Maybe it would make him mad enough to stop talking for a few minutes. "You're not getting the boat yet."

He stood up, only swaying a little and looking rather annoyed. "Why the hell not? Are you keeping me prisoner on this island?" Nope, anger didn't make him stop talking.

"You can leave any time."

"I can't leave without transportation!" Oddly, his look wasn't fury, just exasperation. A normal man would be glowing red by now.

"Not my fault you showed up." I was being a jerk, and I knew it. Fear does that to a man sometimes.

It kind of seemed like Eric couldn't figure out whether to charm or strong arm me. He stood for another minute or two before he finally sighed and sat

back down. He looked up at me and smiled. Charm it was then. His smile was so beautiful that he was probably used to getting anything he wanted with it.

“I can see I’m not getting anywhere. There must be something you want or need.” He gestured around him. The disarming grin on his face was kind of a “Hey, we’re friends here, you can be honest with me” kind of look. “You obviously don’t like living around people, you’re in complete isolation. You can’t possibly want me here. So what is it?”

He directed that sassy smile at me. I had to admit it was kind of sexy. “There must be something you want... or need...” His voice turned a little sultry. “What can I do to show you I need your... help?”

No way to miss that innuendo, not with that expression. More heat shot to my groin. Was he playing me? Was my attraction that obvious? My emotions were under my control, though, so I didn’t think I let my desire show on my face. Maybe it was my mannerisms. Maybe he could just tell I was gay and lonely.

“There’s nothing.” I stood up and moved to the kitchen area in the corner. My face wouldn’t have revealed anything, but there would be no mistaking my arousal. It was mystifying how I knew his words and smile were fake, designed to get me to do what he wanted, and still I wanted him more and more.

“Come on; tell me how I can get you to help me. Let me do something for you, give you something. Everyone has their price.”

That took care of my erection. Carefully I composed myself again and turned around to face him. “I don’t.” Actually, I could be bought with one thing and just that thing alone: the removal of the threat to my survival. For that, I would do just about anything including, no, especially, leaving my refuge. But that was an impossible task so it wasn’t worth thinking about.

He looked skeptical.

“I live in this place, alone, without electricity or running water, and you doubt me?”

That sunk in and he deflated. “Then what? I need to get off this island. I have a life out there.” He gestured toward the beach outside. “I can’t stay here. Tell me I’m wrong, but it doesn’t look like you can afford to support me, either, Crusoe. And I’m not going to contribute money if I’m being held captive.” For a moment I thought I might be seeing the real him.

I tilted my head and looked at him. “It’s about trust.” I wasn’t fond of that nickname, either.

“Okay...”

“I can’t risk you leaving. You might tell someone I’m here.” My mouth had run dry. The reality of how dangerous he could be to me sunk in. It wasn’t about a physical threat from him; it was something far greater. “That can’t happen. I need to be able to trust you.”

He surprised me when his face softened instead of him exploding. “Why? I mean why is it a problem that people know you’re here? Did you do something? Are you on the run? What are you so afraid of?”

Another man might have insisted he was trustworthy, or become afraid at the thought I was a wanted criminal. I had rather imagined that Eric would be one of those people. Yet he wanted to know why I was scared. Something loosened in my chest a little, but we were not at that level of surety yet.

“We’re running low on water.” I grabbed a couple of the empty five gallon water jugs and headed out. I heard him calling after me, but I ignored him and headed out to the well.

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*Feasting*

The trip to the water hole took about five times longer than it should have because I was struggling with what to do about Eric. Of course I couldn't keep someone hostage on the island. That was not only illegal but immoral.

All I had in the world was my knowledge and my integrity. I would give up the first in a heartbeat if it meant I could survive, yet it was the only thing keeping me safe. The latter was the only thing I had that mattered to me, and I wouldn't give it up for anything.

This time when I returned, the man had straightened the place up a little; he'd rinsed out his mug and put away the cocoa. The mattress was back on the bed against the wall, and he was sitting on it in a pile of blankets looking a little woozy.

"You okay?" I walked over to him and tried to feel his pulse but he pushed my arm away. The thought that he might up and die on me after all frightened me a little.

"I'm fine, Crusoe, just pushed myself a little too much."

That nickname was really irritating, but in the interest of peace, I kept quiet. "You didn't have to do anything." It was my fault that he felt he needed to. He probably thought he had to ingratiate himself to me to get what he needed. That might be his *modus operandi*.

Eric shrugged. "The mattress was taking up most of the floor space."

He was right. The cabin was only one room and it was a very small one. I went and got him a cup of water and made him drink it all followed by a second.

"Thanks." He leaned back against the wall. The fact that he didn't say much was probably proof he wasn't feeling well. Was he experiencing side effects from oxygen deprivation?

"Do you want some ibuprofen?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you."

"I think you should lie down again." He had to still be in pain. Not only had the hypothermia done a number on him, but the waves probably threw him around, too, not to mention he fell off a boat. No telling how far the drop was. Then there was the whole CPR thing. But I let it go.

He rolled his eyes. “Thanks, Nurse Nightingale.” I hoped he wouldn’t start calling me that. Crusoe was infinitely better.

It was easiest just to ignore the name, and I sat on the ground near his feet. “Look, I’m sorry; what I said was wrong. I’ll take you to Yáxwch'. I think you’re still a little too weak right now to make the trek to the boat, and we should go when there’s plenty of light left in the day, so we’ll leave first thing tomorrow.”

Perhaps my words were confusing, more likely he didn’t believe me, or maybe he was just too tired. His body was still recovering. “That sounds good.” He then eased himself down and pulled the blankets up to his neck. “I’m just going to rest a while.”

“Okay.”

He was asleep within minutes. I made a stack of peanut butter sandwiches and left his on the table. I just needed to get out of there and get my head back where it belonged, not dwelling on a seductive man with an enticing smile. That wouldn’t be easy. I wasn’t even sure it’s what I wanted. I hadn’t fantasized in a very long time, and Eric was really attractive.

The next couple of hours were spent combing the beach for hard driftwood to carve and softer, larger pieces for firewood. It was important to leave wood where it had been for ages so the ecology wasn’t affected too much, but new logs coming in were fair game. By checking at low tide every day, I got a good selection without seriously harming the environment.

The haul was plentiful as I went much farther around the island than I had in a while. It was nice to see something different for a change, and I took some time to enjoy the different rocks and tide pools. The ocean was smooth that day and soothing.

At one point I thought I saw something reflected out on the horizon, but then it was gone. I didn’t like the idea of a boat coming in close enough to see me, but I had probably just been imagining things, so I went back to my beachcombing.

Two of the logs I found were too heavy to drag by myself, so I had to go back and get rope to haul them. It took several trips to get everything I found. The muck on my shoes squelched as I climbed the stairs to my door. As usual, I was thankful for the iron boot scraper I had splurged on and installed a couple of years before. The house had been so much cleaner since then. Yet I was painfully aware that it was probably filthy compared to what Eric was used to.

He was reclining on the mattress, reading a paperback from my little bookcase. Living on the remote island made it hard to get reading material, but each time I went over to Yáxwch' for supplies, Dzóox' included a stack of books with the other things. I brought her the books I had read, and left a list of subjects I wanted next. I trusted her to pick out good ones, and she always did a great job.

The book Eric was reading was one of my favorites, Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*. The travelogue was hilarious, more so given my background and skills. I found it entertaining and joyous to read the naiveté of people approaching tamed wilderness as if it were dangerous uncharted territory. It left me wishing that my introduction to the wild had been as positive, not quite so terrifying.

All of Bryson's books left me thirsting for something beyond my empty island, and I hungered to travel. Sometimes when I read about a dangerous encounter a person had while trekking the world, I thought I was a coward for preferring to live in isolation rather than risk death.

Fortunately, I didn't have time for such musings because as soon as I walked in, Eric was jabbering again. I worked on making the adjustment from my quiet solitude as I dumped the armload of hardwood by the chair.

"Hey, Crusoe. Found some firewood?"

He probably was talking about the wood for carving, but it didn't matter. Hopefully he wouldn't chuck any into the stove. "Yep."

"So did you mean what you said before I took my nap?" He sounded eager, and I liked how his voice resonated, although I wish I heard it a little less often. "Do you remember?"

No way had I forgotten. The thought of him leaving the island, knowing my name and where I was, made my stomach heave. "Yeah."

His shoulders dropped as he finally relaxed. "Thank you. I know it's hard for you to trust, but I promise I won't tell anyone about you. Your secrets are safe with me. You have nothing to worry about. You believe me, don't you?"

No, not the way he spoke so easily and glibly. "Sure." The light was still bright outside, deceiving as to the time, the result of living so far north, and I watched the pattern it made on the wall as it shimmered through raindrops. The rain was peaceful, not constantly trying to talk to me.

I watched his reflection. He looked like he was going to say more but then he left it and moved on. "Can I ask more questions? I have a lot. Most aren't

any of my business, and you don't have to answer those, but some are pretty relevant, and I really would appreciate a straight answer, if you don't mind." That award-winning smile came back, and this time it didn't look so fake, like maybe he was being friendly because he wanted to be, not just because that was the way to get the answers he sought.

"Shoot." I turned around to face him.

He chuckled. "Nah, you'd be aiming before I could even grab a gun, I bet." No, if he tried anything, he would be bleeding out before he even moved his hand. "No. You'd have shot me already."

Although the idea that I would ever fire a gun at him made me queasy, the fact that we'd shared the same thought made me smile.

"It's nice to see you smile." I didn't know what to say to that. Compliments made me uncomfortable. Instead of responding, I leaned against the window, the solidity steadying my nerves.

"So my first question and, I think, a rather important one is, why am I naked? Not that I'm complaining, mind you, I just prefer to be conscious during these things."

I was not going there. "You're not naked, you have a bracelet on."

He narrowed his eyes.

"What? You're wearing it." Eye-rolling really did nothing for his otherwise splendid looks. I figured I should probably tell him so. I didn't.

"Thank you for pointing that out. Why am I naked except for a cheap bracelet?"

"You had underwear, but I had to cut it off."

"And why is that?"

"Because you should always remove cold, wet clothing as soon as possible."

"You're being difficult again. Is that a habit of yours?"

"Sorry. You beached that way."

"I beached. Like a whale."

I shrugged.

He squinted one eye as if to say that was a ridiculous word to use, then moved on. "Okay, so to clarify, I wasn't wearing any clothes when I washed up

on shore? Just me in my birthday suit, perhaps a little seaweed for decoration, maybe even a starfish in my hair? Not that I'm accusing you of anything, but I'm finding this hard to believe. I went in the water fully clothed, and last time I checked, fish don't have fingers to undo buttons." No they didn't, but he did.

"Food first." There had been a few crabs in the trap when I checked it that afternoon, and I set about preparing them for dinner.

"You can talk while you're cooking." He stood up and adjusted the blanket wrapped around him but for a moment it all hung out. I was pretty sure it wasn't intentional. I got the impression he was just so comfortable in his own body, nudity didn't matter and he didn't even notice. "For future reference, where's the bathroom? I couldn't find one so I used the bushes. I'd prefer not to have to do that again."

"Latrine is outside behind the cabin, up the slope a little."

His eyes bugged out. "Seriously? No toilet? Are you kidding me? Are you living this way on purpose? It's barbaric." He pulled the blanket tighter around him and stumbled over to the armchair. I watched to make sure he didn't go down in the process but he made it okay.

Once in the chair, he shook his head and looked at me. "Sorry, that was uncalled for. I'm just not used to such, uh, rustic accommodations." He looked a little sheepish. "This whole situation is a little unsettling. I'm not usually quite so impolite. I prefer to make people happy." The smug look returned. "I'm *very* good at making people happy."

I had to force myself not to picture how he could make me very happy. I was becoming a pervert. "What are you used to?"

"Solid gold fixtures, fountains of champagne and chocolate, diamond windows, platinum furniture, you know, standard fare." He laughed. "Yeah right. No, it's just that I'm a city boy through and through. Never liked camping. I prefer to travel abroad than into the forest."

The room was quiet for a moment while the water was boiling.

But my new friend was apparently not good at quiet, so soon he piped up again. "So you were going to tell me why I'm naked."

I glanced at him over my shoulder. "You probably got confused and took off your clothes."

The blush on his face was kind of alluring. I really needed to stop looking at him and focus on the cooking. It was hard though. It had been so long since I

had seen someone so handsome. There were probably good-looking men in the village, but I really never saw anyone other than Dzóox' and her sixteen-year-old grandson who carried the boxes down to the pier. Someone always saw me when I was still far out and by the time I got close, only she and the teenager were there.

“Confused? I'd have to be really confused to take off my damn clothes outside. I like being naked but I like being warm and alive better.” I turned around to face him.

“Happens sometimes with hypothermia. People start hallucinating and remove their clothing.”

He blanched. “Hypothermia? Really? That's serious. Shouldn't I be in a hospital?”

“Yes.”

“But you didn't take me.”

The water was taking forever to boil. I began to kill the crabs anyway by destroying their two nerve centers from their undersides, one in the back, one in the front. There's no reason to boil a creature to death when you can kill it quickly and painlessly seconds before it would have died anyway. That it would be minutes this time rather than seconds was just how it had to be because I needed the distraction.

“Hello?”

I had to answer so I turned back to him. “No. I've been trained in how to deal with it. The nearest hospital was too far away. Still is. Hopefully tomorrow you'll be ready to travel that far, though, as that's where the nearest airport is, too.”

Instead of getting angry, he cocked his head and considered me. “Did my clothes survive? Do you know where they are? Or did I take them off in the water? Crap. Do you have something I can wear? I can't sit around naked all day.”

*Why not?* was my first reaction, but I tamped it down.

“Unless you want me to.” He smirked at me. “I look very good in the buff, I'm told. Want to take a look?”

Could he read minds? His clothes had been long gone by the time I had gotten outside that morning. It was funny how the tide dragged away anything

you wanted to keep and deposited all kinds of things you really didn't want, such as naked men. *Liar*.

After killing the last crab, I left the food and rummaged in a crate I kept my clothes in. He was taller and broader than I was so I found my loosest sweatpants figuring the stretchy waist would help a little. A T-shirt that was too big that I kept because it was really comfortable would fit him fine, I figured. I tossed him the clothes and started cleaning vegetables.

"Thanks. I take it that means my clothes are gone."

I nodded. I kept my back to him as he pulled on the sweats. Unsurprisingly, he hadn't asked for privacy, but I was pretty sure my body would tell him information that I wasn't prepared for him to know. Just the thought of him naked and exposed had made my jeans a little snug in the crotch. My body really needed to find another hobby.

"Well, they were in a pretty bad state by that point, I suppose, so no big deal."

The rustling stopped, and I heard him sit again. I glanced back to make sure everything fit okay. He was splayed in the armchair, body language wide open but not obscene, at least not intentionally. The lack of underwear and the giving fabric didn't leave a lot to the imagination, though. I quickly looked away again. I wasn't sure my libido would ever go back to normal even after he was gone.

"So, how did you end up in this godforsaken place? You wash up on shore, too? You, me, and Tom Hanks. That how you got here? Shipwreck? A mighty pirate ship on the high seas came along and one-eyed, one-legged pirates shouted, 'Shiver me timbers!' as they made you walk the plank?"

I wondered for the briefest of moments if I could just throw him back out to sea. Instead I threw the crabs into the pot. The vegetables went in a wire basket in the same water. When I glanced back, Eric was watching what I was doing closely, and I got the impression he wanted to say something about how I was cooking but didn't quite know how.

Then his grin came back. "I'm waiting."

Oh yes, how I got here. Eric was like a seagull with a clam. He wasn't letting go of this line of inquiry. "Not quite."

"Care to explain?"

"It was more of a log than a plank."

Eric whooped. "He makes a joke! I was beginning to wonder about you, Crusoe. I was starting to think you didn't have a sense of humor in that mysterious head of yours. I'm glad I was wrong." He laughed again. "You don't have to tell me. Next question: You just found me on the beach while taking a walk and beachcombing?"

"Pretty much." Again I was smiling. That was getting to be a habit. How long had it been since I used my cheek muscles for anything other than chewing? "You were lying half in and half out of the surf. Looked like you dragged yourself that far and were done."

He didn't deserve how cagey I was being. He wasn't the enemy... I was pretty sure. I sighed. "I chose to come here to... to avoid a certain situation, but I didn't do anything wrong and I swear I'm not running from law enforcement. This island is in Tlingit territory, so I spoke to the local clan about living here."

It had been a long drawn out process trying to find somewhere to stay far away from civilization, a place where I could remain anonymous and safe. It took most of the time I was in North Carolina. Then I had to negotiate a mutually beneficial arrangement which took even more time.

He turned thoughtful. "Thanks for sharing that. I'm sure I'm not the easiest person to confide in right now, especially given your circumstances. I promise you can trust me, though." He continued to surprise me every time we spoke.

Fortunately our meal was ready, and I dished it out so I could avoid showing him my face which I was sure was red. Probably that was the case here, too, though. In my experience, most people ignored me unless they wanted something, Dzóox' excepted. Eric certainly had a good reason to manipulate me.

Delivering the plates to the tiny table I had moved to the center of the room was enough to get my head back on straight. I figured Eric was hungry. The sandwiches were gone but that was all he had eaten since before he had gone into the water more than twenty-four hours before. He dug in with great gusto but with good table manners. I had had to learn them from a video. I figured he had grown up having to be cultured as it seemed to come so naturally.

He stayed in the armchair, and I sat across from him on the stool, and I spent as much time watching him as eating. Somehow he managed to keep speaking while eating great quantities of food, and yet not talk with his mouth full.

Most of what he said kind of went through me because it was all chit-chat. I appreciated that he didn't ask anything important while we were emptying our plates. Eating was task enough for me as exhausted as I was from his presence, and I didn't really speak again until the food was almost gone.

"I love crab." He wiped his mouth. "It's been a while since I've had fresh seafood, but I've never had anything that was pulled from the ocean just moments before I ate it. I envy you this."

It had been fairly apparent that he thought the meal was somehow lacking. He was perfectly polite and had several servings, but although I couldn't say what it was exactly, something in the way he had eaten had me thinking he wasn't impressed with my culinary expertise. I noticed his words weren't actually complimenting the cooking, just that fresh shellfish was good. I wasn't sure what he was expecting though. How else would you cook fresh crab and vegetables? I didn't know how to respond so I ended up just smiling and nodding a bit. He smiled back.

"Where do you get the rabbit food? This was crisp and green. I love vegetables and salad. I know many guys don't like them, but when they're cooked right they're delicious." He continued to talk about food for the next five minutes. "So where did the greens come from?"

"I have a garden."

"Of course. Not something I think about. Food comes in shiny plastic bags from the grocery store or wrapped in recycled paper products and labeled 'Artisan.'" Although I wasn't sure what that meant, I joined him in another smile. That felt good. "You know, I could cook for you. I'm pretty good around a stove. A cast iron one would be different, but I'm game to learn something new."

I very much wanted him to cook for me, but that wouldn't happen. "You're leaving tomorrow, remember?"

"Oh yeah." I could have been mistaken, but I thought a shadow passed his eyes. Regret maybe? Fear? Then it was gone. "How could I forget? Got to get back to work. I'm sure they're missing me. Where am I anyway?"

"Somewhere in the lower end of Southeast Alaska, or maybe northern B.C."

Eric narrowed his eyes, although he didn't look mad. "You're being obtuse again. Could you be more specific?"

"Not much. The Tlingit tribes cross the US/Canadian border, and these islands are right on it, but it's a little hard to tell which is on what side without a

map and an aerial view. There are hundreds of islands around here. I'm sure I could find out but it's better if I don't know. That way if someone tortures—”

Oh no. What did this man do to me that made me forget all of my training and blurt out the first thing that came to mind? “I mean, I could always accidentally say something when I was out somewhere like if I needed to go to the hospital, and I was delirious.”

He pretended not to notice the slip but his voice became fixedly chipper. “No one would believe anything you said because you'd probably also be talking about purple polka-dotted panthers in parachute pants.” Like that, my mood lightened. “So somewhere on the Inside Passage.”

I nodded.

“Well that makes sense. It's beautiful country. Never been up here before. It's a little cold, and a lot rainy, but I like it. You can never get too much fresh air.” Another five minutes later, he was done with that subject. I wondered if he ever stopped talking. Maybe he just babbled around me to fill the void my quietness left. “So how do you pay your keep? I'm guessing that the tribe is getting something out of it too.”

I was grateful for the change in subject. I loved this terrain but there was only so much you could talk about fresh air and greenery, and he had covered all the bases several times over. “I make money from my carving.” He cocked his head so I shared more as he apparently preferred, who knew why. “I learned carving and stone craft when I was young.” The skill was used to make spears, arrows, and tent pegs. Later we were taught to make knives and hatchets including their handles, and it went on from there. “When I was in—when I got out—when I left... where I grew up, I started whittling to pass the time and as a sort of mental calming device.”

“Like meditation?”

“Guess so.”

“Makes sense.” Then his eyes widened. “Did you do these woodcarvings around the room?”

“Yeah. The stone ones, too.”

Still looking amazed, Eric stood and walked over to the bookshelf and picked up the little shrew. It really was quite small. “You did this?” He sounded kind of awed, which was weird and a little uncomfortable.

“Uh, yeah. Anyway—”

“What is this wood?”

“Pacific yew. I made it from a narrow piece of driftwood. That’s why the thing is so small.” I didn’t understand why he was so interested. It was a piece of wood.

“That’s very hard to carve, isn’t it?”

“It wasn’t so bad. The hardest part is drying it, which is really difficult in this environment, as you can imagine. It takes months. I have a special box I built for the purpose.” Why was I going on about a silly hobby that happened to pay the rent?

“This is Shakespeare isn’t it? It took me a minute before I made the connection because to be honest, I really don’t know what a shrew looks like. Well, until now. Well, I guess this is a little abstract, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

“If someone had told me about this, I would have pictured the bard’s profile smack dab in the middle of the side which would have been tacky, like that horrible saw.” He looked up. “I’m sorry to be so rude about that, but I’m a little picky about art, and that thing is atrocious. You didn’t paint it, did you?”

I shook my head. I supposed it was ugly, but the painting wasn’t why I bought it; Eric had guessed correctly about its purpose.

He relaxed a bit at that. “That’s a relief. I love art, and I could go on and on about it, and I get a little judgmental. You have no idea.”

Actually, I was pretty sure I had an excellent idea, and if I didn’t, I had no desire to learn the extent of his ability to speak on the subject or any subject for that matter.

He looked back at the carving in his hands. “This subtle way you gave only a hint of the face, and how you have to move the piece in just the right way to see it? It’s lovely when it merely looks like some stylistic lines, but when you see what it really is, it’s obviously beautiful art.”

My face heated, and you could have knocked me over with a sand flea. I couldn’t believe he knew who that face belonged to or that he even realized it was a face. He really was observant. But to think it was beautiful art? I figured he was flattering me but it felt nice anyway. Maybe I did have a little talent. “Anyway, I give my carvings to the kwáan and they sell them.”

His jaw dropped and he looked at me, the carving apparently forgotten.

“You pass your art off as Native American?” He looked quite upset at that which pleased me a lot while also being insulting.

“Of course not. I would never do that, and the Tlingit would never agree to it either. They have their own amazing artists, and a long tribal history of beautiful craftwork.” The very thought horrified me. “I don’t really know what they do with this stuff, actually.” I gestured at the piece in his hands. “I imagine they sell it to some dealer who then distributes it, probably as tourist schlock somewhere.”

My only request to them had been that my real name not be used. I didn’t care what they did with it. “I don’t know how much they get. They let me live here and supply me with what I need with whatever money my stuff generates. I suspect they supplement my income because they think I’m crazy and need to be taken care of.”

“Crazy, huh? A mad man is my host?”

“We prefer the term lunatic.”

He laughed at that, and my heart raced. The damned thing needed to calm the heck down.

His smile turned contemplative. “Boaz, your work is really good. Believe me, I know art, and this is—”

“Yeah, well, one man’s treasure is another man’s bauble.” Either he was still trying to win me over, or he only thought he knew art. My stuff was okay, maybe beautiful sometimes like he said, but really.

He let it go. “I think since we finished dinner, you’ve said more than the sum total of everything you’d said up until that point.”

I had? How could he tell? He hadn’t stopped talking for three seconds himself. I just shrugged. “I guess you bring it out in me.” That was definitely true. I had possibly said more that evening than I had spoken on any given day in my entire lifetime.

Eric suggested a game of cards, but I admitted I didn’t know how to play and asked if he would show me how.

He agreed but looked baffled. “You don’t know how to play cards? Then why do you have them? And why are they used if you don’t know any games? Do you play solitaire? Or do you have guests you haven’t mentioned?” He grinned.

“Not guests exactly. Just the fairies who come to clean the house at night. They play a game or two before leaving, and they’re very rough on the cards.”

That made him laugh. “I like your sense of humor, Crusoe.”

That made me oddly happy. “Actually, they were a gift from the kwáan elder who packs up my supplies. She doesn’t understand how I live in such solitude, so she’s always giving me gifts to make me feel less lonely.” I retrieved the pack from its place on my bookshelf and handed them over.

“They’re used because it’s an old pack of hers that she said she was getting rid of anyway. Solitaire is kind of pointless, isn’t it? Work is never done—I can always carve something—so when I’m tired and winding down, I would rather read and learn something than play a game by myself.”

He nodded like that made sense. He wiped down the table and dealt while I cleaned up, then he taught me gin rummy. We ended up playing for a couple of hours, and of course he spent the whole time talking, although he kept trying to draw me in by asking me things.

I realized that he wasn’t trying to pry or get me to reveal anything personal; he was just interested in getting to know me. I didn’t have any practice in carrying on a conversation, though, and I felt guilty about making him do all the work. Then again, he really didn’t seem to mind.

Eventually, I saw he was fading and suggested we stop. He agreed readily. We argued about who would get the bed, but the victory was mine because he was the guest, and I was more than used to sleeping on the ground, even if it had been a while. Really, I won because he was still recuperating and in pain so he didn’t have a lot of energy to argue. He rather stupidly hadn’t taken any pain medicine all day, but he accepted some ibuprofen before I went to seal the place up for the night.

As before, he fell asleep quickly, and for some reason, despite my spot in the not-quite-dry-yet sleeping bag on the hard floor, I did too. Apparently I was starting to trust him much faster than I expected or intended, and that was dangerous. Very dangerous. Maybe even for my physical wellbeing, too.

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*Fondling*

Sometime in the middle of the night, I woke to a sound I didn't recognize. As always, I became alert without moving and without changing my breathing. Quite a few beatings had taught me that skill. Another helpful talent I had learned early on was how to open my eyes the tiniest fraction so I could see through my lashes without anyone knowing I was conscious, and I used the skill now.

As my eyes adjusted to the pale light of the moon slipping through the slats of the shutters, I tried to figure out what the sound was. It was coming from the bed, but I was bewildered because it wasn't anything I could identify. It took a sharp breath on Eric's part followed by more rapid movement for me to realize what he was doing. At that point, I hated the fact that I couldn't sleep through anything abnormal, while at the same time, I was shocked that his movements had started before I awoke. I was getting rusty.

This was more than awkward. All I could do was close my eyes, lie there as quietly as I could, and hope he would finish quickly. The sounds were enticing, though, as embarrassing as they were. My own flesh was growing and hardening. It was particularly unpleasant as I was very exposed, wearing only light sleep pants with no covers because the place was so hot.

I was used to a much colder climate than Eric and lived in poorly insulated walls. The stove was blasting heat both night and day for him, and still he slept under the blankets. I, however, was so hot I was sweating, and the current circumstances were making it worse. With the lack of cover, I couldn't even subtly move to ease the ache of my squashed erection. I silently prayed for him to be finished soon and fall asleep so I could relieve the pain.

When he gasped, I began to have trouble keeping my breathing even. I opened my eyes the tiniest fraction again, and the reflection of the moonlight in his pupils showed he was looking at me. It was startling, and it was all I could do not to gasp myself. Then I saw he wasn't looking at my face; he was looking at my body.

Eric's eyes traced my form from my neck to my feet, lingering on my buttocks before moving again. When his movements sped up and his breathing quickened, he focused solely on my rear end and he licked his lips. The darkness thankfully hid the blush I could feel.

“That ass...” He whispered so softly, I barely heard him, and it did nothing to help my heated face. “So fucking hot.” Then he groaned and his back arched, and I knew he was achieving release. It went on and on, and I nearly whimpered, I was so aroused. Even his profanity, which I usually found crass and avoided at all costs, sent thrills up my spine.

Finally he slumped. He lay there for a couple of minutes before getting out of bed and heading out the door, presumably to wash up and perhaps use the latrine. It was enough time for me, though. With just a few quick strokes, I was overcome by pleasure, too, picturing what his face looked like when he peaked.

It was quick work to wipe myself off with my discarded T-shirt, stuff it behind the bookcase, and lie down again by the time he came back. My body was in the exact position it had been in before he left, and I hoped he would think the lingering funk in the room was solely from his own discharge.

He stood near the bed for a while staring at me, I thought, although I couldn't be sure as I could only see him from the waist down. It almost looked like he was getting hard again. Finally he swore, squeezed his crotch hard, and climbed back into bed. Within moments he was asleep, but I waited another twenty before getting up to wash myself and the T-shirt.

When I finally drifted off, it was in spite of the thoughts I couldn't stop from spinning around in my mind. I was now pretty sure Eric really was gay; he hadn't just been flirting as a way of manipulating me. More importantly, I was also pretty sure he wanted *me*.

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*Forlorn*

For me, the next morning was terribly awkward but not so for Eric. Of course not, he didn't know what I had witnessed—and felt. It was probably for the best that he was leaving, but suddenly I didn't want him to go with a desperation that shocked me.

Could I return to that lonely isolated existence that had been normal to me only a couple of days ago? Now even the idea was soul crushing. What had I missed out on all these years? Was the assurance of a long or at least longer life worth it?

There wasn't a lot of time to think on it as he had nothing to pack. I let him keep the clothes, although I would have preferred to watch him without them. We ate a quick breakfast of the rest of the bannock. He actually liked it and asked me what it was.

"It's bannock. Like fry bread but slightly healthier."

"I don't know what that is."

How do you explain fry bread? "It's um, bread that's fried."

Eric was obviously trying not to laugh.

"Well, fried dough. Dough you put in a pan and fry. Kind of like pancakes, but not really because it's fried. I mean, pancakes are fried sort of but there's a lot less oil." Now I was the one babbling. "When I was negotiating about staying here, I got to know one of the clan elders, a woman named Dzóox'. She taught me how to make it."

"That was nice of her."

I ducked my head a little. "She knew I loved any kind of fried dough such as funnel cakes and hush puppies because she made me pancakes the first morning after I arrived, and I ate around twenty. I really love pancakes. So she showed me how to make this.

"Fry bread is a traditional food, but you know, it's fried. Bannock is actually a Scottish food adopted by health-conscious Native peoples I guess. Not that bannock is that healthy, either, being all carbs." I laughed nervously because now I was the one who couldn't stop talking. "Dzóox' was kind of worried I was going to die out here because she'd tasted my cooking."

He lost the battle and burst out, his laughs filling the room. Surprisingly, it didn't bother me. Somehow I knew he was just teasing not judging me. "Well you are good at cooking this at least." The rest of the bannock soon disappeared into his belly.

When we were done, I shouldered my go bag and we left. Throughout our preparations for the trip, Eric had been his usual gabby self, but as soon we walked through the door, he spoke less and less until he was silent when we entered the tree line behind the cabin. I wasn't in a particularly talkative mood either, but his silence was curious. I found I missed his chatter as we went up and over the hill that topped the closest bluff and then down the other side.

The island looked a little like a flipped over comma, although not nearly that smooth, with the curled bit pointing northeast and the fat part due west. The cabin was nestled on the eastern slope of the depression on the northern edge, and the boat was moored on the other side of the promontory, away from the hut, so someone coming after me wouldn't see it first and destroy it.

By walking over the ridge that separated the two places instead of around the rocky and dangerous point, we shaved off a lot of time even though there wasn't an obvious trail and the brush was thick under the crowded trees. I didn't want to leave a path to my escape route for anyone to find. For the same reason, I didn't cut back the bracken.

Eric proved to be more graceful than he looked and took the relatively few new scratches to his hands and face without a word. That seemed out of character. I would have guessed he would be cracking jokes and complaining in half-truths, so more than once I looked back to see how he was doing.

I caught him looking out at the water a few times, looking a little nervous and distracted. He always met my eyes, smiled, and nodded, but it wasn't his usual grin, neither the one meant to charm nor the real one.

It had me a little worried. Something was up but I didn't know what it was. Didn't he trust me to follow through? Did he think I was taking him off somewhere to kill him? Was he going to try something when we were offshore? Maybe he thought I was planning something, and he would preemptively try to shove me off a cliff.

For the first time, I wondered if he was a physical danger to me after all. I kept a close watch on him the rest of the way, but it was impossible for us to walk side by side most of the time with the dense vegetation, and he didn't know the terrain. If I walked behind him and told him where to step, he would

know I was suspicious, or believe I was trying to hurt him, and that could spur him into doing something he was currently just thinking about.

It was with this grim uncertainty that we arrived in the little cove that harbored my boat. Despite the rough going, we reached the craft in under thirty minutes. I pulled back the debris I used to hide it from sight and stepped back so Eric could see that I wasn't lying.

"That's your boat? Wow... Is it safe? It kind of looks... how should I put this? A little... worn?"

I looked at the boat with an outsider's eye and saw it for what it was: an old wooden rum-runner that had seen its heyday long before Dzóox' had been born. The paint was peeling, so the old, graying wood showed through. She was long overdue for a cleaning. Barnacles had clamped their pointy hides on the sides of the ship up to the high water line, which could just barely be seen above the murky water. I didn't like to think what had made its way into the intake valves. Eric might have had a point.

"She's seaworthy. She's made it through nearly a century of harsh salt water, extreme temperatures, and storms. She can make another trip."

Eric looked at me in horror. "The boat's how old? Is it some ancient fishing boat or something?"

"*She* was a smuggling boat back during the days of Prohibition." She was backed in as always in order to be ready for a quick escape, and I now put my hand on her stern. "She was an active one, I heard."

"I thought rum-runners were racers, like cigarette boats or something."

"That's a drug-running boat now. You could fill the space for the life preserver with plastic baggies and still make enough to retire in a mansion in Tahiti. But they're actually the same thing. The difference is that those were used for short and fast runs on fairly safe water and they couldn't carry as much. They were better for lighter cargo like cigarettes, hence the name. Bigger girls, like my sweetheart, were built for coastal transfers, right here in the Pacific, smuggling Canadian Whiskey down to San Francisco and LA."

Eric looked interested so I continued. "Truthfully, the term 'rum-runner' doesn't really mean much. Basically it was a watercraft that hauled contraband spirits. Some were meant for short distances across tame waters and were therefore pretty small like you described. Many were just converted fishing boats."

I stepped over the bulwark as I explained. "My little beauty was made for it, though. She's a home on water, bigger than the hut I live in, with a hidden hold for storing contraband. She's wonderful. What?"

He was grinning like a madman. "You are so adorable when you get excited about something. You just spoke for at least two minutes straight without stopping. That must be a record."

"For me, maybe, but I'm sure you hold the world's record for longest speech." Was he making fun of me? I didn't think so, but I wasn't always good with subtleties in verbal and visual communication. When in doubt, make a joke. "And only romance novelists call grown men adorable."

"You sound like me when I talk about art." I doubted that, but he continued. "The look in your eyes, like you can't see anything but your boat, the admiration in your voice, the information you're giving me, like you're just sharing a little tidbit and know so much more than you're telling. Now that I think about it, you've never called the beach cabin yours."

The hut was where I lived. He wasn't making any sense, but then that was a frequent occurrence. "What are you talking about?"

"You never say, 'my cabin,' and you never call it 'home.' But you both used the possessive and called the boat a home when you were talking about her."

Huh. Interesting. "I guess I don't really think of the cabin as mine. I built it, but it really belongs to the tribe." That and it was just a place to hide. I looked my little rum-runner over. "This home is mine." Why didn't I just live on her? The little hut was just a place. As usual, Eric's observational skills were impressive.

He tilted his head and bent over a bit. "The Knotty Lady? Really?"

"It's bad luck to rename a boat." Not to mention it hadn't really occurred to me. "They couldn't very well call her 'High Spirits' or 'Aquaholic' which I saw on a boat near Ketchikan. It wouldn't do for two boats in the same area to have the same name."

"No, that would just be tacky." He chuckled and straightened. "This isn't her original engine, is it?" Despite his amusement, he still looked a little nonplussed.

"Don't be absurd. She had a new one installed at the end of the war."

"Which one? Iraq? Afghanistan?"

“World War II.”

To his credit, it only took about five seconds to realize I was joking, but those few seconds were priceless. “You know, you so rarely show emotion that it’s not my fault I keep believing your crap. It’s like playing poker with a robot. So how much do you know about boats in general?”

Uh oh. Now I would look like I had been trying to impress him with my knowledge, which I wasn’t. My love of my boat was specific. I was smitten with my Lady, not boats in general. “Not so much, really. Enough to get by out here. Nothing like the fishermen and women do.”

“Well it’s better than what I know, which is nothing except that a sailboat has a big flappy thing at the top, a rowboat has sticks, and everything else has an engine.”

I scoffed. “Not everything else has an ‘engine.’ A canoe doesn’t.”

“Type of rowboat.”

“A raft.”

“Also a rowboat or sometimes a sailboat.”

It took me a moment to come up with something else. “Paddle boat.”

“You mean one of those things you pedal?”

I nodded.

“Well the name says it has paddles, and I’m sure that means sticks, and your legs are the motor—”

“Just stop.” It was fun to banter around with him but today I had my limits. “How do you not know how to sail? You grew up all classy, right? I thought you traveled.”

“Because I’m a city boy, and you assume I’ve been a lot of places, and to you being world traveled means I know all about boats, huh? Talking about not making any sense.” There was that mind-reading again. “Most urban communities don’t have a lot of boats running through their streets, Venice excepted, and it’s called an airplane.” His good humor was back which eased my mind considerably.

“You forgot Ketchikan across the way.”

“Really? They have water streets? Or do you mean airplanes.”

“Well they have both. I meant Creek Street, although I don’t know if you’d think it counts, and float planes are common in Alaska.” The gunwale felt good when I ran my hand over it, safe.

“You love this boat, but I think you *love* love her.”

I realized I was caressing my Lady. Awkward. “She’s the one woman who could make me straight.” I realized I had just outed myself and turned my head to look at him.

His expression didn’t change; he just laughed as he said, “She’s the first thing you’ve ever really owned, right?”

How did he do that? It was creepy. “Um, yeah. She’s mine, you know? She’s a... a symbol of freedom. I can just disappear completely if I have to.” Even more than I already had.

Eric had an inscrutable expression on his face then smiled and nodded. “I get it.”

“So climb aboard and I’ll show you around.”

About three seconds later, we were standing back on deck, tour over. Basically there was a little stateroom with a triangular double-bed, a galley, salon, mess, and small bunk room, although some of those terms described something much more elegant than what the Lady had. For example, the mess was just a built in booth across from the tiny sink.

“Nice. She’s beautiful. That hidden compartment under the floorboards? Where you can see the water below? That’s so cool. But I don’t get how the boat doesn’t sink.”

I had only shown it to him briefly, as it felt a little too personal sharing my boat with him. But I couldn’t help talking about her secrets. “The hull is a lot like a donut with the center open to water.” I climbed back down and beckoned to him. “Not completely, obviously there’s a solid surface, but it’s just a grate. There’s a lever here that can open the bottom and release whatever the hold contains into the sea so that the contraband could be left behind in a getaway. It had the added benefit of keeping the spirits colder.”

He touched the lever which was cleverly hidden just outside the panel to the secret section. “But wasn’t this stuff in barrels? Wouldn’t it float?”

I shook my head. “No, a lot was stored in ceramic jugs, which was kind of stupid because the containers alone weighed down the boat which made the fact

that she was a smuggler that much more obvious. If barrels were used, they were filled so full that the liquid was heavier than the buoyancy of the wood. Since the water frequently splashed up into the hold, the wood would have been saturated and not buoyant enough to keep all that liquid above the water."

"Very, very, cool. This could be used to smuggle guns or something even today." His eyes twinkled. "That's really how you make your money, isn't it?"

That wouldn't have been the best way to keep a low profile. "DEA agents are a little savvier now." It was nice that he was clearly joking, and the fact that I had guns wasn't really making him question my use of the boat's cargo area. My cheeks heated yet again at the thought he trusted me. It was getting ridiculous. *I* was getting ridiculous.

"Well it—she—is a really beautiful boat. I kind of like that the outside needs a few coats of paint hiding the fact that she's so lovely and homey inside."

"Thanks. Part of the camouflage. Makes it easy to disappear, as I said." Then silence fell, and like that everything was uncomfortable again. "So we should head out."

It finally occurred to me that he didn't have a problem with my being gay, although why it would when he was clearly at least bisexual, I didn't know. It was promising, although of course it didn't matter.

"Yeah, we should," Eric agreed. "Uh, do you think I could get a look up top?"

I shrugged and led him up the ladder. He pretended to look at the helm, the instruments and wheel, but he was still glancing out at the horizon apprehensively. What was wrong? I watched him and then it came to me. "You're afraid to go back out there."

"Huh?" He looked confused.

"Because you fell off the boat, you're scared something's going to happen again."

For a moment, he appeared mystified, then his face relaxed. "You caught me. Scared to death." He chuckled in a self-deprecating manner, and running his fingers through his hair, tried to look like he was just a big goof, as if to say "Silly old me, afraid of falling in again."

Even though he made all the right moves and his tone was perfect, something was off. He wasn't scared of the water; it was something else. "No, that's not it. What are you afraid of?"

He looked a little surprised, and I wondered if his act usually worked on other people. "The water, like you said. But I can handle it." He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed it lightly. "It's all good." I felt a stirring inside at his touch. That wouldn't do. There were only a couple of hours left before he and his companionship were gone.

"If you say so." I climbed down to the lower deck and started untying dock line from a cleat. After a moment his hand on mine stopped me.

"Do you want to disappear?"

I looked at him over my shoulder, puzzled.

"Like you said earlier. Do you really want to vanish?" The smoldering look in his eyes wasn't entirely fake, and I had to turn back toward the water. I realized his words could be construed as a threat, but after that look in his eye, there was no mistaking his mind was on very different things.

My heart began hammering in my chest when I realized how close he was standing. I could feel his breath ruffling the tiny hairs on my neck, and it took a moment for me to ground myself. "N-Not really. I mean, I don't know." How long had it been since I had been this close to anyone who was conscious? Oh yeah. When I was fifteen. I shuddered at the memory and felt like vomiting.

"Boaz." His voice was low and sensual, pulling me back from the past. "You don't want to disappear, do you?"

"Not anymore. Or, I mean, I already have. Disappeared I mean." My voice was so soft it was amazing he could even hear me, but he must have because he turned me around to face him. His eyes were bright as they stared into mine. My throat felt tight.

"Do you want to stay here, hidden, forever? Never being with someone else?" His fingers lightly touched my jaw. "Never again feeling the touch of another?"

*Oh...* That felt so good. His words were so sensual. I was sure they somehow moved the air to caress me. Heat pooled in my groin. The lust in his eyes was real, I would almost swear. Not touch another? Not touch him? I shook my head. No, I didn't want to never touch someone intimately, to hell with the double negative. At that moment, he could have asked me to take a ride on his unicorn, and I would have gone willingly.

He moved closer still until I felt the warmth of his body bathing mine. "Then don't. Come with me. Leave the island and live a little. We could stay

another couple of days while you packed your things.” He went in for the kill and lowered his voice again. “And then I’ll take us to the other side.”

My mind was frozen except for an image of what he meant by that. I felt myself swell below, but then I really looked into his eyes, and I saw that while the lust was real, he wanted something else. He was trying too hard.

Then the reality of what he had said sunk in. Leave with him? Leave and go back to the real world? I backed up so fast I nearly fell over the side. “I c-can’t. I-I’m not—It’s not poss—You don’t understand—I—I—” I couldn’t breathe. I clawed at my chest trying to get in air.

Somehow I managed to climb over the bulwark and onto the steady rocks where I fell to my knees. Spots interfered with my vision, and although I could feel air coming in and out as I gasped, I felt like I didn’t have enough oxygen. My fingers hurt where they scrambled to hold on to the solid and safe island.

Strong hands touched my shoulders then reached around in front of me to cup around my mouth and nose. I started to struggle until I heard, “You’re hyperventilating. Relax. Breathe slowly to my count. Breathe in, two three four, breathe out, two three four. Breathe in, two three four, breathe out, two three four.”

There was just enough space between his hands and my face so I wouldn’t suffocate, and although it was harder to inhale, somehow it became easier and easier to breathe. Once the danger of my passing out was gone, he pulled his hands away.

“Sorry about that. Thank you.” The words came out in mild gasps. I was grateful but still overwhelmed by my fears of leaving the island, and I didn’t know what to make of what had happened between us.

He rubbed my back. “Just sit for a minute. Get your breath back.”

That wouldn’t be easy with him touching me, but I didn’t really want that to end yet so I went with it. My emotions were all over the place, but my body knew what it wanted more than anything in that moment, well aside from oxygen. Finally, Eric moved back, and I stood up.

An explanation was in order but I didn’t know what to say. “I’m really sorry. I just can’t leave the island right now. I don’t mean to be so pathetic.” More than he knew. *He* would have left me alone in The Pit a couple of days for that show of unmanliness. Part of me still believed that shows of weakness in front of others were dangerous. There were plenty of opportunities to fall apart in the safety of my solitary refuge.

He assessed me for a moment and apparently decided I was okay because he changed the subject. "You know, I was thinking." His head tilted a little, an easy grin appeared on his face, and his voice, when it came, was light and casual. He was apparently going for nonchalance. "No one expects me back for a while, not until the first, and it's only, what, the 18th? 19th?"

"Something like that." I actually had no idea.

"You have a calendar on the boat?"

I shook my head.

"Never mind, the date's somewhere around then. I'm pretty sure I jum—fell off the boat on the 16<sup>th</sup> and I've been here two nights, right? So allowing time to fly home and cope with jet lag before returning to work, I have about a week off. I really like your secluded hideaway here. Think I could maybe stay for a bit? I don't want to impose but I could pay you back."

He wanted to stay? I thought back to his suggestion of remaining a couple of days while I packed. He didn't want to go yet but why? I thought it a little presumptuous of me to think I was the reason. "Of course not. I mean, sure you can stay, and no you don't have to pay me back. I'll just put you to work." I smiled. "Just, you know, you don't have to if you don't want to. I'm fine. I'll get out of here eventually." I was testing him to see how he would play it.

His grin turned smoothly into a sultry smile. "You don't want me to stay? We haven't had time to play in the sand." His voice was like velvet caressing my skin. He licked his lips to entice me, but again I could see that underneath it all he wanted something badly, and it wasn't me this time. "Let me stay, just for a few days." True he was trying to play me, but I didn't feel he was lying, either, just being cagey. There had been real heat in those eyes, although even if it had been fake, he never actually said he wanted anything but to stay for a few days. He hadn't lied.

Nevertheless it annoyed me a bit. Part of me wanted to jump back on the boat and haul him off the island despite what I had said. The other, and I had to admit bigger, part of me wanted to jump back on that boat and haul him down to the main stateroom and have my wicked way with him. There was actually a third, tiny part of me, that was smarter and more practical, and that piece always won out.

"Why?"

The question unnerved him, I thought. "Why do I want to stay?" He tried to look like the question was ludicrous but failed.

I simply nodded.

His shoulders slumped a little. “Can’t I just want to hang out here with you, have a short vacation away from it all?” He had dropped the act.

I’m really good at not saying anything.

He rubbed his head. “How do you see through me like that?” Now we were getting somewhere. I just waited. “Okay. Deal is, I’d really like to hang low for a while. It’s no big deal. If you want me off the island, that’s fine. It’s just that this... job... didn’t go quite as planned, and I kind of want to figure out how to handle it before I go back. I swear it’s nothing illegal. I’m not a criminal.”

He stepped closer but still gave me space. “I’m not kidding when I say that you’re an interesting person, and that I’d really like to get to know you better. I think it would be fun.” He smiled, a real one this time, I thought, and it was nice. “I promise I’m not dangerous and you can trust me. I really just need a break to regroup. So what do you say?”

If I were honest with myself, the decision was made as soon as he stopped playing me. He’d been there a day and already I was getting used to the company. Maybe I wasn’t as far gone as I thought. Maybe I could be around people sometimes—as long as it was safe. And I really liked that smile. I shrugged my shoulders. “Sure. Why not?”

“Well with that enthusiastic invitation, I’m ready for a week’s vacation. Lead the way.”

A huge weight lifted that I hadn’t even known had been there. As we trekked back over the bluff, I found it hard to believe that just an hour or so ago, I was worried he was about to try to kill me, not that he would have succeeded. I was very, very good.

Now my heart fluttered with excitement as I watched him swagger up the hill. I hoped that I might finally be able to be around someone and still feel safe. Just a couple of days ago, I hadn’t imagined that would ever be possible but here we were. Funny thing, life.

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## **Type 2: Near Shore Buoyant Vest**

*Seafood*

When we got back, I did my morning chores then took him out on the raft to check the shrimp pot.

Before we climbed in, he pointed to the inflatable. "Rowboat. Sticks." I just rolled my eyes. "Is this one seaworthy? I imagine it's younger than the other half of your flotilla given that they didn't have many inflatable boats back then."

"Actually, inflatables have been around since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century but no, they weren't common outside the military until the 1950s. The first Zodiac was made before the war, though. World War II that is." Then I made what I figured was my first smirk.

"Seriously?" He was getting a lot of practice making that skeptical look.

I nodded.

"You are a veritable fount of knowledge today. I can't shut you up."

I froze.

"Not even if I wanted to."

I breathed again.

"I like learning things from you. You get so excited; I don't feel like I'm being taught anything, just finding out things."

What was the difference? And was that a compliment? Hopefully. "I didn't have a lot of educational opportunities when I was younger—I mean to learn interesting things. Other than the regular stuff." Smooth. It was way too easy to relax around him, and that loosened my tongue. I needed to be more careful. "I've spent most of the last nine years studying things that interest me."

Everything was interesting to me. I was as eager to study colonial Canadian history—which I have to say is even less exciting than it sounds, no offense to my Canadian brethren—as I was to read about molecules and the atom. Being kept from a real education when young often resulted in an adult whose thirst for knowledge was insatiable. It didn't make sense to me that we hadn't been taught the same things as other children because if we needed to fit in, we would never have been able to.

"With any luck, what I remember is actually true and not boring to you."

“Never a chance of that.” His grin was infectious, and we climbed in the raft, each grinning like the proverbial canary-eating cat.

A few yards from shore he raised an eyebrow again. “This raft designed to take on these high waves?”

High waves? Where? It actually took me a few seconds to figure out what he was talking about. “What, these here? These are baby waves. Not even, they’re more like tadpole waves that will be become baby waves.” That scared him, to judge from the look in his eyes. “Don’t worry, though, this bay is naturally protected from the ocean by the rocks over there.” I pointed to the western headland. “This dinghy can handle itself just fine. We’re just going to that buoy over there.” The float in question was only about a hundred yards away.

“Itself? This isn’t a female boat?”

“It’s a raft not a boat. That’s like calling the Catskills mountains.”

Eric squinted. “They aren’t mountains? Aren’t they like six thousand feet high or something like that?”

“Only one or two even top four thousand feet. Compare that to Mt. McKinley, which is over twenty thousand feet tall.”

“Point taken.” He laughed.

My family used to say something similar since we lived at the base of the Rockies in Montana. They liked to feel superior about things. It didn’t escape my notice that I had just proven I wasn’t quite as different from them as I had hoped.

As I rowed us the rest of the way, Eric kept scanning the horizon like he was looking for something. His eyes darted back and forth like he was nervous about something.

“Everything okay?”

He looked at me and smiled. “Yeah, fine.”

“You sure? You look a little nervous. I promise I’m not planning to kill you and dump your body.”

“Good thing.” He laughed. “No, I’m sure. Just looking for other boats. You get many cruises coming by here?”

I shook my head. “None, that’s why it’s so strange you ended up here. Only rarely do I see anything at all, and even then it’s an orca pod or a humpback. Why?”

He grinned. "No reason. It just wouldn't feel as remote if they were here. I like the privacy."

"Yeah, me too." His grin was that kind of fake one where he was trying to charm me. He was worried about something, but he clearly didn't want me to know. Briefly, I wondered if I should expect trouble coming to the island, but I realized that was silly. No one had come near in the four years I had been there. It was a remarkable improbability that he had washed up on shore here. The likelihood of two people finding me in the space of a few days was remote. I believed he was telling the truth when he said he didn't know who I was and about how he'd come here so whatever he was worried about had nothing to do with my past, I was pretty much positive. So what was it?

When we got to the buoy, I put it out of my mind as I tied us up and hauled up the shrimp trap.

"That's not a pot, that's a cage. No, it's a net on a frame that looks like a cage. I was picturing a big ceramic pottery thing."

"I use that to catch flowers. This is for catching shrimp. More lowbrow." His laugh made me feel like singing and I do not sing. "This is too trashy even for prawns. You have to use something gilded for them."

There were too many shrimp for us to eat in one day, and without electricity we couldn't use more. Dried shrimp don't really cut it for me. So we threw most of them back and then headed for shore.

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### *Shrimp*

That night Eric begged me to let him cook. Truthfully, he could have demanded payment as I have no interest in—or talent for, apparently—cooking and just the thought of eating something someone else made had me salivating. I helped him shell and clean the shrimp, but the cooking was all his.

As we pulled the creatures from the cold bucket where they'd been soaking and set to preparing them, Eric adopted a Southern accent (or at least what I figured he meant to be one) and started talking about shrimp. "We got tiger shrimp, Alaskan shrimp, ocean shrimp, sea shrimp, bay shrimp..."

"What are you talking about?"

He just went on without answering me. "I can make Mustard Shrimp, Shrimp with Onions, Hurricane Shrimp, Shrimp of the Gods."

I snickered. He turned to look at me, a twinkle in his eye. "We serve sand shrimp, prawn shrimp, cocktail shrimp, salad shrimp, pond shrimp, shrimp casserole, shrimp from the sea, shrimp of the sea, shrimp above the sea—"

"What the heck are you talking about?" I tossed the last shrimp into the bowl and its shell into the bucket for composting.

"Have you seen *Forrest Gump*?"

"That's a movie, right? No. I haven't seen many movies." That felt like admitting I was a deviant or something.

But he just nodded as he moved to wash his hands in the basin. "Well there's a scene in there where this guy goes on and on about what you can do with shrimp. It's hilarious. I'm not one of those guys that can remember all the lines to all the movies and shows. I'm more of... an idea man."

He looked at me and grinned. "So I just remember it sounded something like that. I don't really know what he said, but the list came out like it was all made up. I mean, it wasn't—I recognized most of the things he described—but I always thought the scene would be even funnier if some random things were thrown in there that were just made up."

I nodded like I had any kind of idea what he was talking about. I just cleaned up the mess while he began to pull things from the large cooler I kept buried in the ground under a trap door, as well as from my one cupboard in the corner. My little table doubled as a counter, so I couldn't set it for our meal.

I had done all of the chores when we'd gotten back, so I sat in the chair and started whittling something new. The wood was nice but I wasn't quite sure what I would do with it, and it was much more fun watching him work.

Eric really got into cooking. His hips swayed and his arms moved around like he was dancing, at one point even humming a bit and shuffling his feet in a kind of soft shoe impression, at least that's how I pictured the dance. Pleasant smells wafted over, and I thought about how nice it was, this little moment of domesticity. I mulled over whether it was a momentary sensation or whether maybe I could handle this sort of thing for a longer period of time.

"I love shrimp pizza, shrimp puttanesca, shrimp Pesci, shrimp cobbler, shrimp custard, shrimp pie..." His voice came out of the blue and startled me a bit.

It was impossible to not react, and I burst out in what *he* would have called childish giggles, but I was very sure was manly laughter. It almost hurt, I was so out of practice.

To his credit, Eric didn't whip around as fast as he could have, but he did turn and looked at me with his own smile, a twinkle in his eyes. "You've got to try botanical shrimp, biological shrimp, shrimp fries, shrimp on toast, Lady Shrimp, Knotty shrimp, Knotty Lady Shrimp..." He punctuated each type with a swish of his spoon.

My sides hurt I was laughing so hard. "Stop."

"Shrimp Kiev, Shrimp Wrangell, Shrimp Nome, Shrimp Elf, Shrimp Fairy—I really like that one, although usually I like them a bit manlier." He winked then turned back to the stove to stir something.

I registered his flirtation even as laughter enveloped me. Did he think I was manly or fairy-like? Which did he prefer? He opened his mouth to start up again, but my sides couldn't take it. "Stop, stop, please!" My eyes were watering and it was hard to breathe.

"Sure thing, Crusoe. Ready to eat? Because eatin' is ready."

The food was amazing. What he put together from nothing could have been served in the fanciest restaurant as far as I was concerned, and I told him so. He actually blushed.

"Well, the fanciest one on this island at least." Then he stopped and held my gaze for a few seconds longer than was necessary. For the third time that day, I couldn't breathe but for yet another reason. He finally broke contact and started

on about what Knotty Lady Shrimp would actually be made of and taste like as we cleared the table and cleaned up. He thought it would be whiskey and hemp flavored, but I figured Red Cedar and sea salt. We pretended that this wasn't just a sojourn in our lives, and that one day we would have a chance to experiment and come up with the preeminent Knotty Lady Shrimp recipe.

After I had the place tied down for the night, and the lights were out, I slipped into my sleeping bag on the floor, completely drained. Emotional exhaustion manifested physically sometimes. Eric had tried to talk me into taking the bed again but gave up and agreed to not bring it up again lest I make him get to Yáxwch' via raft rather than rum-runner. He promised quite readily actually.

Despite my fatigue, I found it hard to fall asleep. My memory of the night before, Eric panting and stroking himself morphed into visions of him gasping and writhing in my arms. It was impossible to get that out of my head.

“You have your mild chickpea shrimp, your spicy curried shrimp...”

Well that worked.

“—your vanilla shrimp, your BDSM shrimp—”

And that made me nauseated as I was inundated with memories of being tied up against my will. Fortunately he only had a couple more, and then he fell silent for a full two minutes, possibly a record for him, well except for our silent walk that morning.

Then just as I was sure he was asleep, he turned to look at me. “I'd never heard you laugh before tonight.”

Well he hadn't known me that long, but the reality was I probably hadn't laughed in nine years. Actually, maybe ever.

“I like it. Do it more.” With that, he rolled over and soon his breathing evened out as he fell asleep.

If he kept saying things like that, I would end up wanting more than I could really expect. It took quite a while for me to fall asleep to dreams of a naked Eric rolling around in vanilla pudding—which was erotic—then of him wearing leather and chains and riding giant prawns the size of horses—which wasn't. It was possible I would never have another normal night again.

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### **Type 3: Flotation Aid**

*Time*

The week flew by. I had never had so much fun in my entire life. The day after what I would forever call “Shrimp Night,” he was already helping with the daily chores, which gave me a lot more free time to spend with him. We explored the island together, parts I had never even touched. He almost broke a leg avoiding a fissure in the shadow of a rock, which opened into a little subterranean cave I hadn’t known existed. We didn’t have the equipment to explore it safely, so we vowed to do it another time. I didn’t let myself think about how unlikely it was that would ever happen.

We learned a lot about one another. Eric was an insurance investigator who specialized in stolen and forged art. Working for himself, he was able to choose which jobs to take, and he had a tiny little company, with the surprisingly boring name Eric Atherton and Associates. It sounded like he made out pretty well.

He was every bit as cosmopolitan as I had thought, traveling around the globe for his investigations as well as for recreation. He was single (a relief) and lived alone in a small condo on the East Coast in a town I had never heard of. He said he traveled so often he was rarely home.

Everything about him was fascinating, and he appeared genuinely taken with me and my world. He wanted to know all about my daily life. For a short while, the paranoia that had been cultivated in me from birth made me question why he wanted so much information. Eventually I believed that he just wanted to get to know me. I didn’t share too much, though. It was just too ugly a past to tell someone I wanted to like me.

He tried to convince me to let him sell my art. He was obviously right that he knew a lot about it, and I had come to believe him that my carvings were pretty good. But he really didn’t need to flatter me that they were more than just nice knickknacks. I didn’t get my self-esteem from a hobby I had started in order to make something nice out of the ugliness of my past.

Of course Eric talked a lot—all the time in fact—but he was calmer now that he was being himself. He pulled me into long conversations, and I found myself talking at length. It was freeing, and I loved it. But I preferred to listen to him and let his melodic voice wash over me. Once or twice, I even fell asleep to his words, they were so soothing. In all my adulthood, I had never fallen asleep in the presence of someone awake, never. But now I did.

I felt like I had met the best friend I had never been allowed to have, and I was pretty sure he enjoyed himself too, if the sheer number of times he laughed was any indication. For the first time in nearly a decade, I went for a whole week without nightmares.

The shrimp dinner wasn't an anomaly. Eric was an amazing cook. He could throw together the most delicious meals from the simple ingredients I provided. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to taste food he made after a trip to a grocery store. But the best part about his cooking was him. He got so into it, I just sat rapt, and when he started the dancing and humming, sometimes I had to excuse myself to go outside and get myself under control.

The morning after Shrimp Night, I remembered how I had lost quite a bit of weight when I first arrived as living off the land had slimmed me down. I had never been overweight or bulky, but now I was lean and compact, which meant that I had a stack of clothes from the early days that were now way too big for me. They were just tight enough on him to emphasize all his assets without being perverted. The legs and sleeves were a little short, but he rolled them up, and he looked like any beach bum enjoying a day in the drizzle. It was a very sexy look, even when he got cold and rolled them back down again.

I wondered and dared to hope that he felt as attracted to me as I was to him. Despite all the hints and sexual innuendo, I didn't know what he wanted. I couldn't really be sure that he had pleased himself to the thought of me that second night. He might have just looked at my body and pictured someone else.

That didn't stop my lust from building until it clogged my throat. Every time he moved, and I saw those strong muscles and tight body, I got urges unlike anything I had ever had before, like wanting to lick him from head to toe.

The only clue I had that he might have felt as I did came one afternoon midweek. We were running low on firewood because even in the summer heat, Eric still was cold at night, so we left the stove fire going long after we finished cooking. We needed more fuel, and I was behind the cabin chopping logs. The work was hard but it needed doing and it was a good way to keep my upper body in shape.

Eric emerged from the outhouse and flopped down on a stump, leaning back to bask in the only bit of sun we'd had all week. "Oh my fucking God: sun, Crusoe. You have like three seconds a year, right?"

"There are cloud breaks many days each year. One percent of the time the sky is clear."

“Ha ha.”

I looked over at him. “I’m not joking.” I actually didn’t remember the exact statistics and could have been exaggerating, but I didn’t think so as it certainly seemed that way. “I don’t have data for this island but you should look up Ketchikan when you leave.” Leaving wasn’t something I wanted to talk about so I hurried on. “I don’t know much about the rest of the state, but this is standard for Southeast Alaska.”

“Seriously? It’s a wonder you haven’t hurled yourself off a cliff by now. This weather is so depressing.”

It was true that a lot of people had trouble with how overcast the area always was, and with all the precipitation year round, but I didn’t mind it. In fact, I barely noticed the rain now, and I had lived with snow my whole life. “Alaska actually has one of the highest suicide rates in the country. You should probably petition the governor to make more sunny days to take care of that.”

“Oh, so you collect dismal factoids, too.”

My shirt was getting sweaty, so I took it off. “I aim to please.”

“You’re hot? Well I suppose you’re working. But this morning? I can’t believe you were too warm and had to go back to change into a T-shirt.”

“This is a fine summer day. You’re just a wimp.”

“It was like forty degrees when you got up. In Florida, people would be wearing parkas.”

The logs were all cut into segments by then, and I picked up the nearest and stood it on end. “That’s a bit of an exaggeration—it had to have been a least fifty by the time we got up—and besides, this isn’t Florida.”

He made a *hmph* kind of noise. “Well, I hate Florida weather, too. What’s the average summer temperature there?” He sure was grumpy, and he kept staring at me.

Sweat was flinging off my forehead so I stopped for a moment and wiped my brow with the back of my hand. “I honestly have no idea.”

“Wow, something Rain Man doesn’t know.” He grimaced. “Sorry, that’s a rude thing to say. Sorry.”

That was yet another reference I had no framework for, so I ignored it and turned my back to him. I didn’t want wood chips and sawdust flying his way.

They smelled fresh and wonderful but getting hit by some, or having something get in your eye, was less than pleasant.

“Well I, for one, prefer mild weather. San Francisco is nice this time of year.”

“If you say so.” I got into a rhythm with my chopping, and I had split two of the wood sections into firewood before I realized Eric hadn't said anything in a while. That was, of course, quite unusual. I turned back toward him, and I nearly dropped the axe. He was staring at me with his lips pressed together, with a weird look on his face, kind of stunned maybe. I wasn't sure; it almost looked like he wanted something very badly. His jaw was clenching and unclenching and his breathing was a little irregular.

“Eric? Are you okay?”

He looked up at me which was when I realized he hadn't been looking at my face. His legs were crossed and his hands were in his lap. He just stared at me for a moment then he swallowed and cleared his throat. “Uh yeah, I'm fine.” He stood up, hands clasped in front of him, and he turned quickly like he was hiding something.

“Are you sure you're okay?” He was acting weird.

“Yeah, I'm fine, Crusoe. I just need to go to the bathroom.” He turned and jogged toward the latrine. *No, outhouse*. Normal people called them outhouses.

I was kind of starting to like the whole Crusoe thing. “You just went a few minutes ago.”

“It's all that water I've been drinking, got to keep hydrated, but it has to come out the other end.” He was calling over his shoulder even as he opened the little door to the shack and the stench wafted out. “I'm going to get some more water in a minute. I'll bring you some.” With that, he slammed the door shut behind him.

Call me stupid or just naive, but I stood there stunned for at least a minute before I finally figured out that he'd most likely been hiding an erection. For me? I went over the scene in my mind. I had just been chopping wood, my back was to him—and my shirt was off. All he could have seen was my back and my muscles flexing, as exciting as that could possibly be. Oh. A fluttery feeling started in my chest before moving south. Oh... And then what had to be a “shit-eating grin,” as Eric would have called it, filled my face, and there it stayed for the rest of the day.

*Trust*

Life was beautiful and easy, but I was living in Wonderland and knew my days were limited. As the week neared its end, I found myself tense and edgy. Our last day, I woke up moody and stayed that way throughout the morning. I dressed and bustled around trying to keep myself busy so I wouldn't think about what would happen in the morning. But my emotions ran from elated to depressed and back again from moment to moment. It was hardly a surprise that Eric noticed and called me on it.

"What's got into you, Crusoe?" Eric had relaxed in bed most of the morning and was still only wearing a pair of sleep pants that gave me quite a nice view, especially the parts just below his waist. I sat down on the edge of the mattress.

Rubbing my eyes, I avoided his gaze. "Sorry, I'm just tired."

"Something you're not telling me?"

I shook my head and stared out the window like the waves were the most fascinating thing on the planet. My breath fogged the glass but I didn't bother wiping it away.

"Worried about tomorrow?"

Yes. "No."

"Crusoe, you've got to trust me by now. I promise with everything that I am, I'm not going to give your secrets away." His hand touched my cheek then took hold of my chin and turned my head to face him. "I would never do that to you, never." For a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. I was terrified and yet wanted it so badly it hurt. But then it passed.

My smile hardly achieved the standards of even his falsest, but I put on the most dazzling one I could manage. "I'm fine, really. I trust you, I do." That, at least, was true. "Everything's fine."

Apparently I was a terrible liar around him. He narrowed his eyes. "Then what? Tell me."

The room was hot and stuffy like there wasn't room for both of us and my emotions at the same time. How did I tell him what was really going on? How would he react to hearing that he had twisted my world so much that I felt like I was in an Escher painting? I wasn't sure what I wanted anymore.

As usual, he figured it out before I could decide how to talk about it.

“You want to leave with me tomorrow and not come back, don’t you? But you’re scared.” He leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms. He had really nice arms, and I looked at them instead of meeting his eyes. “It’s okay to be scared.”

That was only half of it—the other half involved him and my feelings around... well, my feelings—but it was the only part I could even think about let alone speak on. “I’m not some child afraid of the dark.”

He chuckled. “No, you are definitely not a child, and I’m not sure I’ve ever met anyone less afraid of the dark than you are.” I looked up at him in time to see his eyes roaming my face. I wondered how he knew that. Maybe it was a metaphor. “It’s more than just leaving your solitude, isn’t it? There’s something out there that terrifies you.”

I just sat there frozen, as if moving would make all of my secrets fly out of me and blanket the room, tainting everything they touched. I needed to let go of the past but I had no idea how.

“Is it social anxiety? That’s what I thought at first, but as soon as you got to know me you became positively gregarious.” He grinned which was a relief. Things were getting way too serious. “You aren’t incapacitated by it at least.”

At that I had to laugh. I wasn’t afraid of people. I knew how to take care of myself—I had spent my whole life learning how. I might not know how to relate to people, but being around them didn’t scare me. Although I supposed that wasn’t the same kind of fear he was talking about.

He raised one elegant eyebrow. “I take it that you don’t have a problem with that then.”

“Not so much, no.” I chuckled. “I’m not good with it, I was... homeschooled... so I was never socialized properly, but I’m not afraid of people. I do get claustrophobic if there are too many, though.” Rain was falling in sheets but it didn’t stop me from suggesting that it was time for my daily run as I stood and headed for the door.

He stood and it sounded like he took a step to follow me. “Yeah, right. If you don’t want to talk then don’t. But don’t try to con a con man—” His eyes grew wide. “That’s not what I meant.”

It was something I had already suspected. I turned to face him. “I don’t care if you’re a con man. I usually know when you’re trying to charm me.”

Actually, I wasn't sure at all, I just hoped. Now I had another thing to worry about. Apparently it showed. Apparently everything about me showed.

"Is that what they're calling it these days?" Sighing, he sat back down on the bed. "I'm not a con man, I swear, and I never have been. I'm mostly a good guy. Manipulating people often makes my job easier. Sometimes I feel like a con man myself." He rubbed his face. "Actually, it's bled into my everyday life. It comes too easily for me." He looked at me earnestly. "But I promise I don't want to be that way with you and something about you makes me want to be honest all the time."

Somehow his sincerity, his lack of airs, his whole demeanor shouted "I'm telling the truth. You really can trust me." I wanted to, and I was tired of being afraid so I let myself. "I believe you. I'm telling you the truth, too, just not all of it. There are just parts of my world, of my history, that I haven't shared with many people. Some of it no one has ever heard. It's too ugly and too dangerous."

Eric looked sad. "That really upsets me to hear. I hope someday you'll tell me everything. But right now, I just would like to know what's going through your head about leaving the island. Please?"

Slowly, very slowly, I nodded. My skin felt tight, my head hurt, and my stomach ached, but he deserved that much. He'd trusted me when he decided to stay the week.

"Can you tell me what you are so afraid of?" He leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

My legs were weak so I leaned against the windowsill before speaking. What was safe to tell him? "They might kill me if they find me." *If I'm lucky*. It was weird admitting even that part out loud.

As was becoming usual, he surprised me. The look on his face wasn't pitying, nor was it skeptical or judgmental; he just looked concerned and maybe a little angry, but not at me, I didn't think. "Who? Who do you think might kill you?"

I had trouble meeting his eyes, so I looked at the surf through the window. "My father and the—his friends." It was odd calling *him* that.

"The what? You were going to say something else, some important piece of the puzzle."

His perceptiveness was sometimes annoying. "Puzzle?"

“Of who, exactly, is Boaz, my Crusoe.”

Oh. His Crusoe. That was... that was nice. Swallow. “The, uh, the officers.” It was even harder to look at him now. At this point, even I wasn't sure whether I was trying to tell the truth or be evasive.

Eric frowned. “Military? Are you AWOL?” He didn't appear to be judging me, just asking.

“Not exactly. Not any recognized military.”

“What do you mean? Like some rebellion or insurgence somewhere?” He sounded confused.

I laughed at the thought. “They think they are but it's not likely the US feels threatened by them in any way.”

“The US—”

I glanced up and practically saw his synapses firing.

Then he got it and there it was, the expression I had been waiting for: his eyes widened and he looked incredulous. “A militia? Like those loony backwoods guys who want to overthrow the US government? You're kidding me.” And now he was disgusted.

I didn't have the time to get angry or afraid. My heart just started hammering and my hands got clammy and once again I couldn't breathe. It was starting to become a nasty habit. My mind tried to go to survival mode, but my body was taking a long time to get there. As soon as I could breathe again, I lurched for the door. “I need to check the traps.” I was halfway down the beach before Eric could have had time to react let alone follow me. I finally heard him shouting my name in the distance—my real name, Boaz, not “Crusoe,” a more telling sign than any facial expression.

I was an idiot. Why had I trusted him?

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*Tide*

For the next few hours, I wandered around the island, literally. It wasn't particularly big, so I walked around it slowly counterclockwise and arrived back at the cabin early afternoon. By this point, I was more embarrassed than anything. What had I expected? That Eric would understand immediately? That it wouldn't take some explaining? I could hardly blame him if he assumed I was like my insane parents and the other people in the cult they called an army. He had seen some of the weapons around the cabin and knew there were more. I isolated myself. I was obviously paranoid, and he had no way of knowing I had good reason to be.

When said out loud, it sounded like the plot for a cheesy B-movie, not that I had seen any. People in militias were seen as the enemy, all or nothing, like living in such a place made someone evil whether that person had a choice or not. I certainly didn't, not when I was a kid and not when I was older, when I had already seen a young woman who had run away brought back and saw what they did to her for being a traitor. She was an example set for the rest of us. They caught her in a day and they made us stand and watch while they—

No. I wasn't going to think about that. I completely overreacted to Eric's expression and had spent all morning figuring out how to apologize. My self-image of a heroic, high road taking, wrongdoer deflated when I walked in the door, though, because he wasn't there. Maintaining that level of self-serving martyrdom was exhausting, so I made myself a couple of sandwiches out of hard salami I kept in my high tech subterranean cooler, and fell onto the bed to eat. I fell asleep before I had finished.

When I awoke, the sun was much lower in the sky. Well, the shadows were darker even if I couldn't see the sun. Eric wasn't back yet and I started to worry. All sorts of things ran through my head as I checked first the outhouse then the ledge where I stored the raft, which was still there.

My emotions were high as they ran the gamut between fear for his safety and panic that he'd taken off in my boat. Not only did I love my Knotty Lady, but if she were gone, it meant I was trapped on this island. More importantly, he knew nothing about boating and both he and my rum-runner would be in danger.

Rational thinking overruled my panic, and I headed west down the beach toward where I had found him only a matter of days before. It seemed like

weeks in some ways, minutes in others. Breathing in and out slowly helped until I finally saw him far ahead crouched at the water's edge near the far bluff. Then my relief caused my temper to flare, although he had done nothing wrong, and I marched toward him.

As I got closer, I realized he was kneeling in the surf, water swirling in eddies around him. He was holding something in his hands as he bent over. My anger was gone, replaced by confusion until I was close enough to see that he was gesticulating wildly. I dashed the last few yards to his side.

"Eric? Eric, what happened? Are you okay?" I began to examine him for bodily trauma, holding on as best I could when he was so agitated. He was freezing. Not as icy as that first day, but still too cold. He must have been wet for a while. "Eric, talk to me. What's wrong?" There wasn't any blood on him, nor visible injuries.

He looked me in the eye, his eyes shiny. "It's gone. It's gone, Crusoe, and it's my fault. I did this. The Agony of the Martyr is ruined."

Gibberish is not my first nor is it my second language so I opted for a more physical approach. "Eric, come on, let's get you out of the water."

"No! I have to save it." He grabbed for what looked like large swaths of ripped paper floating around him. That was when I noticed he was already holding a piece delicately in his hands. He would put it down on the pebbles beside him to grab another, and put that one aside to reach for a third, and by then waves had pulled the first one away. He yelled at them in what sounded like frustration. I hadn't seen him like this, and it scared me a little because I didn't understand it. Not a lot scared me.

"Shh, it's okay, I'll get them." I went for the furthest two pieces first, wading out to grab them and tucking them against my chest before making my way back.

"No!" He was practically yelling. "You can't layer them, they'll stick together."

I glanced at what I was holding. It was painted cloth which looked to be okay, although the surface felt a bit sticky. What I knew about paint, though, was less than Eric knew about boats, so I raised my arms above my head so the pieces dangled above the water and raced up the beach. There were some smooth and dry old logs above the high tide line, left over from some horrible storm, and I spread the pieces out colored side up. I noticed there were whitish

spots on some of them, and the sides were shredded but most of the paint was intact.

They didn't look too bad, except for the fact there were two of them and more still in the water and I was pretty sure there was only supposed to be one. Maybe they could be glued or taped back together. I sped back down to the water and nabbed the last one trailing past. I tried to take another from him, but he refused to let go. When I tried to lever him up, he wrenched his arm away, lurched to his feet, and stomped up the slope, well, as much as anyone can stomp on sand.

After spreading his out with the others, he fell against another log nearby, with a look in his eyes I couldn't interpret; outraged and frustrated, sad, somewhat bitter, and maybe a little self-pitying? No, that wasn't right. Anger at himself; that was it. It wasn't clear to me what he was that upset about. The pieces were clearly a painting that had been torn apart, but he acted like he'd lost a loved one. There had to be more to it. Maybe he painted it himself.

I placed the fifth piece with the others then crouched beside Eric. "Talk to me, please." My mouth snapped closed as I found myself almost adding an endearment. That would have been awkward.

He took deep breaths. "One of the pieces had washed up on the shore so I looked for more. I rushed up and down the beach, into the water, over that promontory thing there—one was caught on the rocks and had possibly gotten even more damaged—but I could only find these. It was so big and these are so small and it's ruined." The pieces looked huge to me, but the thought left me as a tear slipped from the corner of Eric's eye.

I had never seen a grown man cry before. I had rarely seen anyone over the age of two cry. But this... this was heart-wrenching. He looked broken and furious and raw, so emotionally naked, it cracked something inside of me. This big, larger-than-life man was coming unglued, although the thought was like acid on my tongue. I knew he would rather swim to Anchorage naked than show this kind of weakness, and I wanted to tell him that it was okay, that he was safe to be vulnerable with me.

All I could do was put my arm around him. He didn't resist so I put the other one around him, too. He leaned into me, which set my heart pounding, and I took a chance and pulled him close. He came willingly, and he curled between my legs, his head against my chest.

Surprisingly, he let me hold him while he tried desperately not to let any more tears fall. It really didn't take him that long to calm down, but it seemed

like forever and yet not nearly long enough. Although it was hard to see him in such pain, holding him was incredible. I was rather amazed he let me. He felt so good in my arms, and he smelled deliciously of salt and seawater and him.

I was so lost in the sensation, that I really didn't notice he'd been quiet awhile until he leaned back a little and looked at me. "Sorry and thank you. I get a little emotional about art." He laughed. "That's an understatement. I'm not usually like that. In fact, I can't remember the last time I really cried. It's the emotion of the whole situation, I think. Not just the painting but how it got here, my role in it, my near death... you." He looked up at me.

I sucked in a breath as he looked at me, his irises tracking back and forth as he looked at each of my eyes. Then he glanced down at my lips and back to my eyes, looking for something. An okay? Was he asking what I thought he was? I let myself lean forward just a hairsbreadth to see what he would do. Did I really just make the first move?

He looked at my lips again and back up at my eyes, then it was his turn to move forward a little. I found myself following his lead without even thinking about it, looking down at his lips and then back at his eyes and moving forward a little until there wasn't any more room between us. Neither of us moved for a few seconds as if not actually finishing would have meant nothing had happened.

Then he gently touched his lips to mine, and just that little bit had a spark running through me. He held the kiss a moment before backing up a little and looking at me, perhaps to see how I felt about it. What I felt was that I had just had the most erotic moment of my life.

We sat there a moment, both breathing a little faster because it was my turn, and I was still a little nervous. But I forced myself to move because I really wanted to kiss him again, and this time it was easier to close the space between us. I held the kiss just a little longer before pulling back only to feel his hand touch the back of my neck and pull me to him again. *Yes*. We were kissing. It felt so different than anything I had ever experienced before, so much better than that one time so long ago with someone else who didn't mean anything in that way.

Eric's lips were soft but firm, so perfect. He opened his mouth a little and rubbed his bottom lip across mine. I think I may have trembled, which was a little embarrassing and horribly unmanly, and he pulled back to look at me again, probably to make sure I was okay. I was better than okay. This time I

grabbed his shirt and yanked him forward, and then his arms were around me and our lips parted and our mouths were joined and his tongue tangled with mine and we were pressed together like we were sharing our very breaths, and then I forgot to think for a while.

When we finally separated, he pressed his forehead to mine and breathed deeply. "I've wanted to do that for so long, Crusoe... You have no idea."

I kind of did, but I just smiled and concentrated on getting my breath back. "I think maybe I've wanted to longer." Since I first saw his beautiful face. How could I have thought avoiding *them* was worth never having this? This intimacy, this sharing of more than just words and touch, of something just a little bit deeper and closer, was more wonderful than I had ever imagined.

Eric didn't give me time to think longer and pulled me close again and we kissed some more. When we finally separated, we were both breathing heavily. He looked concerned as he stared into my eyes. "You ran off—"

"I'm so sorry about that, I was being too sensitive." Right now I was so embarrassed, I never wanted to discuss it again. But I owed him an explanation for my behavior. "I haven't told a lot of people, and it's something I struggle with a little." To say the least. "I completely overreacted."

"No, I understand how hard that must have been to tell me. But I wasn't judging you, I swear." His fingers touched my cheek. "I was just horrified that you had a parent in a militia; you hear such horror stories. I immediately pictured you as a kid growing up around guns and violence, feeling like you were in the military."

His eyes were shadowed. "I hate the thought that you may have had to grow up in a place like that." It sounded like my story really had affected him. Damn, I didn't want that. He didn't need to take that on. This was way too intense.

I ran my fingers through his hair and laughed. "It wasn't all bad." Yes it was. "The grownups were just really fucked up." Understatement of the century. At that point, I realized that by saying so, I had inadvertently let him know that his assumption that I had been raised in that environment was right.

Eric cocked his head. "Can I ask you something about it? Not personal, just a general question?"

No. "Sure."

"I took a psychology course in college that talked about splinter groups, isolationist compounds, and militias, things like that. The professor said that

most separatists are just disillusioned. They love their families like anyone else. They have potlucks and get married and do mundane things. Was it like that for you?"

"Not really." Okay, *that* was the understatement of the century.

"Oh. Because I was going to say that I know they're not evil people, not for the most part. They're mostly just ignorant and scared and feel like everyone looks down on them, so they pretend they're better than people who aren't like them so they can feel better about themselves."

I really didn't want to talk about this because I was getting the impression he wouldn't like what I had to say, so I just shrugged.

He continued. "That's not to say that what they do isn't ever wrong. Sometimes it is, especially when a few take that hatred and fear and do horrible, racist, murderous things." I felt him shudder in disgust, and I squeezed his arm to reassure him that I thought those people were horrible too. More than that. I wasn't nearly as understanding as he was, and I wanted to make sure he knew I wasn't like them at all, at least not anymore.

No. I never had been. I always knew that the things I was being taught were contradictory, like if it was wrong to murder one person, how could it be okay to kill people just because you didn't like them? Maybe some of the people leading our group were just misled, but I felt that as a whole, the ones in control were a malevolent bunch and deserved whatever happened to *them*.

He shifted and sat back so he could face me. I already missed feeling his body against mine. "I just want you to know that I don't think that people in those groups are innately bad people. I don't want you to think I hate your family and the people you knew before. I know it's a cult mentality and when those people isolate themselves, it just reaffirms their beliefs and the hatred builds."

He looked really worried. "I don't judge you. I know you're not like that. You aren't building a wall of hate here. You're hiding from something and I don't know what it is, exactly, just that you're in grave danger." I appreciated how he said that I was in danger, not that I *believed* I was in danger. "Please don't think I have any preconceived ideas about you from knowing about your past."

Eric really didn't know anything about my past, just that I had been raised by extremists, but it meant something to me that he wanted me to understand that his knowing about it didn't change what he thought of me. I felt that

deserved giving a little something back, a tiny tidbit of the information I could tell he craved.

“The group I grew up in was obsessed with the end of the world. They were convinced it would happen any day.” That was all I could tell him, at that point, though. This was territory I was not ready to explore with anybody, not even Eric. It was good we could trust each other but enough was enough.

It was any easy segue to lighten the mood, though. “Kind of like the Zombiepocalypse, only with fewer walking dead people and more not moving ones.” I had read about that particular version of Armageddon in a magazine.

He laughed. “That’s why you’re so prepared.”

“That’s how I know how to be prepared.” The difference was important but I wasn’t going there again. “You have to take zombies seriously.”

Eric grinned.

“I am really sorry about your painting.” I didn’t want to get all maudlin again, but I really wanted to change the subject and we were going to have to address it if only to pick up the pieces to take back to the cabin for them to dry.

He leaned back into me, with his shoulder to my chest, and I put my arms around him once more. Holding him was the highlight of my year, well except maybe for the kissing thing. That was pretty fantastic, too.

“It’s not my painting. It belongs to the world. But now it’s ruined and can’t be replaced.” He didn’t get upset this time. He was back to his *c’est la vie* self. “It’s—It was—a masterpiece, a Goya, one of the lost paintings of the Nazi era. I was chasing it down when I fell—no jumped off the boat. This painting is—was... Shit, that’s a hard adjustment to make.” He laughed, a little self-deprecation in it.

“A couple of years ago, a cache of artwork was found—never mind. It’s a long story and doesn’t matter. The point is, the painting was genuine. Three different experts verified its identity, but on the way to the vault where it would have been kept until its provenance was figured out, it just disappeared. I was hired to find it and have been searching ever since. I had finally found where it was just as it was moved again. I knew it was on a boat bound for Anchorage and then probably to Russia, where it would be gone forever. That would have really sucked.”

I worried he might be getting a little misty again, and I didn’t like him hurting, so I rubbed my thumb up and down his arm.

“Jesus, I’m being so ridiculous.” I got the impression he was embarrassed by his deep emotion, so I just pretended I hadn’t noticed, and he didn’t say anything else about it. “The thieves were supposed to transfer the painting during a private cruise from Bellingham to Juneau. I hired on as a waiter. The ship wasn’t making any other stops, so we were taking an odd route along the west side of the passage to avoid the popular tourist lanes.” That explained how he made it to my beach. He had been much closer than I had thought.

“From there, the painting would have changed hands with someone else, who would then have sold it to who knows where. I don’t know why they did the transfer that way, and it was something I was hoping to find out. I still plan to figure it out.” There was a look in his eye that made me think that he looked forward to the hunt, that he found it exciting.

“They were keeping the painting in a tripod case.” He turned to look at me. “They folded it before rolling it up. *Folded* it. Heathens.” Disgust filled his words, but at least it wasn’t directed inward. He looked back at the scraps drying on the logs, although that would never happen in the rainy cold we called summer around here. I wasn’t quite sure what he was seeing in the wet canvas, but I didn’t ask. “If only it hadn’t been ripped into pieces, the painting still would have been fine.”

“The seawater didn’t ruin it?”

Eric shook his head. “Probably not. It wasn’t in the water that long. The sealant will have protected the paint well enough that any damage should be able to be repaired. I hope. That at least looks okay, although why that matters now is beyond me.”

He blinked and returned to his story. “Anyway, the case was pretty obviously what they were using to store the painting since none of them had photographic equipment, but I took a quick look to make sure it was really there—just a look—before I called in the Coast Guard. The thieves caught me and they had guns. Big guns. Like guns the size of my feet.”

That was pretty big, but it was a good thing. The cliché about big feet and penis size worked for me. I hadn’t seen him erect yet, but I really hoped to, and now that we’d kissed, I figured my chances were a little better. My thoughts distracted me and I almost missed what he said next.

“I tried to get away and hide but they were right behind me. I had to jump. Not even a masterpiece is worth my life. Thank my fairy godmother I was able to grab a life jacket. I knew they would take care of the painting; it was worth a lot of money to them. It would be fine.

“As bad luck would have it, though, my foot caught on the strap as I jumped over the railing, and the case almost went over with me. But, I was wrong about it being ‘almost.’ I only thought they grabbed it. They were reaching for it, and that water was so fucking cold I couldn’t even think straight let alone see. It was all I could do to get the life jacket on. The case was dark and that water was darker and by the time I spotted it, I couldn’t move anymore.”

Now he looked pensive like he was trying to figure out a puzzle. His expressions fascinated me. “The case must not have been all the way closed or maybe the zipper was broken. They weren’t very careful if they folded a painting. The canvas must have worked itself free somehow. I have no idea how it got into pieces like this, though.”

“Maybe a boat propeller, or it might have gotten caught on a long line.” At his look, I explained. “A long line is used in a type of commercial fishing. Basically it’s just an incredibly long line of fishhooks that is dragged behind a boat or left floating on buoys for a while. It can be messy.”

He shuddered.

“Maybe a shark got it, although that would probably result in more damage.”

Eric blanched. “Sharks? In Alaska?”

I nodded. “Lot of them, especially now. Salmon sharks come around during salmon season when the fish are heading for the runs. Summer is the season for most fish species around here.”

“Do they eat humans?” He was probably thinking of his own journey through open waters.

“I’ve never heard of a salmon shark attacking a human being. They bump into boats sometimes, and get caught in trawler nets, but mostly they leave people alone.” He relaxed at that but I couldn’t help myself. “The great whites, though, they can be a problem.”

The look on Eric’s face was priceless. “You’re making that up. You have to be making that up. Tell me you’re making that up.”

I grinned. “Sorry.”

“But they’re in places like Hawaii and the Bahamas.”

“You can’t beat a prehistoric body for its staying power no matter the environment. Sharks aren’t that common, though. There really are only a dozen species or so in Alaskan waters.”

Eric looked like he was frozen in place, and I felt a little guilty. I let him off my hook. "As far as I know, there has never been a shark attack on a human being in the state of Alaska. The one or two encounters between great whites and boats have been reported as combative rather than predatory, and I think there have been like five in the past fifty years in the entire state."

He released his breath. "You fucker."

I smiled and pulled him closer and angled my mouth over his. A few minutes later, he was jelly in my arms, sharks forgotten.

We sat up and he looked at the painting again. "Whatever happened, the painting has pretty much been destroyed as a whole."

It took me running over the events in my mind for his words to finally sink in, and this time it was my turn to freeze. "Wait. Your life was in danger?"

He chuckled. "Art thieves do not tend to appreciate my skills."

"They were going to kill you?" That both shocked and horrified me.

"Well, yeah. I didn't jump off the boat because I thought it would be a nice swim." He shivered, maybe thinking about his hypothermic brush with death, or possibly sharks. I wrapped my body around him and he continued. "That painting was worth a lot of money. Its estimated worth was upward of three million dollars, but really it was invaluable."

"Do you think the thieves are looking for the painting?"

"No, it's been almost a week. They were just the go-betweens. I doubt it was worth their time and expense. They're probably long gone." He grinned at me, but it was that charming one, the one he used when he was trying to convince me of something. It wasn't fake, just charming. Maybe he was just trying to reassure me.

"You'd tell me if you thought you were in danger, right?"

He laughed. "I'm not in any danger. I was only a threat in the moment. It's the painting they wanted, and now it's just a few scraps of material. Its destruction is just so awful. I feel sick."

I wasn't sure what to say. I was still a little unnerved by the thought that someone out there had wanted to kill Eric. "It's insured, right? They can't hold you responsible—"

He stared at me, appalled. "It's not about the money or my job or anything like that. That doesn't matter. This painting was magnificent, a part of history, a

link to our past and to the mind of a genius.” He sighed and looked grim, but then he brightened. “Perhaps there’s still value, though.”

Eric’s eyes focused on the pieces of canvas again as he thought for a moment. “Not even half of it is here but the pieces are big enough that maybe smaller portions of the canvas could be framed. Maybe it’s not a total loss.” His eyes narrowed. “That might work. I’ll have to suggest it.” He was nodding.

Eric had just impressed me even more. I saw a wonderful man who grieved over something truly precious because of what it was, not what it was worth, or who it belonged to, or how it could profit him, someone who risked his life for it. But instead of whining and beating his chest, he moved on and figured out what to do next and how to make the best of it. Here was a good man who I really wanted to prove worthy of.

In that moment, my barriers came down, and I realized I trusted him more than I had ever imagined I could trust anyone. In one week, Eric Atherton had managed to crack a wall inside me that had been erected over thirty-four long years of torment and fear. He was remarkable. He was someone who maybe one day I could—maybe I could get to... like... him... a lot. I tilted his head and leaned in to press our lips together so I could show him how much I liked him already.

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*Touch*

We stayed up late talking and doing quite a lot of kissing. I shared a little more of my background—that my childhood and early adulthood were focused on training and survival skills. I left most of it out, like what the training entailed, the dangers and the risks, and certainly not any of the real horrors that had happened. I didn't even mention WITSEC, let alone why I was in the program.

He still didn't know how I knew someone would kill me the first chance they got. I wasn't ready to talk about that yet. That discussion was for later, if there were a later, although I knew that was unlikely. The stories would fill days of telling and nights of bad dreams. I didn't want our last hours together to be about that, but I got the impression he knew how much I was holding back.

We didn't have sex. I wasn't ready, and he was trying to prove he cared about me and wasn't a playboy who had just been trying to get in my pants. We actually had a rather odd conversation about it that was somewhat uncomfortable for me and left me more confused than ever.

I was lying on my side and he was facing me, one shin between both of mine. We were clothed, but he was holding me close enough that he felt like a furnace. A really strong, handsome, sexy furnace.

"I love lying here with you." The desire in his eyes was real, and I knew that he hadn't tried to play me since he had decided to stay the week. As if he had heard my thoughts, he brought up the time before he decided to stay. "I want you to know that although I wasn't always completely honest with you in the beginning, I never lied about how I felt." He brushed his lips against mine before continuing. "From the moment I opened my eyes and saw your face, I wanted you."

"You tried to kill me."

"Oh that." He chuckled. "I was only trying to knock you out. Despite my desire, I didn't know who you were, or what you wanted with me. I thought it behooved me to get the upper hand."

"Behooved?" Even I didn't use such words in conversation. Talk about stuffy.

He ignored me. "If you remember, I didn't try too hard."

“You were barely able to stand. In fact, you couldn’t.”

“True.” His eyes roamed my face. “Damn, you are so handsome. That really was the first thing I thought, and then when you caught me, and I felt your skin on mine, I was a goner.”

Skeptical, I raised an eyebrow.

“I mean it. Although I tried to manipulate you, I wanted to touch you so much. Every bit of that hunger in my eyes was real.”

A tremor ran through me as I pictured the look on his face on the boat that day. I had to close my eyes just for a moment. “It was hard for me to understand what you wanted. I thought there was truth there but I couldn’t be sure.”

“There was. You were—are—so hot. I wanted you so badly. Yes I wanted to stay on the island, and I admit it was for more than one reason, but I want you to know that the most important reason was you. I should never have tried to be anything but honest with you.” He smiled. “You can always see right through me.”

That was true. I thought about making a joke. The intensity of the emotional intimacy was making me uncomfortable. The sentiments were way too honest and not the kind of things you said to someone you’d only known a week.

“You just wanted to fuck me.” I froze as soon as I said the words, realizing what I had just put out there. I wasn’t ready for that, not when I barely knew him, not when he was leaving the next day.

“Not exactly.”

I unfroze and deflated. He didn’t want to have sex with me? I might not be ready, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want him to desire me. True, I was very conflicted, but my past was hard to put aside.

“You misunderstand.”

My smile was as fake as his most smarmy. “No big deal. As long as you want to kiss me, I’m fine.” I wasn’t fine. Why wasn’t I fine?

He rolled me back to lay on me, and let his lust shine through. I hardened and felt his erection against my hip. He moved and his length slipped against mine, and I thought I might come just from that alone right there and then. “Do you feel that?”

I nodded, breathless, and clutched his upper arms.

“I want you, I do. But sex doesn't mean anything. It's just a means to an end. It's something I have to do to—” He must have realized how that sounded. “I'm not a playboy. When I come on to someone, it's because I have to, and I hate that. Sometimes for my job I have to do things in the interest of the greater good.”

What was he saying? His eyebrows shot up as his own words sunk in. “I'm not a whore, I swear! That's not what I meant.” What was the difference? Sex for a paycheck was still prostitution. “Fuck, no.” He pressed his cheek to mine.

I wondered if he could read my mind. Probably not because at that moment he would have jumped up and run for cover. I was proud of myself for staying quiet and just lying there, unmoving. Rigid, in fact.

“That came out all wrong.” He looked at me again and took a deep breath. “In my job, sometimes it's important that I get close to people. The hint of sex is something that can open all kinds of doors. I don't actually sleep with them; I just use a lot of innuendo to imply I'm willing to do something they want. It makes me feel dirty, and I despise it. The introduction of sex, even suggesting it, so soon after meeting someone cheapens it, it's just too easy.”

“Because of that, I don't want it unless it's with someone who I've known for a while, someone I care about.” He caressed my face. “I didn't want to taint you with that. I wanted something more. Even with my provocative words and actions, I just pictured us like this, holding each other, passionately kissing, being intimate without sex.”

My muscles loosened even though he was contradicting himself a little. “If you didn't want me why did you play me so hard?”

“I didn't mean to, I swear. It was dangerous for me to leave the island, and I admit I manipulated you when I tried to get what I wanted.” His motivations weren't so different than my own in wanting seclusion. What would I have done in the same situation? I really couldn't be sure.

“Please believe me.” He grabbed my hand and pressed it to his groin. “I have been hard since that first day. If I had just wanted sex, I would have pulled you on top of me when you helped me lie down. If I had wanted to use the idea of sex to get something from you, I would have kissed you when you were untying the boat.”

I still wasn't sure where he was going with this, but he hadn't moved my hand, and I left it there. I was really okay with that part too.

“I wanted to do that, fuck how I wanted to, but then I would have been using you, and I don't use innocent people, not like that. Manipulate, yes, when I have to, but use? No.”

Again I wondered what the difference was, but his sincerity, and my belief that he was fundamentally a good person, allowed me to trust that to him they weren't the same. I thought that maybe he was trying to say that his innuendo had been okay because he wasn't asking for sex, just letting me know how attracted he felt. But it was terribly confusing. Talking about emotions out loud with other people was just weird.

“I would especially never use you. Never you. From the beginning I knew that. I wanted you so much that I knew I couldn't try for you.”

“You aren't making any sense.” This was a bizarre conversation, and I wanted it to end so we could make out some more. He wanted me, I wanted him, we weren't going to have sex. It no longer mattered to me whether he wanted more or what his twisted logic meant or why he was telling me. He would be gone the next day, and I wanted to spend it in his arms doing something very different than talking. “It doesn't matter. Just kiss me some more.” I tugged his shoulder.

Instead of doing what I wanted, he rolled off me and rubbed his face. No. I dragged him back and he didn't fight me, but he still held back. “I need you to understand this.”

Why didn't he just get to the point? I didn't want to know more. I wanted to fool around. “Understand what? It's not complicated. You use bad men by ogling them.” His eyes moved to the side. Oh. Not just men then. I felt a little unsettled by that, but he obviously wasn't straight, so it wasn't important. “Okay, you use bad people by ogling them—”

He pressed his cheek to my shoulder. “I'm gay. I swear I'm gay. I told you none of it means anything.” It really shouldn't have mattered, but that did make me feel better. I had no problem with bisexuality, but I didn't have enough confidence in my sexual wiles to think I could compete with a woman if he decided that's what he really wanted.

I knew I was being stupid because monogamy is monogamy, and anyone can cheat with anyone, but somehow the thought that he might want someone who had pieces I didn't (and didn't want) was concerning. How could I compete with that? I chided myself. It didn't matter; he wasn't mine. He'd be gone in less than twelve hours.

“Okay, okay. You use bad people by ogling them...” I paused to see if there would be any interruptions this time but he remained quiet. “...by ogling them and alluding that you want to have sex but don’t go through with it. You do this to recover stolen art. You hate it and so you don’t use it on anyone who’s not bad. Right so far?”

He pushed himself back, presumably to see me better, and nodded.

“Because of this, you don’t want—and don’t have—sex with anyone unless you’ve known them for a while and really like them. Just thinking about it is cheap to you. You didn’t know me, therefore you didn’t want to have sex with me. See? Got it. Now kiss me.”

He tugged me close and tucked his face against my neck again as he held me tightly. “I’m so sorry.” His voice was muffled, but I could understand the words. “I should have been honest from the start. You deserved that. I should have trusted you.” He pulled back to look at me again. “Trust doesn’t come easily to me. I’m no different than you in that.” His eyes were clouded. “I wanted to.”

“It’s okay. Really, it’s okay.” Why couldn’t he let it go and get to the good stuff? He really talked too much sometimes. A lot of the time.

He still held back, and I stifled a groan. “You still don’t get the most important part.” He pressed against me, more forcefully this time, and I swear he was even harder. My own erection pressed painfully against my jeans. “I didn’t want to intellectually, but my body did. That hasn’t happened in a very long time.”

Oh.

“I wanted you so much that I had to masturbate that first night—well, the first night I was aware of where I was—just to get some sleep. I kept waking up, and you were lying there without a shirt, and all that milky skin was sweaty. If I hadn’t felt a connection with you already, I wouldn’t have been able to stop myself from going over and climbing into bed with you.”

I laughed and kissed his nose. “I know.”

“What?”

Well I didn’t know all of it, but I did know the important part. “I heard you.” I lowered my voice. “I watched you.”

His eyes widened. “But you were asleep.”

“Not once you got going.”

His face heated but not from embarrassment. “I wish I had known. I would have put on a better show.” He was teasing, but I wondered how much truth there was to that.

“Will you please kiss me now?”

Finally, he pulled me close and got back to it. We just made out, murmured silly things, and caressed safe places. My erection never went down and neither did his, judging from how hard he always was when our groins pressed together. It was both amazing to prolong the pleasure and agony at the same time.

Eventually he excused himself to go to the outhouse, and when he came back, he was soft although that soon changed again. I was pretty sure I knew what he was doing out there because I considered going as well. More than once I wondered if he was waiting for me to tell him I was ready, or just make the first move, but he didn't say anything.

We held each other until eventually he fell asleep in my arms. At least a dozen times, I thought about waking him up and opening his pants to release the erection he still had and just going for it. There were a few moments where I did reach for him, intending to caress places not so safe, and see what happened, but each time I stopped myself and just patted his hip, or squeezed his leg. He'd rub my arm and then drift off again, never really fully awakening. I admonished myself for my weakness, but memories were hard to overcome. Although I loved the darkness and felt safer in it, imagining sex in such subdued lightning brought me back to a place and time I didn't want to go.

When I finally slept, I dreamed of us floating in the ocean, bobbing in the waves, somehow each of us inside the other in that weird illogical way dreams have. I was trying to achieve orgasm but couldn't. Just as I was about to peak, something would happen and it slipped away. I begged him to help me but he'd just smile and push me back saying, “No, you're not ready yet.”

Then I had my first nightmare in over a week. *He* was there, and I heard someone else nearby. I yelled at the person to run, but I couldn't make a sound. I was tied to a post and couldn't move while *he* did something horrible, telling me *he* was doing it because I was too weak. Then I thought it might be Eric *he* had captive, even though I couldn't see. My cries were muffled by the cloth in my mouth, but still I screamed and screamed and screamed.

I awoke shaking and dripping with sweat. Eric was instantly alert and pulled me close before asking me what was wrong.

“Bad dream.” I couldn’t look him in the face because the remnants of the nightmare still fogged my mind, and I refused to taint him with my memories.

He misinterpreted, though. He pulled back to look me in the eye. “Crusoe, I’m so sorry. I’m so bad at communicating about things that really matter.”

Not this again, not now. *Please.*

“It boils down to one thing: I’m not a playboy no matter how I come across. I just want you to know that. I don’t sleep around, it’s an act. Sex doesn’t mean anything; making love does. I don’t want sex with you. I want more, but there can’t be anymore, and I don’t quite know what to do about that.”

He was as confused as I was, and that made me feel a little better, although I needed him to quiet that mouth of his. My hands were still shaking where they clutched his shirt, and he pulled me close. Mercifully, he stopped talking, kissed my head, and rubbed my back until he fell asleep again, his hand still resting between my shoulder blades.

Sleep wasn’t going to happen for me, though. The dream wasn’t the problem, it was gone now. I was used to nightmares as they had plagued me all my life. Instead, I brooded, confused about our conversation and how I felt about it, frustrated and hungry for something I didn’t know if I would ever have. Eric didn’t wake when I climbed over him and went out back behind the outhouse to finally bring myself to that elusive finish. I cried out his name when I ejaculated, and then slipped down the wall, curling up with grief for something we would never have together.

When I got back to bed, I burrowed into his side and just held him, still unable to sleep. I clung to him, needy and wanting so much more than he had to give, until the sun came up and he awoke and it was time to go.

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## **Type 4: Throwable Device**

*Besotted*

The next day dawned dismal and drizzly as usual. In July, the driest month, the area averaged over six and a half inches of rain; even in August it was close to ten inches. Why did I want to live there so badly? It was beautiful and peaceful, but was it worth the constant rain and the endless solitude? I had lived on the island for four years and never before had I questioned the weather. I was making up reasons to leave or to stay instead of focusing on what really mattered: my body and my soul.

Eric was equally pensive as we did the usual chores together, neither of us knowing what to say or maybe just not knowing how to say it. We spoke little when we gathered up his tiny belongings: a carving of a seagull I had done for him, an unusual shell he found on the beach, and the sad remnants of a masterpiece.

I gathered up my go bag as well as my latest carvings, figuring that as long as I was in port, I might as well drop them off in Yáxwch'. This time Eric asked what the backpack was, and I explained it was my emergency go kit. I always had one close by.

He said it made sense, but he uncharacteristically didn't ask what was in it, and I was glad. Our trek to the Knotty Lady was slow this time as we dragged our feet like we were heading to our doom. But in the open areas where we could walk side by side, he took my hand and I let him.

The one good thing was that I now knew he cared at least a little bit, for what that was worth. When we reached the boat, I cleared away debris that had accumulated over the week, stowed our things so they wouldn't slide everywhere, then did my pre-launch inspection.

I located two inflatable life jackets, the most comfortable I had found that still allowed me full maneuverability. I had planned to invest in full flotation wear, at least a jacket with arms, but I had never gotten around to it. We put on the flotation devices, Eric not only willing, but practically ripping his from my hands, he was so eager to wear it. I almost laughed at that but then I remembered he would have died without one and it didn't seem so funny.

Finally Eric helped me untie the mooring ropes, and I climbed up to the wheelhouse and got us underway. The trip would take two or three hours at the speed my small boat could reasonably take, depending on the current, wave height, wind, and so forth. The island where I lived really was that remote.

There was only one seat in the little cockpit so Eric stood leaning against my chair, his hand on my shoulder. The pilothouse was covered with an awning I had installed, but the side walls were only waist-high so within a short time he was soaked. He stood like a trooper, though, watching the sea until eventually he got too cold and went below for a blanket. When he came back up, he sat on the deck next to me, his back against my leg, and broke the silence.

“I’ve always loved art. I used to paint and draw and sculpt when I was younger. My parents thought it was a lovely and safe hobby for a young man, and they supported me in it in any way they could. They sent me abroad for summer art school twice, as well as on a masterpiece tour throughout Europe, and even to a two month long excursion through Asia, studying ancient techniques and artistry.

“But after years of classes, I finally figured out I didn’t have any talent. By then I was living in a kind of artist community. Fortunately, it was college so I was still young enough that I had plenty of other interests and ideas for my future. So I turned to studying art itself. I knew technique, but the artists I lived with taught me all about the substance of art, what makes one work a masterpiece and another just a nice painting.”

I reached down and ran my thumb along his jaw. He leaned his head back and looked up at me, and I smiled.

He returned my smile, and then reached up and touched my face once before continuing. “That was the beginning of my real education in the field. I had already learned French and Italian as a child, along with a smattering of German and Mandarin, enough to get around on my travels. But I kept studying languages so I could read about art from original source material.”

The water was calm enough and there was nothing in sight so I turned my seat and pulled him sideways into my lap. He laughed and kissed me. “Say something sexy in Italian.” I felt bold in asking, but in another couple of hours he would be gone, so there was no reason to be coy.

“*Sei molto bello.*” He kissed me lightly.

“What does that mean?”

“You are very handsome.”

“Stop teasing. Tell me something else.”

His brow furrowed. “I’m not teasing you. You’re gorgeous. Don’t you know that?”

I felt my cheeks heat up. Now I had forced him into complimenting me. “You are the devilishly handsome one here. Tell me something else. Um, maybe something normal, not sexy.”

Dropping the blanket, he stood up and turned to straddle me, which was a bit of a challenge given the arms of the captain's chair. His hands cupped my cheeks and he leaned down and kissed me deeply. “*Ogni volta che ti bacio dimentico dove sono.*” He kissed me again.

“Do I want to know what that means?”

“Each time that I kiss you, I forget where I am.” His eyes were filled with so much emotion, I wanted to run and hide from the intensity. What he said definitely didn't fit my “something normal, not sexy” edict. I thought of saying something. Instead, I pulled him back and kissed him again.

He shifted in my lap and pushed me back in the seat to get a better angle before diving in for more. My fingers dug into his back. He made a noise like a sighing gasp and tilted his pelvis into me. I felt his hardness pressing into my abdomen, which didn't surprise me because I was just as stiff.

His tongue swept my mouth, his hands clutching my shoulders. I wanted—I didn't know what I wanted but kissing wasn't enough. I wanted to climb inside of him and stay there. The feeling scared me, and I pulled back. “Eric...”

“Come downstairs with me.” There was no misinterpreting what he was suggesting. “Please. I know what I said last night, and I meant it. That's how you must know what my feelings are right now and how much I want you. So please come down there with me.”

Just the night before I had told myself that I wasn't ready for that. I didn't know him well enough, and he was leaving. But now I realized that I wasn't ready to just let him go, either. I had never felt this close to another human being, not ever. I closed my eyes, and I felt him kiss each lid.

“*Arrêter de penser.* Stop thinking.”

Easier said than done. He was right, though. Why was I thinking so hard about it? I was thirty-four, far too old to be a virgin, particularly when there was a gorgeous man who I really liked urging me to have sex with him. Had a week been enough time, a week of being together constantly, of sexual tension that drove each of us to masturbate in a fetid outhouse just to release the strain?

I reopened my eyes. The look of passion on his face was my undoing. I found myself nodding and crushing my lips against his. The kiss was our most

intense yet, and he moaned. Stars in Heaven, how he moaned, and that went straight to my groin. I pushed him away and pointed at the ladder. Nodding, he stood up and headed down while I turned off the engine and dropped anchor.

By the time I reached the galley, I was having second thoughts, but when I opened the little door to the bedroom and climbed down to stand in front of Eric, I saw not just the lust on his face but also the uncertainty, and I realized he was just as nervous as I was. Somehow that made me feel a hundred times better, and I crossed the tiny space to him and pulled him into my arms.

He buried his nose in my neck, and I pressed my cheek to his head for a moment. He had already removed his life jacket, and I quickly tossed mine on the stairs which would assure I wouldn't forget to put it on before leaving the cabin.

He pulled me to him again and looked into my eyes. "*Tu es si beau et si sexy.*" Although I was pretty sure he had said something about being sexy in French or some other Romance language—a more apt name for the grouping I couldn't imagine—he didn't give me time to ask what it meant, as he took my mouth again.

I felt his hands grab my buttocks—my ass. His crass words were so much better than my stilted ones. Why I had thought I was above using them, I didn't know. He kneaded my *ass* and I threw one leg around his to pull him closer. I felt his erection press against mine, and I rubbed them together. I had never been so aroused in my life.

We tumbled onto the bed, and he rolled us over so he was on top. Pushing himself up on his forearms, he looked at me with such tenderness I forgot to breathe. "*Du machst mich so glücklich.* You make me so happy."

The intense emotions were getting to be too much so I had to say something. "Y'all be makin' me feel a'right, too. That's mountain man speak."

He stared at me for a moment before bursting out laughing. He ducked his head as he let it out. When he looked back up he was smiling. "I was trying for a moment there, Crusoe."

I grinned. "I know. You need to work on that. Or maybe I do. Whatever. Come here." I pulled him back down and we kissed again. Within moments the levity was gone in a haze of lust. He pressed his groin into mine, and I gasped. He ground into me, moving up and down until I thought I might achieve—might *come* right there in my jeans.

He broke away to trail his lips along my jaw. I tilted my head up, and he licked and sucked my neck and throat. A hand slipped under my shirt and caressed my side. I wanted to reciprocate, but I wasn't sure what to do, so I just grabbed his ass and squeezed. He pushed back against my hands and rolled his hips, so I figured it was okay. What he was doing, though... The noises I made weren't ones I had ever made before.

"Fuck, Crusoe, what you do to me..." He bent his head and closed his mouth around a nipple. I nearly shot out of bed at the wonderful sensation. His fingers twisted the other one, and I gasped. I hadn't had a clue that men's nipples had such sensation. It had never occurred to me to test it out. He switched sides, and I arched my back and grabbed the back of his head.

After a moment he pulled up and his gaze was heated, his lips red and sexy. "I'm going to fuck you so hard." He dove back in to kiss me, and the hand that wasn't supporting his weight reached down and began kneading my groin. "I'm going to pound into that sexy ass until you're screaming." He was practically grinding into me. "I've wanted to fuck you for so long; I may not be able to hold back. I'm going to make you see stars." He tried to kiss me again. I was too frozen to react, although I may have squeaked. Eric noticed immediately. "Crusoe?"

At that point, I started shaking, and I couldn't stop, my fingers digging into his biceps.

"Boaz? What's wrong, what'd I do? You don't like dirty talk?" He looked anxious as he pushed up and away so he was barely touching me. "I thought—we don't have to—I mean... Did you want to top? That's fine, I can do either. Anything with you."

I let go of him and jammed the heels of my hands into my eyes. I couldn't get in air, let alone speak to answer him. I knew mental issues weren't sexy, and I tried to get myself under control. I thought of his instructions the last time I came unglued that first time he asked me to leave with him. *Breathe in, two three four, breathe out, two three four. Breathe in, two three four, breathe out, two three four.*

"Talk to me."

"Sorry. Just give me a minute." I tried to keep my palms in my eye sockets, but gentle hands on my wrists pulled them down.

"Just tell me what's wrong so I can fix it. We don't have to do anything you don't want to do. I didn't mean to push." He looked so worried, I felt bad for him, and my anxiety eased a bit in the desire to make him feel better.

“You didn’t—I want to. I mean, I want... something. I just... Damn.” I felt like an idiot.

Eric examined my face, and I could tell he was thinking hard. The moment he got it was obvious as his eyes went wide and he pulled off me. I grabbed for him immediately. I didn’t want him to leave. He didn’t go anywhere but he lay on his side, leaning on his elbow. Only his hand remained on top of me as he slowly caressed my stomach. I felt so pathetic.

“You’re a virgin.” I nodded, but there was way more to it than that. He leaned forward and touched his lips to mine and then pulled back. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrugged. “What was there to tell?”

“Well, I would have been a little less forceful, a little more tender.”

“You were—you are—perfect.” There was just that flashback. I hadn’t had one in years, but he didn’t need to know about that.

He smiled sadly. “I scared you.”

“You just startled me, is all. I hadn’t really thought much past the part with your tongue in my mouth and my hands in your hair.” Or really much of anything, if I were honest about it.

“What have you done in the past?”

“Nothing.”

“What does that mean? No intercourse obviously, but no blow jobs?” I shook my head. “Hand jobs?” I shook my head again. “Frottage?”

The formal term coming out of his mouth made me laugh. “No, nothing. I’ve done more with you than I ever had before. There was only one other guy, and we didn’t get to... It was just a kiss and a little groping.” Might have been more if *he* hadn’t found us. If the other boy hadn’t... I shivered.

For a moment, I thought Eric’s eyes were going to pop out of his head. “You mean—” His hand stopped moving, and he started to pull back, but I grabbed for it and tried to keep it in place. No such luck.

“You are my first in everything except what you’d call the basic kiss with minimal tongue and a wee bit of touching of non-sexual body parts.” Now I was terribly embarrassed. Thirty-four and barely been kissed.

He rolled on his back and rubbed his face. “I wish you’d said something. I can see why you didn’t, but still. Fuck.”

I must have misinterpreted everything. He either really did just want a roll in the hay, or he was only interested in someone as experienced as he obviously was. Damn. I sat up and pulled my shirt down then began to climb over him.

“Where are you going?” He sounded upset and started to reach for me but held back.

“I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to mislead you. I don’t know what I was thinking.” If I could just get to the head before I threw up...

Eric had other ideas though. He took my arm. “Wait. You didn’t mislead me. Please stay.” He gently tugged, and I relented and lay back. “It’s a huge responsibility, and I just want to do it right.”

“What is?”

“Helping someone with their first sexual experiences. Your first time can be exciting and fun, or it can be painful and scary.” He looked more upset than I thought he should.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m thirty-four, not fourteen.”

He pushed me back and leaned over me to run his thumb along my chin. “Right now, I’m the first man you’ve been around for more than a minute in how long? I’m also probably the first gay man you’ve seen in even longer. So I don’t want you doing something because you feel it’s your only opportunity.”

That did it. I punched him in the shoulder.

“Ow!”

“You deserved that. If you think I’m that pathetic, get over it. If I were that desperate, I could have gone into Ketchikan and found someone anonymous to have sex with. You think that I’ve gone my whole life without, to suddenly be unable to survive another day without knowing what it feels like?”

He had the grace to look sheepish.

“We have a connection, at least I thought we did. No one else was ever worth...” Letting go of my fears for, letting go of my past. “...worth the complications.” My face felt tight, and I covered my eyes with one hand. I was frustrated with myself and the situation.

Hopefully that was enough of an explanation. I didn’t have to go into how I didn’t dare get that close to anyone while in WITSEC, how even oral sex in a back alley could blow up in my face and make my moral character come into

question. As I was the only witness to many of the crimes, the case had hinged on my testimony, and I had to be beyond reproach.

The attorneys had never told me I couldn't have sex, although WITSEC had cautioned me against relationships in case they had to move me without warning. But after what I had been through, no way were *they* getting away with what *they* had done. After all that had happened, justice was more important than a quickie. Memories of what I had seen never played into choosing not to have sex; at least I hadn't thought so.

"Crusoe, look at me." He tugged at my wrist. "Please." I lifted my hand. His expression was tender, his smile gentle. "We do have a connection. If we didn't, I would have gone home that first time you showed me the boat." He took my hand and kissed it. "I would have pushed to have sex last night instead of waiting until you made the first move, although I'm sorry that up on deck I couldn't wait any longer. I had to ask you. I couldn't leave without..." He swallowed. "Without touching you like this." He reached for me and rolled me sideways until we were pressed against each other again. "I want you, but I don't want to do anything you aren't ready for."

"I want you, too. So much. I just... I just don't know how far I want to go." I closed my eyes. "That sounds really stupid. You'll be gone in a couple of hours, and I'm a grown man. I just don't want to mess this up. I want you to remember me and think of good things. I want you to remember this—" I opened my eyes and motioned between us. "—and remember it being hot and heavy and not me being incompetent. If what you thought didn't matter to me, I probably would have let you take me back at the cabin last night." Well, maybe. That level of intimacy was still frightening.

Eric pulled me forward and kissed me again. "If you're still interested, why don't we stop talking and just take it as it goes. I'll tone down on the language. I just got carried away because my need for you overcame my language filter." He had a filter? Really? "Do you need me to not talk? It's so hard when I just want to tell you how gorgeous you are."

My face prickled as blood rushed to my cheeks. "That's okay. If you tried to stop talking, you'd probably break something. It wasn't the language. It was the intensity coming on so quickly."

"I get it. You lead and I'll go wherever you take me."

That sounded better, although I wasn't sure about taking charge. Nevertheless, I leaned in and kissed him. The first two seconds were awkward,

and then it changed. Somehow talking about it made things better. It was as if now that Eric knew I was a virgin, I had nothing to prove and another wall had broken down.

Instead of going easy, we got fast and intense right away, me being the pushy one. There were no more flashbacks. This time when he swirled his tongue around my nipples, I slipped my fingers into the back of his pants as far as they would go under the snug fabric. When he lingered too long on my chest, I grabbed his hand and pressed it against my bulge to remind him there were other things on offer.

“Fuck, Crusoe. You are so hot.” He claimed my mouth again as he arched up and rocked his pelvis against mine. I gasped. Then he was back to caressing my sides, but I was done with that.

I reached between us and undid his pants. Giving him my old underwear had never even been considered, so he was loose and free, and my hands were soon filled with what I had been wanting since I first saw them a week ago.

The skin of his erection was soft despite the hardness of its core. It was different than mine, and I broke off the kiss to look as I explored. Above me, Eric sucked in a breath and swayed. I figured that was a good sign and moved one of my hands to his sac which I rubbed and tugged. His hips moved as I stroked.

“Your touch is like fire.” He fell back down and mashed our lips together and then all rules were gone.

I had never imagined kissing someone so intensely. I felt like he was devouring me, and I wanted him to. His hands squeezed one part of me and then another, exploring anywhere he could touch. Without conscious thought, I thrust up against him and whimpered. “More.”

“Fuck yes,” he said. In a matter of seconds he was naked, then he rolled us over so I was on top and he helped me undress. It was agony to stop touching him for the length of time it took to get my clothes off. Then I was back on him and there was nothing between us.

Eric rolled us over again and sat up. “Let me see your cock.” I let him but didn't stop caressing his hips and arms. “You are so beautiful.” That baffled me, considering the numerous scars criss-crossing my body, but he didn't seem to notice them. Maybe he was just focused on the important bits. He took me in hand and fondled me until I moaned. His eyes traversed my body. “I can't believe I'm the first man to see you like this.” The fingers on his free hand

traced one of the bigger imperfections. Maybe he had a thing for disfigured men. "You are a gift you've kept hidden from the world, and I'm the one to get to open it." I rolled my eyes again, but he was looking at my—my *cock* now.

The word was foreign, and I let it flow off my tongue. "Cock. I want your cock." The word itself was mouthwatering.

He looked up at me and grinned before pointing at it. "Right here, all yours." *Yes*. I took all of him in my hands, his sac, too, which felt heavy and solid, yet soft and yielding, and just perfect. I could have held it all day, but his erection grew even harder and longer as I gently massaged it, and I began twisting and tugging the way I liked doing to mine. He groaned. "You're a natural."

All I was doing was what was obvious. I wanted to keep doing it, and also do something else I desired even more. "Stop talking and kiss me."

"Your command is my desire." Our mouths locked, our hands filled with each other's cocks, our hips rocking.

My pleasure was building. "More."

"You're going to be the death of me, Crusoe." He spun us again, and once more I was on top. "Show me what you want."

I pushed myself up onto my elbows and stared into his eyes. "I don't know what I want. I mean, I want to have sex, obviously. I want to... fuck. I want to fuck." Saying the word was surprisingly natural and I grinned. "Yeah, I want to fuck." I laughed. "I sound like a little kid who's never said a bad word before."

"We're not stopping right now for anything, but at some point you're going to have to tell me why you don't curse."

"That's a long, complicated story, and I agree that interruptions are unacceptable, so do something else with your mouth."

Eric chuckled. "Do you have stuff?"

"Stuff?"

"Lube. Condoms." Oh. That stuff. My face must have fallen because he quickly jumped in. "That's okay. We can get close enough for now if you have some cooking oil, or natural lotion. Not something with a lot of additives or chemicals." For now... I really liked the sound of that and refused to think about the reality of the future for the moment.

Instead, I jumped up and found an old bottle of vegetable oil in the galley and brought it back to him. "This looks old, but it hasn't expired yet."

“It will work just fine. Come here.” He pulled me on top of him again. “I need some more kissing. That okay with you, sexy?” I nodded so we did some of that for a while until I was becoming raw from grinding into him.

I was panting when I came up for air. “Please, now, I need more. Now, please.”

He laughed again. “Okay, I’ve got what you need. Do you want to pitch or catch?” Baffled I shrugged. “Do you want to feel like you’re fucking me or like I’m fucking you?”

“Which is better?”

“They’re both wonderful.”

“Why do you keep talking? Just go with it, whatever. I think I’m about to spontaneously combust.”

His laugh was so wonderful, like waves crashing on the shore. “You’ve got it.” He rolled us again and kissed me once more. Then he trailed his tongue along the cleft between my nipples, across my belly and still farther down.

The anticipation was killing me as he descended. Finally he licked the underside of my penis and then swirled his tongue around the tip and into my slit, and I cried out, thankful we were on a boat far away from anyone who might overhear. Eric slipped just the head into his mouth, and I had to grab the base of my cock so I wouldn’t come.

“While I love what you’re doing, I think that it’s going to have to stop if you want to do anything else.” I was like a teenage boy again, ready to go off within seconds of being touched. Only this time it wasn’t me doing the touching, and I wasn’t terrified of the ramifications if anyone found out, and that made it all the more pleasurable and exciting.

“Got it.” Eric pulled off and sat back on his heels. He poured the oil onto my cock and balls and slathered me up. He glided his hand up and down its length a couple of times. “Good?” I nodded. “Okay, my turn.” He oiled up his own erection then grasped my legs and pushed them up and back toward my face.

The magazines under my bunk back at the cabin weren’t there for nothing. I hooked my arms behind my knees and pulled them back. “Like this?”

He nodded and leaned forward to kiss me. I let go of my legs and wrapped them around his waist. It felt really good and then it felt even better as he took

me in hand again, and I reciprocated. We were working ourselves up, and then a finger touched a part of me that I had forgotten had a sexual purpose, too. "Is this okay?" he asked.

Oh my stars, yes. "More, more."

"Pushy." I felt him smile against my mouth. The finger circled around, oil letting it glide gently. Then I felt just the tip slip inside. "How about this?"

"More." I panted as I felt the finger go deeper. It didn't hurt at all, just a little pressure. "More, please more." The finger went in further. "More. More." I began a kind of breathy chant as I was penetrated and the finger pulled back out and then in again.

Then there were two pushing into me. That stung. "Push against my fingers." I tried that and the fingers slipped in more easily. "That's it. You are so tight. Fuck I want to be inside you so badly." I wanted him in there, too.

He began plunging his fingers in and out as he caressed my shaft with his other hand. That meant his weight was on my chest and I loved it. I began gasping with each thrust. He shifted and pressed his abdomen against me so hard I had to let go and grab his thighs before I slid further up the bed and banged my head against the wall.

Then he touched something inside, and I reared up almost throwing him off. "Oh fuck, oh fuck, do that again."

"What, this?" Again his fingers sent lightning up my spine. My prostate. That part didn't show in the pictures in the magazines.

"Yes, oh fuck yes."

"I never thought I'd hear good Boaz using such words." He laughed.

"Shut up, and do that some more."

He did and he did. Then he switched to three fingers and the pressure was more intense for a while until it eased, and I was feeling even more pleasure. Then Eric shifted again, and I felt his cock slide along the cleft between my ass cheeks. He pulled back and this time he shoved his fingers into me at the same time as he moved forward and pulled them back out again as his hand retreated.

He repeated the process, although he kept slipping out quite a bit. "Sorry, this is harder than it looks." It sounded pretty difficult to me, but I was too immersed in my enjoyment to say anything. We got a rhythm going, or rather he did. I did little more than clutch him and enjoy the sensations engulfing me.

“This is my dick inside you. You’re being impaled on me, and I’m filling you.”

I imagined that it was his cock pressing into me instead of his fingers. It was hard when his erection was also plowing between my ass cheeks, but I went with it. He paused to adjust me, pulling one of my ankles over his shoulder and then he was at it again.

“Do you feel it? Can you feel me inside you?”

“Yes. Yes.” The fantasy took hold. I moaned. I envisioned him driving into me and soon that’s what I felt. No longer was I being penetrated by mere fingers but by his sumptuous cock. “You’re fucking me. Please, keep fucking me.”

Soon he was hitting that amazing spot inside me each time he plunged in, shooting me with pleasure, and I moaned each time he touched it. I was lost in sensation, watching his face as he concentrated. When he looked into my eyes, I gasped at the intensity of his expression. He somehow managed to kiss me for a moment, amid everything he was doing, then he slid into me once more.

I really forgot that we were just pretending to be fucking. I had nothing to compare this to, and it was the most amazing sensation I had ever had. I felt like he was driving into me with his whole being. He held my gaze as he rocked, eyes glazed with lust, sweat flying off his forehead and plastering his hair to his cheeks. He was breathtaking. I never wanted this moment to end.

But then it got even more intense, and the moment had to end because I needed to come and badly. “Eric...” He twisted his head to the side and kissed my leg. “Eric, I need...”

“Ready for me to bring it home?”

I could only guess what he meant, but I begged him anyway. “Please, please.” Somewhere along the line he had let go of my erection, probably in the interest of remaining upright, and I was too busy holding on to take care of it myself. I cried out again. “Eric...”

“I’ve got you.” He shifted us again and took hold of my cock which he fondled and rubbed while he used the fingers of his other hand to firmly massage me on the inside, brushing my prostate over and over. His hips kept moving a little but he was no longer able to keep his dick between my cheeks. I started to say something but then he began sliding his fingers into me so fast, curling against the gland with every stroke, and pumping my cock with such

vigor that I couldn't think of anything but the mounting ecstasy as my legs bounced high with every thrust.

"Eric... Oh fuck, Eric? I'm going to—" I moaned loudly. "Eric—I'm, I'm..."

"Come for me, Crusoe, let me be the first person to see that joy. Do that for me. I want to see your beautiful face when you soar. Come in my arms. Let me watch you."

I clutched at the blankets and arched my back even more. At this point only my head and shoulders were on the bed. "Eric. I—" The building sensations were overwhelming me. I felt more pleasure already than in any previous orgasm and still the thrill was building.

My emotions were rising along with everything else. I felt... I wanted to... I was drawn to him in a way that wasn't just physical. Was that what people meant when they said sex was emotionally intimate? My mouth wanted to say things my heart wasn't ready to accept. "Fuck! I'm not a teenage girl!"

How he had a clue what I meant, I didn't know, but he smiled. "Men feel, too, baby. Now come in my arms."

So I did. I let the tide of passion wash over and around me, and push me up over the top. "Eric! I'm coming. Eric!" I shouted over and over as I erupted in spurt after spurt of creamy fluid. My orgasm went on and on, but I heard him yell my name as it was ebbing, and I opened my eyes to watch him peak, too. The look on his face was so breathtaking, it had me rearing up again, and I cried out as I spurted one last time.

We fell back to the bed in a heap. I gasped as tremors continued to wrack me. My lover, *lover*, pulled me close and lay back, covering his body with mine. *My lover*. I liked the sound of that. I pressed my face into his neck and breathed him in, the delicious, manly scent of him.

"Wow." My voice was muffled by his neck but I didn't move.

He laughed. "That good?"

"Yeah."

"Yes, I thought so, too."

Finally I pulled up and looked him in the eye. "Thank you. I never imagined it would be like that. That was incredible." My heart was still pounding in my chest.

“My pleasure. Thank *you*.”

I tilted my head. “What for?”

“For letting me be your first. For letting me do that with you at all. For just letting me be here in bed with you.”

My face heated, in embarrassment or joy, or maybe both, I wasn't quite sure.

He looked like he was struggling with something. “I don't usually... it's not like that for me. For some people, sex is often just about power, or is a means to an end. It's not always about pleasure. I'm usually just fine with—” He shook his head and moved toward me to use his mouth in a very different way, stopping me from thinking about what he had said. When I came up for air, I could barely remember what we had been talking about. Eric could really kiss. “You are a gift, Crusoe.”

What do you say to something like that? Talk about awkward. Time to change the subject. “If you call me baby again, I'm going to kick your ass.” It felt freeing somehow to use profanity, like now I was a real man, a man's man. The sex helped with that, too, of course.

“I thought you liked my ass.”

I lowered my eyelids in what I hoped was a sexy look. “It's you who likes my ass.”

“Fuck yeah I do.” He pulled me close for another sizzling kiss and squeezed my butt cheeks—no, my ass—as he devoured my mouth.

Another few minutes passed before I had the strength to pull myself away from that incredible kiss. “I need to make sure everything is okay out there. We're not in a protected cove so I shouldn't leave her unguarded for too long even if we are anchored.”

I climbed out of bed and went up to the galley to fetch a towel to clean us up. As I got it wet in the sink, I peered out the portholes. Everything looked okay. There was a fishing boat a fair bit away but that was about it.

I climbed back down into the stateroom. “Looks good but I still need to get up there.” He reached for me and gently pressed his lips to mine. When I pulled away, he gave me his sexiest smile. I leaned in for another kiss and then a third. My pulse began to speed up again and other parts of me began showing renewed interest. “Okay, maybe it can wait a few more minutes.” His grin got even bigger and he pulled me back down.

*Boarded*

At least another hour had passed before I was finally dressed and heading back up top. Outside, rain had drenched the deck so it shimmered beautifully. I loved my boat. Looking across the water, I noticed that the fishing vessel was closer now, and I could see that it was a purse seine. Suspicion entered my mind when I saw their behavior was more than a little odd.

I climbed up to the cockpit for a better look. The binoculars I had up there were expensive military grade field glasses, and they told me everything I needed to know: the seiner was up to something and it wasn't catching fish.

A moment later, Eric joined me, flushed from the sex, his hair mussed more than usual. He was breathtaking, and I wanted to kiss him, but there were more important things to deal with for now. "What's up?"

"Get down." I pushed him out of sight and kept my voice low.

"What?" He resisted, but I had the surprise factor, and in a moment he was sitting. "What the fuck, Crusoe?"

"Shh. Sound carries over water. Please trust me. There's something wrong with that boat out there."

"What's going on?" He now whispered, wary, but listening. His position on the deck kept him hidden by the wall of the wheelhouse, which was good. That meant he was safe for now.

We needed to get out of there fast, but we were stopped cold. I wanted to look cool about it, not like we were turning tail and running, and the time I was taking to get the engine properly warmed up as I would normally, was agonizing. I wanted to push her to full throttle and peel out of there as fast as I could, but that was much too risky.

I was still looking through the binoculars but as discreetly as I could. They had an anti-glare coating so there wouldn't be a reflection to give me away, but the boat was close enough that someone might notice that I was watching and not piloting my craft. "Fishing boats don't usually throw their entire catch back. A purse seiner, like that one, might reject some stuff because the whole point is that the net ensnares everything, but they wouldn't throw away the whole haul."

"A what?" He crawled over to the wall and peeked over. The crew was dumping buckets of squirming fish back over the side. The things writhed,

struggling for breath as they fell back into the water. Eric couldn't see that much detail without revealing himself, but the fish dumping was more than obvious. "What the fuck are they doing?"

I had watched them pull up the seine net and dump it on the deck. Now the crew was scooping up the fish with plastic buckets and crates and throwing them back into the water. They weren't even looking at the fish, just shoveling and dumping the enormous haul.

"A purse seine is like a trawler except that instead of having a net that drags through a portion of the water, its net is huge and grabs everything from the surface to the ocean floor. It catches anything too big to slip through the holes. So a crew might throw some stuff back that isn't what they're looking for, but not everything. I think they're looking for something specific. Something big enough to be so obvious in a pile of huge fish that it isn't necessary to look closely." Something big enough to hold a large painting.

He didn't need to ask what they might be searching for. "Shit."

Shit was right. We needed to get out of there, and Eric needed to hide. All bets were off if they saw him. The Knotty Lady was facing slightly away from the other vessel, which meant her stern was visible enough that anyone watching would see Eric descend. The helm was just forward of midship, and the upper deck, which had to be traversed before getting to the ladder to get below, was mostly open.

I would have to turn the boat until it faced full forward, and even then, Eric would need to be careful. Turning toward them also might make them nervous. There weren't any good answers. Although the waves were bobbing us about, currently we were moving in the wrong direction. "We need to get you out of sight but that isn't going to be easy." I explained the problem to him.

He laughed. "There is more than one way to climb down." I hadn't thought of that. My brain was thinking "civilian" not "strong man capable of more than quivering in fear." I didn't insult him by asking if he was strong enough to cling to the side of the cabin and slip in a porthole while avoiding the more exposed windows that left much of the boat open to sunlight.

Fortunately, I had closed most of the curtains when I first saw the big vessel, before I had gone back for another round. I cursed my libido. We would have been out of there by then if I hadn't stayed for seconds.

One of the biggest problems was that the vessel stood between us and our destination. "Okay. We can't go to Yáxwch' right now because the seiner is in

the way. Nor do I want to lead them back to the island. I'm going to set a course for a large land mass in a third direction. It would be better to head in the opposite direction from them, but I don't want them thinking we're heading straight out to sea. That would be rather suspicious."

"Makes sense. What do you need me to do?"

"Hide. I need my go bag, though. Can you grab it and pass it back up?"

He rolled his eyes before carefully slipping over the side. A few moments later, he called up softly, and I reached over the side to grab it. I had the SIG Sauer out and loaded, and the spare clips in a pocket in seconds, just as Eric reappeared over the side. I slipped the gun into the back of my pants, hopefully without him noticing.

It was a stupid place to keep a gun—I could literally shoot my ass off—but the big pockets in the cargo pants were too low to get at quickly, and the barrel would bang against my knee. At least I had taken the time to strap on my knife when I got dressed. I had almost forgotten it—Eric did that to me—but seeing that other boat out there as I came through the sitting area had me returning to strap it on.

"I thought I told you to hide." I covered the gun with my shirt.

"And I thought I was a grown man who might need to know what was going on." He had a point. I didn't like it but he was right.

"Sorry. There's not much to do, though. I'd say act normal but I don't want them seeing you. I need to think."

By now the engine was warmed up enough that we could get going without looking like we were doing anything abnormal. I pretended to finish checking the dials then pulled up the anchor. The engine revved a little as we moved off, despite my attempts to keep silent, but it wasn't loud. A quick glance at the seiner, though, showed that we had been noticed. Someone was already at the side watching us through their own binoculars. Damn. I did my best to look like I wasn't paying attention and went about my business.

"What's happening?" Eric took the binoculars from where I had stowed them and moved to look over the railing.

"No, they're watching us." He sat back. "I think they're turning to come investigate."

"Fuck."

“No kidding. It will take them a while though. They’re bigger than we are, and although their top speed is probably higher due to the bigger engine, maneuvering is more difficult. I don’t plan to be here when they come around.”

“This is my fault, Crusoe. They’re after me and that painting.”

It had been clear to me for a long time that he had stayed on the island because he was afraid of whatever or whoever had landed him in the water a week ago and not just to “regroup.” But I was pretty sure he had believed the thieves long gone before we left that morning. “It’s not your fault. Please stop.”

I eyed the boat briefly as I pretended to adjust something overhead. This wasn’t good. No way would I let them get my lover. “Change of plan.” The best option was to go in the opposite direction than my boat was currently facing. Still trying to move the Knotty Lady as nonchalantly as was possible for a boat, I turned us and slowly sped up.

There were a lot more islands in the direction I planned to go, although we would have to cross the route the other vessel had taken earlier. It would take us closer to the other boat, but it would take them longer to get to us because it was a sharper turn and they were currently attempting to turn in the opposite direction.

I explained what I was going to do. “Maybe they’ll just ignore us when they see we’re just a pleasure craft, but I’m not holding my breath. You need to hide. If they get close enough to see you, we’re in even bigger trouble.”

It was a relief that he didn’t play macho and instead acknowledged that my idea was the best course of action, but he didn’t go quietly. “I’ll hide, but I’m coming out if they board us.”

“No!” The fear that shot through me was concern for his safety, with no regard for my own except that I needed to stay alive to make sure Eric did too. It wasn’t something I was used to. “You need to stay out of sight. I can handle them.”

He looked skeptical. “Don’t be stupid. You’re one man. That ship has to have what, twenty people?”

I scoffed. Ship. Twenty people. The craft was a tiny little thing, barely more than a barge. “Hardly. It looks like they’re carrying more than the usual crew of five, but not by much. I’d say there probably ten people aboard in total, maybe a dozen.”

“Still, that’s more than one person can handle.”

“First, they’re not all going to board us. Most are just men and women who fish for a living. Second, I’m hoping it won’t come to that, but if it does, I’ll just show them around and we’ll be fine. You’ll be hiding in the cargo hold.”

“I’ll be what?” He looked less than thrilled.

“It’s the safest place. They won’t think this is anything more than a pleasure yacht, and it won’t occur to them to look for hidden compartments.”

Even a frown was beautiful on my man’s face. My man. When had I started thinking that? Of course, his consternation didn’t stop him from talking. “You’re being too optimistic.”

Me? I had never been accused of that before. Ever. “Please, Eric. I need you to be safe.”

“What about you? You want me to sit back while you put yourself in mortal danger because of something I’ve done?”

That made me mad. “You didn’t do anything except your job. It’s these jerks’ fault we’re in this mess, not yours. Now please, just get below. You don’t have to get into the hold unless they come really close.”

He growled. “Still, ten of them, one of you. I don’t like those odds.”

I leaned down and kissed him. “I trained from birth for this, remember? Trust me.”

For the first time, I was grateful for all the action movies the marshals watched in our hotel rooms during the early days of my protection because Eric replied with, “I do trust you, but even Jet Lee would have trouble dispatching this many people at once. This isn’t a movie.”

“You’re right it isn’t a movie, and maybe Jet Lee wouldn’t be able to, although I think you’re wrong, but Jackie Chan could do it with his eyes closed and so can I. Well, probably not with my eyes closed. J.C. is way cooler.”

My attempt to ease the tension failed miserably. If he had tried to defend the merits of Jet Lee over the man Chan, we would have been okay, but he didn’t. Instead he kept up with his doubts. “What if they have guns?”

Damn. I was hoping he wouldn’t think of that. But he did, so I pulled the SIG out along with a Glock I retrieved from under the decking. There was a least one other gun in the wheelhouse alone, all licensed and registered, but I didn’t think he needed the details.

His eyes widened for just a brief moment then narrowed. "How could I forget? You always come prepared."

I grinned. "Always."

"You probably have half a dozen different weapons stashed around here, don't you?"

"Fifty-six, but who's counting?" That didn't include the kitchen knives and forks, and the myriad other household (boat-hold?) items that could be used in more deadly ways.

"More guns?"

"And other things."

"Did you hide them better than in the beach shack?"

Oh that. "You're the only one who could find them, I bet." I caressed his upper arm.

He smiled. "I'm feeling better already." The smile disappeared. "But not good enough that I want to hide while you do the fighting. I work out. I can bench press two forty. That's more than you weigh. It's more than I weigh."

Our boat was getting up to a good clip while the other vessel was still turning around, but we didn't have time for this.

"You haven't been trained as a mercenary, right? I have." More like assassin or black ops spy, but that was immaterial and would only serve to make him distrust me as a person. "Eric, it will make my job harder if I have to worry about you. Plus, you need to keep the painting safe."

"Oh please. You sound like some idiot action flick guy, right before he does something that's impossible within the laws of physics. As hot and sexy as you are, you're still human. And I can put the painting in the secret hold."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. The other boat had turned around now and was speeding up. I needed to focus before they caught up. "Well, how about this reason? You're untrained and we haven't worked together so you're unpredictable. I don't know what you'd do in a given situation. If some guy pulls a gun, I know which way I'm going to zig to unarm him, but you might zag and end up getting one of us shot."

He paled. "Fine. But if shots are fired, all bets are off." He crawled for the wheelhouse wall.

“Eric!” He turned back. “Please listen to me,” I begged. “That’s the worst time to come out. That’s when *I’ll* be trying to hide.”

His hand paused on the railing while he at least hesitated.

“Please. I’m anxious just thinking about your safety. I need to get in the game. Please don’t come out for anything. Please.” He had to listen. I had to make him hear me.

White-knuckled and with steam practically coming out of his nostrils, he glared at me while he spoke through gritted teeth. “How will I know when to come out?”

Relieved he had acquiesced, I thought for a quick moment. “I’ll tell you it’s time for Knotty Lady Shrimp. And keep your life jacket on. I don’t have time to save your hypothermic butt again.”

That didn’t get the grin I was going for, but he didn’t argue. “I won’t get into that claustrophobic hole in your hull, though, until I hear you say the word ‘crab’. Be loud.” He turned away, then angled his head back slightly so I could hear him over his shoulder. “If you get yourself killed, I’ll never forgive you.”

Then he disappeared over the side, but I was sure I heard him whisper “jackass” as he went, which almost made me smile. I didn’t think to tell him to put something waterproof in the hold for him to sit on so he wouldn’t get soaked by the cold water, but he probably would figure that out by himself, perhaps the hard way.

I was relieved that I could now focus on what needed to be done. Eric had gotten me all turned around on the island, not knowing who I was inside or what I truly wanted. He’d ripped apart the hidden loner and pulled something better from within my heart. He knew me as an awkward softy with a dry sense of humor who liked to share random trivia and carve wood into rodents and historical playwrights.

But now it was time to become the person I was literally born to be, the man I kept hidden, the one who had been conceived for just one purpose. Eric needed me to be on my game, and I slipped into my cold, emotionless, survival mode, familiar and natural.

Only this time there was something deep inside that inner shell behind which I stuffed anything distracting like emotions, and it wasn’t entirely hidden. A small but powerful flame burned, reminding me of the absolute necessity of preventing the death of someone I cared about. That was my mission: Keep Eric alive.

The seiner was my primary concern for now, and I ran through different scenarios and possible outcomes while keeping an eye on our course and heading. There was no longer any doubt that the other craft planned to find out what we were doing. Her nets had been reeled up, no longer piled on the deck, and she was heading straight for us at a much faster clip than was really reasonable.

Going about my business with a feigned indifference, I tucked a few more goodies into my pockets. I kept my life jacket on but made sure the straps didn't block my hands. I still needed to play the dopey boat owner out for an afternoon cruise, so I slowed down as the seiner drew closer. I wasn't sure I could outrun the other vessel anyway.

By the time she was within shouting distance, I had stopped the boat and was clinging to the railing with a rain hat on. If we were anywhere else, I would have added zinc to my nose. Here, though, that would peg me for a poser for sure. I pretended to stumble as small waves rocked my rum-runner as they pulled close. I had to admit the fishing boat's skipper was excellent. She reversed engines at just the right time to coast up and match my speed even as I was decreasing to stop.

"What the hell are you doing?" I tried to look indignant but as innocuous as possible. "You could capsize me with that thing!" The other boat pulled up alongside, a mere twenty feet between us now. "Watch out!"

Still maintaining the fiction of an ignorant landlubber, I hurried across the upper deck and jumped down to the lower. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" No acting had been included in my training and only sheer luck would help me pull this off.

A man walked over to the bulwark of the other boat and smiled at me as they pulled closer. The vessel was much bigger than *The Knotty Lady*, but the deck was about the same distance above the water, standard for a purse seine. "Sorry about that, man. We've got a bit of a problem. Permission to board?"

I shouted as loudly as I thought sounded reasonable. "Hell no! I don't want my boat stinking of CRAB or whatever it is you're hauling." Hopefully Eric had heard that and had gotten to safety.

The man didn't notice how loud I had been on that one particular word and just smiled and spread his arms. "Do I look like a fisherman? I've only been on board a couple of hours. I just want to talk."

“You can talk from right there. I don’t let strangers on my boat.” The seiner was practically on top of me now. A couple of big men had grappling hooks which they were using to latch onto my railing and pull us closer. “What are you doing? Go away!”

“Aw, don’t be like that. I’ll only take a few minutes of your time.” Now that he was closer, I could see that he was completely average. I’m not sure what I was expecting, maybe a dirty scoundrel, arms-smuggling type or a debonair aristocrat, but this man was ordinary, completely forgettable.

He was average height and weight, had brown hair cut in a nondescript style, and was wearing clothes you’d find in any department store. Over these he had a clear rain poncho that covered most of his top half, just his soaked forearms and lower legs sticking out from underneath the plastic. A moment later he was joined by an equally average woman similarly attired. It didn’t look like either was wearing flotation gear. So, not experienced sailors.

I didn’t make the mistake of thinking they were harmless, though. There was no telling what was hidden beneath their bland exteriors. “Well you’re not being very polite, and I’m not in a talkative mood.”

They ignored my words. “Where’s your friend?” The woman’s voice was as average as she looked. The whole normalcy had me on edge. If I were trying to hide in plain sight, that’s exactly how I would dress and hold myself. It actually was what I was trying to do.

“What friend? I’m alone.”

“Now don’t be that way.” The man’s voice was grating. “We saw him. We just want to have a little chat.”

No way had they been able to recognize him if they really had even seen that there were two people aboard. If they had identified Eric, they would have headed over sooner.

“I really have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m alone. Now release my boat and let me be on my way.”

That wasn’t happening anytime soon. The two vessels were now flush, and the men had dropped their hooks to rope the boats together. Another woman, previously unseen, stepped up to the edge and climbed over. She was someone new, not the captain who now stood on deck ordering her people about. After securing the vessels, the two big men joined her. All of them looked and dressed like thugs.

“Now see here. You are trespassing. You do not have permission to board me.” I sounded like I should be wearing khakis and a polo shirt. Perhaps I was playing it a bit too strong. I wished I had Eric’s skills.

Thug Woman snorted. “We gave ourselves permission.” Her cronies laughed.

“I want you to leave.” Obviously that wasn’t going to happen, but I wanted them to continue to think I was stupid so they would underestimate me.

“I’m sorry, but that isn’t going to happen. We really just want to talk,” Ordinary Man said as he hopped over. By now Ordinary Woman had also joined us on my deck, which was getting much too crowded.

“Then talk.”

“Well, we really want to talk to both of you.” I was really beginning to hate the man’s voice.

Thug One poked his head into the cabin. “No one right here. We’ll check the rest.” He stuck his hand in his jacket pocket and stepped down into the salon, followed by Thug Two who had a hand in a pocket, as well. Subtle.

Thug Woman not so gently pushed me to sit on the far bulwark. I went along with it for the time being, but slid over until I was in the corner. She didn’t stop me, thankfully, probably figuring that “corner” meant “cornered.” Wrong.

“What do you want? I don’t have anything. I’m just out for a cruise. Getting away from it all, you know?” I realized I had no compunction about lying and evading the truth with criminals.

Ordinary Woman sighed. “Knock it off. Where’s the painting?”

Ordinary Man glared at her. Most likely he was going for a more indirect method of interrogation.

“What are you talking about? What painting?” This was getting tiring.

Thug woman glared back at Ordinary Man, then looked at me. “Don’t play dumb. We ran your vessel name while you were just sitting out here doing God knows what. There’s no Knotty Lady licensed out of Alaska, Washington, or B.C. other than a single commercial fishing boat out of Juneau. You don’t look like a commercial fisherman to me.”

She crossed her arms. “Your boat is too big not to be licensed. You’re either a long way from home, or you’re hiding something, or you’re an idiot for being out in open waters without a legally licensed boat.”

My license had expired? That was news to me. Guess I had missed that notice in my nonexistent mailbox. Oops. The bank probably wouldn't be too happy about it, either. The woman was right that it was suspicious for an average weekend boater to forget to relicense his vessel.

"I'm guessing you're hiding something." Ordinary Man had decided he was no longer playing Mr. Friendly. "Where's the painting?"

"What painting?" I hated repeating myself. I hated talking in general.

He sighed. "Okay, we'll play along for the moment. If you aren't looking for the painting, why are you sitting in a vessel in the middle of nowhere doing nothing in an unregistered boat?"

They thought I was looking for the painting? Huh. All right, time to drop the idiot tourist act and move on to annoying jerk. So, what was I doing? "I like fish."

Ordinary Woman narrowed her eyes. "Why aren't you fishing?"

"Why aren't you?"

Her nostrils flared but she didn't take the bait. "I repeat the question. Why aren't you fishing?"

I shrugged.

She slapped me, but I saw it coming and flowed with it so it barely registered. "Try again," she snarled.

"Don't feel like it." Neither fishing nor answering.

Ordinary Man stepped in. "Then what are you doing here right now? Why did you drop anchor?"

"Sleeping."

"In the middle of the afternoon?" Thug woman looked dubious.

"It's called taking a nap."

Ordinary Woman butted in. "You're a very active sleeper. We saw you walking around. Naked." She smirked. Thug Woman chuckled.

"\$200 for the peep show. That's U.S. dollars in case you get any funny ideas. Pay up."

Her smile disappeared. "Do you think this is a joke? Mr...?"

"Yep." Did she really think I would give her my name?

She growled. "This isn't going anywhere. Where is your friend?"

"What friend?"

"Don't play coy. You were naked. You fags were undoubtedly playing hide the sausage." Ordinary spat the words with disgust.

"I'm not sure what that is. Maybe you could demonstrate."

This time the slap missed me completely. Ordinary Woman wasn't as good at hitting as Thug Woman, no surprise. The latter was built like a cement truck. The male goons reappeared. "Nothing below."

"He's got to be somewhere." Ordinary Man grabbed my jacket. "Where is he?"

"Fishing?" I found I loved being annoying.

Ordinary Man not so much. He slugged me. I rolled with it, grabbing his arm and twisting him. He was in front of me, blocking my body and head, my knife at his throat, in seconds. I was still perched on the gunwale and most of his body was between my legs, but I had the knife angled in such a way that if he tried to drop, he would slash his own throat.

A moment later, three guns had left their pockets and were now cocked in my direction. Luckily for me, I had a nice big shield blocking my important bits. From my position in the corner, no one could get a good angle from which to shoot me.

Keeping my head behind Ordinary Man's, I raised my voice to make sure they could hear me. "Now that wasn't very nice. I thought you folks just wanted to talk." Since I had showed my cards, the game had changed. I was very proud of the metaphor as it came to me. It felt very pop culture, a particularly weak area of mine.

"Let him go." Ordinary Woman was not pleased.

"Get off my boat." I pulled the knife toward me a little and felt Ordinary Man's skin give. The cut wasn't deep, but I could smell blood. He whimpered.

"Give us the painting." Thug Woman wasn't happy, either.

"Get off my boat."

For a moment, I thought Ordinary Woman was going to stomp her foot. "Where is the other man that was here?"

"Get off my boat."

Broken record was a good technique for not getting into arguments. On the other hand, it tended to make people angry. Thug Woman was no exception. "I'll give you to the count of five before I shoot your face off."

That was unexpected. "You may have failed to notice that someone else's head is in the way," I pointed out.

She broke into the nastiest smile I had seen in quite a while. "I don't care. He's expendable." The whole situation shifted on its axis as I realized I had been wrong about who was in charge. Looks can be deceiving.

In my arms, the man jerked a little but didn't say anything. Maybe he hoped she was bluffing.

"Ferguson! You can't shoot Steve!" Ordinary Woman shouted. *Ferguson. Steve.* That totally fit him.

Ferguson snarled but she didn't take her eyes off me. "Good fucking job saying our names, *Cathy*. I didn't want this jackass to know who we are." *Cathy.* That fit her, too.

Cathy glared back, hands on hips. "Oh shut up. You're going to kill the guy anyway. Who cares if he knows our names?" She turned to glare at me.

Ferguson's jaw tightened. "I wasn't planning on sharing that particularly tidbit just yet. Tends to stop cooperation."

"Like he's cooperating to begin with." Cathy rolled her eyes as she said the words, still glaring.

Thug One stepped in and asked, "What now? Atherton's not here."

Cathy was getting exasperated. "Where the fuck do you think he went? That water's too cold and there's nothing nearby. He couldn't have gone anywhere. Look again."

"Fucking bitch." Thug Two said the words quietly, like he meant to keep them under his breath, but he hadn't been trying very hard. Cathy ignored him. She had probably been called worse. I had some ideas if he was interested. Most were less gender specific and sexist, and more anatomical.

"Where is he?" Ferguson enunciated carefully, her attention back on me.

Hopefully safe. I had a sudden vision of someone accidentally pulling the secret lever while searching, releasing the contents of the hold into the water. Talk about cold shock. Then figuring out how to get out from under the boat

without being cut on the rotor, which although stopped now, was still sharp enough to be dangerous. Or it could catch the strap of something, say a life jacket... I needed to stop thinking about it.

“How about you all introduce yourselves so I can put names with faces?” Apparently they didn't find me as funny as Eric did because no one even smiled. *Eric*. I hoped he was okay. I didn't allow myself to dwell again, though. I really needed to stay focused since I wanted to get us both out of there alive.

“I'm getting sick of your shit,” Ferguson said to me as she cocked her gun and pointed it at Steve's head. A horrible stench filled the air. Yuck. I couldn't really blame him, but I wanted to throw the man and his urine soaked pants away from me. I wasn't that stupid though. Perhaps Ferguson had no compunction about shooting Steve, but I wasn't going to take her word for it. I still wanted his body blocking mine.

“Don't kill him yet. We may still need him. We'll go look again.” That said, Cathy looked at the two thugs and pointed at the entrance to the cabin. The men headed inside with her trailing behind.

These were much better odds. Over on the fishing boat, only one person was paying any attention to us. He stood smoking a cigarette and drinking something from an insulated mug, sitting on a crate like he was watching a show. All he needed was popcorn. I didn't discount him, but I doubted he was much of a threat at this point. He was dressed in fishing gear including a thick flotation coat. Unless he had a gun, he was not an issue at the moment.

Ferguson's voice pulled my primary attention back to her. “It's just us now, and I've already made it clear I don't care about Steve. Give me the painting and tell me where Atherton is, and I'll make your death quick and painless.”

“Forgive me if I don't quite trust you.” I sounded calmer than I felt.

She grinned. “You're forgiven since you're right not to.” She lowered her gun and shot Steve through the chest, but the movement before she pulled the trigger gave me time to dive out of the way.

Steve's screams punctuated the air as I flipped and came back up with throwing spikes in my hands which I proceeded to fling at Ferguson. Cargo pants were cool. I thought I heard a muffled bang from inside the cabin just as one of my projectiles hit Ferguson in the hand she was aiming with. The other sunk into her hip.

“Motherfucker!” she yelled.

The gun went off again, but I was already swinging myself up the side of the cabin to the upper deck. I took in that the gunfire on deck had drawn other members of the team outside.

I also noticed that the fishing crew just stood there with their mouths open. Idiots. None were taking any precautions that I might be the one with the gun and might turn it on them. Not that I would have. Their biggest crime was probably greed.

Thinking about them, was a waste of time, so I ignored them and bolted across the upper deck. No one had thought to take out the radio and hopefully I had a chance to signal the Coast Guard. I hadn't called them before the jerks boarded because I hadn't had anything to report. Now was a completely different story.

But I didn't have a chance to do more than lift the mic, because I heard one of the goons already scaling the ladder and probably drawing a bead on my back. I dove through one of the side openings of the wheelhouse as bullets began flying past me, shattering the windshield. I heard Ferguson screaming to maim not kill me, and Cathy screaming that she hadn't signed up for this. Well neither had I, so I didn't have a whole lot of sympathy.

I caught a handhold on my way over and used it to twist myself around the corner of the cabin and onto the foredeck just in time to avoid the bullets flying along the gangway. The deck was bigger and wider up here, which meant it had fewer hiding places, but it did have a porthole to the main sleeping compartment below.

I turned as Thug Two rounded the corner. It was hard to hit a moving target, but I was still very good, despite being somewhat out of practice. Twice a week I shot at stationary objects, but it had been a while since I'd had a live adversary. My bullet met its target, though, and I heard the guy cry out, but I was already aiming at the smashed windshield when Thug One peered down.

As I shot him, I heard a loud splash from the other guy hitting the water. The boat was bobbing roughly from everyone running around, so my aim suffered, and I only grazed him. He grunted as he fell back.

Cathy poked her head around the corner just before I dove head first through the portal to the stateroom. Rainwater was now leaking onto the bunk, but that was probably a lower priority than staying alive. It still came a close second. I had plans for that bed when we got out of this. They would have to

wait, though, because when I sprang up from where I landed, Ferguson was waiting for me with a pistol in one hand and Eric in the other.

\*\*\*\*

*Besieged*

My heart fell through the deck when I saw him. Survival mode went out the window, and all I could think was that I had failed him.

"I'm so sorry." My words came out in a croak but he grinned and shrugged. How he could look so calm, I had no idea. Inside I was falling apart.

"Drop the gun," Ferguson instructed. I dropped the gun. "Move it or boyfriend gets it." She stood to the side, pistol jammed in Eric's ear. Smart choice. Most people would have aimed for the temple, but the ear would keep the weapon pointed at the brain and such a close range shot would kill just as thoroughly as one from anywhere else.

I noticed that she hadn't removed the throwing spike embedded in her hip. Also smart. That deep, it had hit enough blood vessels that right now it was probably the only thing stopping her from bleeding heavily. She moved a little stiffly but not too badly. Apparently she was resilient in addition to being intelligent. Her hand wasn't doing as well, judging by the red paper towels twisted around her fingers, but she still had a tight grip on my lover. Apparently I needed to sharpen my weapons.

Ferguson's voice betrayed her pain. "I said move it!"

I moved it.

The galley and salon were quite hazy as we passed through, and smelled of sulfur. Back outside, the deck was awash with Steve's blood, although he wasn't anywhere in sight. A wide stripe of red across the bulwark made it clear where he had gone. He probably hadn't died from the gunshot, but it didn't matter anymore. Eric and I were the only ones wearing life jackets. Hopefully Davey Jones's Locker had room for non-sailors, too.

Thug One was checking the clip in his pistol, looking hale and hearty, no blood even showing through the tiny hole in his jacket sleeve. Thug Two was clutching his collarbone but was breathing when he hauled himself over the stern and fell onto the deck to join our little party.

There was a quip there somewhere, but I wasn't in a mood for games anymore. With Eric's appearance, everything became real to me. Not that it hadn't before, but I had spent so much of my life surviving what well-trained killers thought was childrearing, the situation really hadn't phased me.

Seeing my peaceable lover held hostage by these vile people had brought home the finality of the situation. When I had the upper hand, it was fun to banter. Now they had everything that mattered to me, not that the list was long, but the two things on it were priceless, and really, I was pretty sure I could survive without the boat. I had nothing.

“Pat him down,” Ferguson instructed the men.

Thug One strode over. It took a few moments for my weapons to be found and deposited in a nearby bucket. He looked impressed. Ferguson looked appalled. I just shrugged. Eric looked like it was exactly what he expected and maybe a little proud. That made it worse somehow. I had wanted and hoped that he would never see this side of me.

“Get rid of it,” Ferguson ordered.

The man looked a little reluctant, and maybe a little envious, but he picked up the bucket and dumped it over the side. The weaponry didn't matter. There were plenty of other deadly things within reach. What I needed was to get control of the situation as soon as possible. It was ridiculous that five people had managed to outsmart me on my own boat.

Cathy came around the side, and although I kept my focus on the gun Ferguson had sticking in Eric's ear, I noticed that Cathy was limping. “Why didn't you kill the bastard?” She directed a venomous glare at Eric.

Ferguson looked furious. “We need him.”

Amazingly, Eric was smirking.

I looked from him to Ferguson and back again. “What happened?”

“Ask lover boy here.” Ferguson snarled as she shook Eric.

His easy grin was disconcerting. “The short one's smart enough but doesn't have any common sense.” He must have meant Cathy. Ferguson was huge. “While everyone else was going after you, she stayed behind to look for me. Alone. Unarmed. I wasn't.” I narrowed my eyes, and he shrugged again. Why hadn't he stayed put? “This boat is a floating arsenal. I bet you've forgotten most of what you've stashed here.”

I wanted him to stop talking and giving away my secrets, but Ferguson didn't look at all surprised. Eric kept going as was his habit. “She found me—” Oh. “—but I used some kind of smoke bomb thing I found before I hid.” That was the bang I heard and also the smell.

My little pocket smokers also made noise in order to confuse someone into thinking they were hearing gunfire while impeding their ability to see what the sound really was. The odor was just from the components. Smoke bombs were one of my favorite weapons, but it sickened me to think of Eric having to use one.

“The woman now was startled, and when she backed away, she slipped and fell. She was getting back up when this woman,” he indicated Ferguson with his thumb, “came running. By then the smoke was pretty thick and she tripped over the other one. I had grabbed the coffee pot, and when she fell, I took the opportunity to smash her head with it.”

That was when I noticed that Ferguson had blood clotting her hair, and if I wasn't mistaken, a lump growing beneath the mess. She also had blood dripping from her jaw. My own jaw dropped a little, but I managed to keep my lips closed. My wonderful Eric had subdued two professional violent criminals with a smoke bomb and a coffee pot? He even looked pleased with himself. I could have kissed him. In fact, I very badly wanted to.

“I would have gotten the short one, too, but she's wily,” Eric said with a smirk.

Cathy glowered behind him. “Shut up.”

“She's more agile and slipped out the window. I only had time to whack her in the leg before she was gone.” He grinned as he spoke.

“I said, ‘Shut up!’” Cathy yelled at him.

“However, unlike Jet Lee or Jackie Chan, I can't handle even two people at once. It was still hard to see through all the smoke, so I tried to sneak back to the... bathroom?” He looked at me, eyebrows raised.

“Head,” I explained, although I really wanted Eric to stop talking. Maybe he was trying to distract them to give me time to do something. But at the moment, there were too many people for me to get us out of the situation and still keep him safe.

“Head, right. I went for the head and almost made it. The big one couldn't see, either, so she grabbed for the closest thing to pull herself up. Unfortunately, that was me.” He looked regretful. “Sorry. Although I have to say she fell again when I wasn't a sturdy enough wall to use to pull herself up. That's when she banged her chin. I felt bad about that.” He didn't look at all apologetic. “Okay, I'm lying. It was the highlight of my afternoon. Since they boarded us, I mean. The things before were *much* better.” He winked at me.

Now I wanted to punch him. He wasn't taking this seriously. Still I was impressed. How he had done all that in the space of about two minutes, I had no idea. I also wasn't sure what his plan was. Maybe he was trying to keep them angry and liable to make mistakes.

That sort of made sense, if you watched too many action movies, and I appreciated the attempt, but it was a dumb move. Making people like these angry was likely to push them into doing something rash. Unhinged bad guys made for dead good guys. I probably should have remembered that earlier when I was using Steve as a shield.

"Ferguson." Next to us on the fishing vessel, which I was beginning to think of as more like a pirate ship, Thug One stood with his foot on the gunwale. "These assholes are trying to leave. They're saying guns aren't in their contracts."

It hadn't escaped my attention that the crew had finally all disappeared, which was quite impressive given how small the pilothouse was and how open the deck.

Ferguson swore. "Let them. This boat will do just as well. The painting is here somewhere." She jabbed Eric with the pistol. "Where were you hiding? Where's the painting?"

"What painting?" Eric was still egging them on.

I glared at him and shook my head. Stop baiting the guys with the guns.

"Very funny. Where is it?" Ferguson shook him a little.

Cathy chimed in. "It wasn't in the bolt-hole where he was hiding." It wasn't? Then where was it? "The thing is sloshing with water."

"Where is it?" Ferguson shouted at Eric and jammed the gun in his ear again.

I jumped in to distract her. "What painting are you talking about? I haven't seen any painting. This is a boat not a museum."

Ferguson gave me her full focus instead of just half. "The Agony of the Martyr, and I know you have it because Atherton would never let it out of his sight." It wasn't in his sight right now, but unlike Eric, I wasn't about to bait them anymore.

"I don't know what you've been drinking, but this man washed up on my shore without even a stitch of clothing on. There was no way he was hiding any painting."

“You’re lying.” Ferguson spat the words.

Thug Two was clearly in a lot of pain, and he finally lost it. “Give us the painting, you dumb fuck!” He stood and tried to march over but he had lost too much blood, and he staggered and fell to his knees. He wasn’t doing very well. I was pretty sure I only hit his collarbone, but maybe I nicked something major. Whatever thing he had wadded against his neck was completely saturated in blood and he was very pale.

The jerk on the seiner threw a few bags of crap onto my deck and started to untie us. The bleeding man looked panicked “Carmichael, wait. Get me over to that ship. They can get me help. I need a hospital ASAP.” *Carmichael*. Thug Two’s words were slurred and blood began dripping down his chest.

“Scholtz, are you nuts? We’d all be arrested. We’ve got at least attempted murder now. That crew isn’t blind. The only way we’re getting away is if we all go. If they don’t have you lying there bleeding, it will take a lot longer for anyone to believe their story and come looking for us.” *Scholtz*. Now I had all their names. Carmichael returned to his task.

Scholtz wasn’t giving in. “You guys’ll be long gone, and I’ll make sure nobody says nothin’. I’ll tell ’em I got harpooned or somethin’.” An image formed in my mind of him lying on deck with a spear sticking out of his gut, and I almost laughed. Well I thought about it anyway.

Carmichael was clearly disgusted. “On a trawler?” Purse seiner, but the point was moot. “You’ve got a bullet in your neck. You’re a fucking idiot.”

Ferguson apparently agreed. “Scholtz, shut up, you’ll survive.” I wasn’t so sure. “Cathy, get us underway.”

Cathy groaned. “I haven’t driven a boat in years, Ferguson.”

“I’m sure it’s like riding a bike. Take us back to base.” Ferguson still hadn’t broken eye contact with me or I would have made a move.

“Fine.” Cathy climbed up the ladder and disappeared. I hated the idea of her touching the helm of my boat. If she damaged anything, I would take it out of the woman’s insides.

Carmichael finished untying us, jumped aboard, and called out to the crew on the other boat. In moments, the vessel was pulling away. He grabbed the bags and disappeared below.

Ferguson stared me down. “One last time. *Where... is... the painting?*” Good question.

Mimicking her, I spaced out my words, too. "I... don't... know." I wasn't even lying. I really didn't have a clue as to where Eric had hidden it.

"Well then, if there isn't anything you can tell me, I suppose I can just kill you both now." Her finger moved on the trigger.

"No!" I yelled. She probably didn't have any intention of shooting him, but I couldn't take that risk. "It's back at my hideaway. We were just hanging out there, until you folks left. We thought you were long gone, so today we were going into port to call the authorities." I felt the boat rumble under my feet as Cathy got us underway.

"Hideaway? Are you for real?"

Sue me for not being up on the jargon. "Whatever you want to call it, it's a remote beach house and there's no one else there. That's where we left the painting." Eric looked at me like he couldn't figure out what my plan could possibly be. That was two of us.

"You expect me to believe Atherton would let that thing out of his sight?" Ferguson looked skeptical but not completely disbelieving. Behind her, the fishing boat was gaining speed, leaving us jostling in her wake.

"Do you really think he would let something that valuable onto a ship this size in this kind of weather and environment? The thing already got soaked. It's still drying." That much was true, wherever it was. Evading the truth without lying was one of my better honed skills.

Her eyes bugged out. "It got wet?"

"Your stupid case was open when it fell off the boat. Water got in," Eric chimed in. His charming grin was gone, and in its place was a snarl.

"Fuck!" Ferguson was red in the face.

Near the stern, Scholtz was prone on the deck. Blood was running down his side, joining the pooling water, painting the whole deck pink. It was not a good color for my boat. I nodded in his direction. "Your buddy doesn't look good at all. He needs a doctor ASAP."

"Who cares? Less money I have to pay out. Where is this 'hideaway' of yours?" Nice woman.

"Let me up into the helm, and I'll get us there." I tried to look cowed, but it apparently had been too long since I had practiced that particular ability.

She laughed and growled at the same time. "Oh you're funny." It was worth a try.

I decided to bargain. "Get that gun away from Eric's ear, and I'll give you the coordinates for my estate. You'll have to take us with you, though, because the painting is hidden." She had no idea how tiny my little cabin was. Calling it an estate was a riot.

Ferguson stared at me for a moment. "Carmichael."

He came up from below. I hadn't forgotten him; I wouldn't make that mistake. He was very dangerous, the kind of miscreant who listened rather than spoke, who watched and waited for the right moment. He was like me, although lately I had been doing a lot more talking than I had ever done on any training mission. Yes, he was just like me, and he was truly deadly.

"Toss Scholtz overboard." Ferguson didn't look at either one of them as she spoke. She wasn't dumb; she had her eyes locked on mine. She knew I was the Carmichael of our side.

Scholtz was unconscious, so he couldn't protest as the other man dragged him to the side of the boat and threw him over the gunwale. The body barely made a splash as it hit the water. Carmichael didn't even get any blood on his clothes. I would have to learn that trick.

"We'll do it your way, but you're only buying time. We're going to get the painting, and you're not going to stop us from selling it." We didn't need to. The Pacific had taken care of that for us. "Cathy!" Ferguson shouted.

The woman appeared above. "What now?"

"New plan." Ferguson raised an eyebrow at me. I gave Cathy the GPS coordinates and she disappeared again. A moment later, the deck tilted a little as our course changed.

The rain was already washing Scholtz's blood away. Steve's was mostly gone from the gunwale. Eric was staying quiet, but he didn't appear to like that we were heading back to the island. I didn't either, but as she said, I was buying us time.

"Carmichael, I think the boys here need a little assurance that we mean what we say." Like live people being dumped overboard hadn't already cleared that up for me. "Take him." She shoved Eric at the killer. I sucked in a breath, but I waited to see what her plan was. The gun was now pointed at me. "Rough him

up a bit.” Although she directed her comments to the man behind her, she never took her eyes off mine.

Panic, a heretofore unknown-in-adulthood feeling, slammed through me. It was all I could do to not shake and somehow appear outwardly calm. “That’s not necessary,” I managed.

“Oh I think it is.” But she didn’t let go of Eric yet in passing him off. Her hand had stopped bleeding so her grip was tight, but she still looked like she was hurting from the wound in her hip. I hoped I could use that at some point.

I looked at my lover, and I was sure he could see the fear in my eyes, but I didn’t see any in his. He smirked as if to say, “I can take it.”

No he couldn’t. Maybe he was planning something. That was even worse. “You know, I don’t know where the painting is hidden. He doesn’t trust me enough. We’ve only known each other a week. He took care of hiding it.” I was babbling, anything to keep her attention on me and away from Eric.

“Like you wouldn’t know where it was stashed in your own home,” she jeered.

“It’s a big house, and he hid it while I was getting the boat ready. It’s beautiful, by the way, the painting, although the manor is too.” My little hut was getting delusions of grandeur.

Ferguson scoffed. “You expect me to believe he just happened to land on your island without planning? That he drifted all that way to conveniently wash up at your door—naked as you claim—convinced you of his story, you bonded and started fucking, and then you planned this elaborate scheme? That’s ridiculous.”

Well put that way, it did sound a little far-fetched.

“Carmichael, just hurt him a little. Don’t want to mess up that pretty face of his.” Eric was handed over, and I stifled a shout. Nothing I could do would make it better, and getting upset would only make it worse. If they knew how much he meant to me, they’d be that much rougher with him.

It almost killed me, though. I didn’t want to watch while the reprobate pounded Eric’s body. My lover fought back, and he got a few blows in, but he was no match for superior skills and was quickly overcome. Eventually, he just lay on the ground trying to protect his body from the kicks and punches. He grunted as the air whooshed out of him, but he didn’t make any more noise than that.

I had never felt more rage and helplessness than in that moment. This was even worse than when Eric was so upset on the beach. He wasn't just feeling emotional pain; someone was inflicting physical pain in addition to the psychological kind, and on top of his existing injuries that were still healing. I was against needless death. This man's was necessary. I vowed he would get his just reward, and Ferguson, too, for ordering it.

For her part, she was leaning back against the cabin wall, a smirk on her face, the gun loose in her hand. I wasn't fooled, though. She wasn't stupid and had never taken her eyes off me. She was still well balanced, and though I was fast, she would shoot me before I could reach her, despite her obvious pain. If I jumped out of her way instead, she'd shoot Eric, an easy target. I hated her.

Finally the beating stopped, and Carmichael stood back. I was pleased his lip was cut and his face puffy. I would bet money that in a few hours he would be sporting some bruises the size of my lover's fists, assuming Carmichael lived that long, which wasn't a bet I would make given the way things were going. So probably it wouldn't be a good idea to make the first wager either. I could see Eric breathing, but my anxiety wouldn't ease one iota until I could examine him and make sure he was okay.

This had to end. I looked into Ferguson's eyes and showed her all the cold-blooded, raging evil that I had suppressed all those years. I wanted her to see who she was really dealing with. I wasn't disappointed when I saw a moment of fear in her eyes. I dismissed her with a lazy blink and then turned back to my lover.

He was slowly uncurling until he was sitting, breathing heavily, but in one piece. To him, I only showed affection and concern. I wanted to say something reassuring, but I wasn't good with empty platitudes. I was beginning to think I wasn't much good at all.

Eric didn't pause more than a moment. He slowly pulled himself to his feet and to his full height. He straightened his shirt and life jacket then looked at me with his customary grin. "Well that was invigorating. What's next on the agenda?" Although I wanted to hit him myself for goading them, inwardly I smiled at his inner strength and audacity. I really, really liked him. A really, really lot.

"I would like to sit down. Is that all right with you?" My sitting would make everyone relax which could only help. I was just as lethal sitting on my ass as standing on my feet, which I had demonstrated when I had injured Ferguson earlier.

Her memory was failing, or maybe she was just tired and in too much pain. She nodded, no longer smirking, most likely still reeling from my stare earlier. It was a pretty scary look; I had practiced in the mirror.

I sat down and stretched my legs. On the other side of the boat, Eric did the same. I met his eyes and again let him know how much I cared. He blinked in acknowledgment and then sent the same emotion back at me. If I hadn't already been sitting, I might have fallen.

His emotions were staggering. If it hadn't been only a week, I would have sworn what I saw was... but no. Intense situations, like the many that had happened over the week, heightened feelings, made people believe things were real that weren't. Regardless, I vowed I wouldn't let him down. I would get him out of this.

Carmichael had been thorough when he searched me, but he hadn't gotten everything. I still had a garrote inside my waistband. I would have to get close to make use of it, but it was still something that I knew I could utilize. I didn't really need it, though. There were plenty of things within reach that could be used as weapons, not the least of which were my hands, arms, legs, feet, and teeth. I didn't fight fair when I was fighting to survive. I just needed the right opportunity.

It came sooner than expected. The place where I had lived the past four years drifted into view only a few minutes after I sat down. Eric was sitting slumped on the bulwark while Carmichael stood at ease but wary, a few feet distant. I could work with that.

I had slowly maneuvered the garrote out of my waistband while we'd traveled, and as I had pulled it out, I had fed it under my T-shirt. Now I had it ready and waiting. I pointed to the island with my chin. "There it is. Told you."

"Hmm." Ferguson glowered but she took her eyes off me for just a moment to peer around the side of the cabin to see for herself. That was all I needed. In one swift move, I kicked her legs out from under her and used the slickness of the deck to slide across to Carmichael.

He had noticed the moment I moved and grabbed for his gun, but he made a fatal error. He turned to point it at Eric, but my lover was already gone over the side. I was only a little worried; he was wearing a life jacket. As long as I took care of these beasts while he was still in sight, he'd be fine.

In fact, I was going to thank him slowly and thoroughly when we were done. If he'd still have me... Who knew what he would think about the trained

killer he had probably figured out I was. I hadn't killed anyone directly, but Scholtz had died from my bullet. Maybe with luck, Eric would think it had just been a lucky shot.

I could dwell on that later. I used my momentum to spin and kick at Carmichael's legs, but he was up on the gunwale already searching the water. Oh no, that wouldn't do. I screamed at him, not in anger, but simply to distract him from looking for Eric.

It worked and he turned quickly, but not soon enough to avoid the small buoy I had launched at him. He stumbled, but didn't fall. Behind me, Ferguson had quickly recovered, and I hoped her aim wasn't as good as mine. It wasn't, at least on a rocking boat, and the shot went wide.

I was already on my feet, and I swiveled away from the direction Carmichael evidently expected me to go, avoiding his shot, too. Creatively, I used the garrote by casting it out, flicking it around his wrist, and pulling. His gun flew from his grip, and I caught it in midair turning as I did so to shoot Ferguson as she aimed at me.

Her bullet grazed my foot but she went down with a thud as her pistol went flying off the boat. Then Carmichael was on me and we struggled, fairly well matched. He tried to get the gun but I sent it sailing rather than let him get his hands on it. It wasn't the right weapon for a struggle that close. Unfortunately, the man managed to flip me, and as I swung around, he whacked my head against a ladder strut.

Although it only kept me down for a second, it was enough, and he had his arm around my throat in a choke hold he knew how to use. He also knew how to protect his body from my flailing. I couldn't reach his eyes, ears, or genitals. Gouging his legs and arms was ineffectual, but I didn't give up easily. Eric was out there and needed me.

I moved us and tried to bash his head against the same strut. He coiled up and avoided it, but I had already seen what I needed. Ferguson had managed to get her hand on Carmichael's gun and was aiming it at me, so I used the motion he had started to roll us straight into her path.

The bang was loud but the concussion was more distracting as the bullet plowed into Carmichael's back behind me. For once my luck held, and what must have been hollow point rounds shredded his insides instead of traveling through him to hit me as well.

We weren't done yet, though. Even as I felt Carmichael's body go limp, I was flipping over and onto Ferguson in seconds. She was too weak from her injuries to aim quickly enough, and I knocked her out easily.

I quickly whirled around to take care of Carmichael but he had already joined his comrades in death. Ferguson might wake up, but I doubted she would be able to do anything. Still I chucked the guns into the cabin—they would be needed for evidence—and rushed to the stern to find Eric.

He was nowhere in sight, and I lost my mind. "Eric!" I screamed his name as I jumped up on the gunwale to get a better view. How could I not see him? We were no longer moving, and even at sea level, from my height I could see at least three miles. I screamed again. "Eric! ERIC!"

"He's long gone."

I spun around. *Cathy*. In my terror, I had forgotten there was someone steering the boat. Sloppy, sloppy. In my head, I heard *his* sneering recrimination. I had messed up, and Eric was going to die.

The monstrous woman stood at the top of the ladder, yet another fucking—yes, fucking—gun pointed at me. "He's dead, and now that I see your little island, with the tiny little cabin over there, so are you." She pulled the trigger. I only had a second to think anything as the projectile sped toward me, but my grief for Eric was overwhelming. And here I had thought she was the least dangerous of them all. Sloppy, sloppy.

I felt the bullet slam into my chest, puncturing not just my flesh, but my inflatable life jacket as well, rendering the flotation aspects useless. I should have shelled out for the full parka that didn't need to be inflated. Cathy wasn't using hollow point bullets, although it hardly mattered. Those just would have killed me more quickly.

I was unbalanced by the impact and the motion of the boat sent me dropping off the stern. But as I fell, I saw Cathy collapse in a spatter of blood. Behind her stood Eric wearing a look of horror and anguish that I could just make out before the waves closed over me.

The effects of the gunshot and the look on my lover's face wiped my training from my mind, and I gasped and breathed in water. I shouldn't have been able to think of anything in that moment, shock should have wiped my mind, but I did. I thought of Eric, and I was glad he was alive and had survived. I succumbed to the cold, the drowning, and the loss of blood, my mind at peace.

*Bloody*

Cold.

It was so cold. The chill entered my very soul and endured for eternity. Blessed numbness should have taken it away, but there was no reprieve. And there was pain, so much pain. Cold, cold pain.

Shouting. Movement—like waves. My name. Movement not like waves. My name being screamed. *Crusoe*.

Icy torment pulling me from the peaceful dark. It hurt so much.

“Goddamnit, Crusoe, don’t you fucking die on me!” Something clawed at my arm and blinding agony shot through me. I might have screamed.

“Boaz, listen to me, you goddamn motherfucker. You fucking stay with me or so help me—”

Loud noises. Thwap, thwap, thwap.

Sobbing? Someone was crying. *Don’t cry*.

Other voices. Shouting. Words I couldn’t understand. Even more pain. How could I hurt any more than I already did? Why couldn’t I get warm?

*Someone please turn up the heat.*

Eric’s voice, *Crusoe*.

Eric.

*Say it again.* Crusoe. I loved that name. How could I have ever not loved that name?

Really loud noises. Other movements. Falling. No, rising.

Eric’s hand. That was Eric’s hand, I knew it was. I would always know Eric’s hand.

Eric. Alive. He was alive, that was what mattered. *Thank you, God.*

I felt the passage of time but still the iciness inside endured. It was so very cold...

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“Crusoe.”

Fuck off.

“Crusoe, I know you’re in there.”

Fuck off!

“Crusoe, come on, baby, wake up. Please. You’ve had your fun. It’s time to come back to me.”

FUCK OFF!

*Cold...*

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Blinding pain shot through me, pushing back the arctic chill just a little. I screamed.

“Crusoe? I’m here.”

*Hurts.* Breathing was excruciating. This pain was as bad as anything I had felt in my life, maybe worse. I was still freezing. Breathing was becoming a problem.

The sound of something hitting hard plastic came from by my ear. A button being pushed frantically? *Eric.*

“I’m calling a nurse, Crusoe. They’ll help you. You’re going to be fine.” He didn’t sound like he was telling me the truth, and that concerned me. Even when he was lying, Eric sounded like he was being truthful. I could sometimes see through him at those times; I thought that maybe I was the only one who could. But barely. Now he sounded scared, and like he was lying, which was disturbing. I didn’t want him to be upset.

I opened my mouth to reassure him, but the pain was too much, and I ended up crying out instead.

“Stay with me, baby, it’s okay.”

Someone else was there. Then something filled me, wrapping me in numbness, away from the hurt. Hauling me back under.

“You’re going to be just fine. The doctor said so.” Eric’s voice was beautiful, a rich and solid sound, but now it was thick with emotion, and he still sounded frightened.

I heard what sounded like a snuffle. “Please be okay.”

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I was freezing, and I was tired of it.

Somewhere deep was horrible pain, but a wall of something thick and cottony inside kept that at bay.

But not the cold.

“Crusoe, if you don’t wake up I’m going to scuttle your boat.”

Why couldn’t I get warm? I had never been this cold in my life. I would rather have the pain.

“Seriously, the thing is old and worthless and now it’s covered in blood and bullet holes. I think we should just burn it.”

What was happening to me?

“Although if we did that, what would be the point of Knotty Lady Shrimp?”  
Shrimp?

“You got your Ketchikan shrimp, your Seattle shrimp, your dog shrimp...”

Eric?

“...hard shrimp, easy shrimp...”

Eric.

“...the tried and true Rock ‘n Roll shrimp, *Rocky Horror* shrimp...”

Enough with the shrimp. I tried again. “Eric.” Well I made a noise anyway, although it sounded nothing like a name.

“Crusoe?” Blazing, fiery heat touched my hand. It was the most wonderful sensation ever. “Hey baby, that you in there? Did you say something?”

“Not... baby...” It would have been easier to speak with rocks in my mouth than with whatever was misfiring somewhere inside. I tried to open my eyes but they felt glued together.

“Crusoe. Thank you, every god that ever lived.” My face was peppered with dabs of white hot heat. I revised my earlier analysis; *those* were the most wonderful sensations ever. They even made the aching barely noticeable. Then the warmth left for a moment that felt much too long, and I heard shouting. “He’s awake!” Then the sensations came back, white hot strokes on my cheeks and one hand. “Open your eyes, baby. The lights are really low, it won’t hurt.”

Liar. Everything hurt. “Not... baby.” That sounded a tiny bit better.

“I couldn’t quite hear you.” I could hear his smile. “You have to open your eyes so I can figure out what you’re saying.”

That made no sense whatsoever. I tried to open my eyes. This time I managed just a crack, not much more than when I had watched Eric jack off. I smiled inwardly at that. He fucking jacked off in my bed and didn't even ask me to join in. *Fucking jacked off*. Why had I refused myself such delicious language? The words tasted sweet.

“Did you just say ‘fucking jacked off’?”

I smiled.

“Oh Crusoe, baby, I love that smile.”

“Not baby.” Inside, the pain barrier cracked and the hurt started seeping through. I think I whimpered.

The infernos he called hands rubbed up and down my wrist and across my brow. “What, baby?”

Someone else came in the room and bustled about. Things beeped and plastic snapped. It got even colder as the covers over my other hand pulled away and someone else touched my arm.

I jerked away from icicles masquerading as hands. I managed to push my eyes open a bit then snapped them shut. Yes, Eric had lied. It was way too bright.

“I’ll be just a minute Mr. Egan, then I’ll get you a fresh warm blanket.” A deeper voice, not Eric. “We’re glad you’re back. How are you feeling?”

In pain that was beginning to be something much worse. The dam staving off that hell was beginning to crumble. I didn't like the man with the hands that were like ice floes sliding along my skin. I tried to ignore him.

“I’m here Crusoe.”

I shivered. “Hurts. Cold.” An overwhelming crush of agony flooded me as the wall came down inside. This time I whimpered for sure.

“I’m giving you something for the pain now, Mr. Egan.” Deeper Voice.

“Okay baby, okay.” *Eric*.

He rubbed my hands and then pulled away. I tried to reach for him but sharp, frigid, spikes of pain lanced through me.

“I’ll be right back. Where are the heated blankets?”

“Just across the hall. I was going to get them in a minute.” Deeper Voice sounded annoyed.

“Let me. Be right back.”

“Eric.” It was all I could manage.

He chuckled. I loved that sound. “I promise.”

I figured I would reward him when he came back, so I practiced opening my eyes. It hurt like hell, but nothing like what was ravaging my chest. By the time Eric came back, I was squinting.

His smile was so bright I almost had to close my eyes again. “There you are.” He grabbed my hand and squeezed it, then kissed my forehead.

“Hi.” I almost sounded human, if human meant dying frog beast.

“Hi yourself. You’re going to be fine; the doctor said so.” He took away the old blankets, and I nearly screamed when the air touched me, but he immediately laid the new ones down, and I felt a very slight bit better. He piled the old ones back on top, and I appreciated their reassuring weight. “She’s a really good surgeon. Fixed you right up.”

I reached for him. “So fucking cold.”

My lover’s brow furrowed as he stopped fussing over me. I really hated seeing him unhappy. “Still?”

“Yeah.” Coughing sent more spikes of agony into my chest.

He looked behind me, at the nurse, I presumed. “Can you do anything for the chills?”

“Sorry. I just gave him more antibiotics and pain medication in his IV. Maybe that will help. I’ll let the doctor know you’re awake, Mr. Egan. I’ll see if you can have anything to drink.” The nurse finished his duties and left.

Eric still looked worried. I wanted to make him happy. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” He looked baffled, not happy.

The pain had ebbed enough that I could get out a few words. “For letting them hit you.”

Now he looked angry. “I’m not a child, Crusoe. Just because I’m not a secret spy, or whatever the hell you are, doesn’t mean I can’t take care of myself.” He stilled, and his face fell. “I’m so sorry I didn’t get her before she shot you.”

“You did get her though. I’m proud.” I smiled and blinked sleepily. I didn’t think I was supposed to be happy Eric had killed someone. Still. Something

was coming over me that made me fuzzy and a little giddy and a lot tired. I nearly giggled. That would never do. The wall blocking the pain was being rebuilt and the discomfort receded. Discomfort. *Is that what they're calling it these days?* I remembered hearing that recently but I couldn't quite place it. "So proud."

"I did, didn't I?" His grin was worth the freezing cold that wouldn't go away, but I didn't have much time to enjoy it as I gave in to that woozy, floaty feeling and slept.

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Next time I awoke, it was dark, and I was alone. For what was probably the first time in my life, I hated it, both the dark and the loneliness. And the cold. It was still freezing, and I started to shiver. I suspected I would never be warm again. Eric had left. He knew I was alive and would survive, so he could leave guilt free.

I tried to tell myself that was okay. I had known he would go soon. I had just hoped he would have said goodbye. Now I was shaking and in pain, and the dark wasn't curbing my fears. I was alone now for real.

What was I going to do? I didn't even know where I was or what was wrong with me. Well, gunshot wound, yeah, but how bad was it? What damage had been done? Was I paralyzed? Moving my feet and arms a moment helped push that particular concern down, not that the limbs moved well. But other doubts surfaced.

Light. I needed light. Where was the call button? Where was everyone? Maybe some plague had flooded the earth and only isolationists survived. I was so panicked, I didn't even realize how stupid that was.

I had worked myself up into quite a state when just a couple of minutes later, Eric walked in holding a large cup of coffee and a bag of chips. "Hey, you're awake." He smiled in the dim light coming in from the door, but that quickly turned to a frown when he looked at my face.

"Light, light—I need the light." It came out in an anxious rush.

"Of course." He put his things down and turned on a light that lit half the room. "That enough?"

"Yeah." I closed my eyes and forced myself to relax. "I just—" Talk about being a child. Even a little kid would tell me I was being a baby.

"What is it?" Eric sat down and took my hand. His heat trailed up my arm.

“I was just scaring myself. Must be the drugs.”

He smiled. “That, and being shot can really fuck with your head. Are you still cold?”

I nodded.

“Here.” He pulled off the lid to his drink and slipped in a straw he took from the rolling table. “It’s just hot water. I was going to make tea. The doctor said you could drink now that the anesthesia has completely worn off.”

I took a sip. A little warmth spread from my mouth to my throat and down my chest. Better. I took another sip.

“Want more blankets?”

“No thanks. They don’t do much.”

“Does anything help?” He caressed my forehead. It felt wonderful.

“That.”

He raised his eyebrows then squeezed my hand. “How about this?”

I nodded.

“Well then, scoot over.”

Yes, that might work. I scooted back. The pain was a lot more bearable now.

“The other way.”

I shifted forward. Eric had to help me when I got tangled in cords and tubes and blankets. But he got me straightened out, blankets properly arrayed, then he kicked off his shoes and climbed in behind me. He curled around my back and put one arm under my head and the other around my waist.

“That better?”

Yes, finally. I felt heat seep into my back and from there spread into my arms and legs. For the first time since I had fallen into the water, I felt warm. “Mm hmm.” In moments I was asleep.

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## **Type 5: Special Use**

### *Hospital*

The next day I felt much better and the next better still. It turned out that I wasn't in Anchorage or Seattle as I had feared, but a hospital in Ketchikan to which I had been airlifted. The trauma center was plenty sufficient to handle a gunshot wound. In Alaska, with all the hunting, they probably got them in all the time.

Eric stayed, and they let him. Despite how conservative the state was, no one gave us a hard time. I figured his big bad muscles didn't hurt, and I was none too scrawny myself, if a bit shorter.

When I worried that Eric was needed back at work, he brushed off my concerns. "I'm the boss. If I can't take a few extra days off, what's the good in owning my own company?" He had a point.

Eric also explained where the pieces of the painting had been. When he was belowdecks waiting for my signal, he had taken the time to hide the pieces properly. He knew that if the thieves found him, they would have the painting. Even though the art was in pieces, it was still extremely valuable, and he didn't want the thieves anywhere near it. He was even more concerned that if the villains (his word, not mine) realized the painting was destroyed, they would have no reason to keep us alive. He wasn't as confident of my secret hold as I was, thank God.

He had taken the scraps and rolled them up in one of the dry bags that contained things I wanted to avoid getting wet, an ever-present possibility given it was a boat and all. He grimaced when he described how he'd had to coil the pieces to fit them into the sack. Not trusting the technology of the waterproofing, he had placed that bag into another, and the whole thing into a third. My lover was nothing if not protective of artwork.

He had thrown in anything heavy he could find to weigh the bags down so they didn't float to the surface. He had then tied not one but two cables to it, just in case one failed, he said, which he had then looped through holes in the edge of the hold's grate floor and fastened them tightly. He had flipped the hidden lever, which dropped the whole lot into the water and closed it again. The bags trailed below the boat, hidden from sight, and all that could be seen were two little bits of cable looped through the grate.

Knowing nothing about boats let alone secret cargo holds, Cathy had no idea that those loops meant anything, if she could even see them above the

water sloshing up from below. All she did was lift the tarp Eric had been sitting on, in order to check for the painting underneath. Seeing nothing but seawater, she had assumed the painting wasn't hidden there.

I was really impressed. It had never occurred to me that the hidden hold wasn't secure enough, and the only reason I wouldn't have been quite as inept as Cathy in finding the bags was that it was my own boat and hopefully would have noticed something amiss. I assured Eric that he was brilliant, and that if my rum-runner's boat makers were still alive, they would throw him a party and offer him a job with their next project. He rolled his eyes but accepted the compliment with a kiss.

When I was well enough to carry on a conversation, including not only staying awake for one but also leading it, I thanked Eric for saving my life. I wanted to be really alert for the discussion because it was important to me that he knew how much I appreciated him. My discomfort had receded to where I was able to do with only a couple of blankets and could sort of sit up in bed if it were angled just right.

Thankfully, Eric refused to let go of me, always touching my arm, my leg, or holding my hand. Although he acted like everything was normal, I thought that maybe it was his way of assuring I was still there and hadn't died. He played it cool, but I could tell that inside he was still getting over the ordeal. As for me, the physical connection was a reminder that I wasn't dreaming.

"I can never thank you enough for what you did."

"Well, I figured I owed you." He grinned.

"No, rescuing you was the best thing that ever happened to me." Being shot had made me a little demonstrative, and I was still adjusting.

"It was good for me, too." The sexual innuendo and the lewd look was vintage Eric.

"Sure. Being alive is generally better than being dead."

He nodded. "That it is." He trailed his finger along my arm, and I realized he was trying to avoid the subject. It looked like he was as uncomfortable with praise as I was. "There are so many great things you can do when you're alive." He tried for lecherous, but he was obviously more affected by the conversation than he wanted me to think.

I was flooded with memories of the day when I had found him lying among the flotsam and jetsam. It seemed so long ago. Then I pictured that gun pressed

to his ear, and Carmichael beating him, and I had to swallow hard. Driving the thoughts back took a bit of effort, but then I was able to ask questions about my rescue.

“How did you get back on the boat and up to the wheelhouse while I was fighting Carmichael?”

“Before I fell in, I grabbed one of those white things that hang by a rope...?”

“Ship bumper?”

“Yeah, that. I grabbed it because I saw that they’re tied on, so when I fell in, I was still holding onto the ship in a way. A bonus was that I kept my arms and hands out of the water so they took longer to go numb.

“Mercifully, the fall was a lot shorter this time and less painful. I held on until the boat slowed to a near stop. I’m glad that was fast because I wouldn’t have been able to hold on much longer. At that point, I swam toward the prow. That’s the word, right?”

I nodded. I hadn’t thought about the boat still moving, and it rattled me that he could have been lost from sight so quickly. The ocean is big and a person is very, very small in comparison.

“So I swam toward the prow but I could see it was too high up. I was so pissed off, I barely even felt the cold. It was probably numbing my aches and pains.” That made sense. “I had to swim back a ways, but no one was watching. Climbing back on was still challenging with my fingers nearly numb, but I obviously made it.

“The cabin wall kept me hidden until I got up over the side of the wheelhouse thing. That woman who was supposed to be steering was over by the ladder watching what was happening to you in the back—”

“Stern.” I corrected him because I knew it would be distracting, and he looked like he was working himself up a little. He was swallowing a lot and the knuckles of the hand that wasn’t touching me were white.

He rolled his eyes. “Stern. She was watching the stern and didn’t even see me coming. Thankfully she was in the process of stopping the boat before I even fell in, maybe as soon as she heard the first shot. It still took me a while to catch up and reach the front.”

I was pretty sure shots weren’t fired until after Eric fell off the boat, well except in the beginning before he was even captured. The timeline of events

was still mixed up in my head a little, though, because of the physical trauma, so I went with it. It hardly mattered.

“By the way, you really aren’t as great at hiding weapons as you think you are.”

That was amusing. “No one other than you has ever found my stashed inventory.”

He looked smug. “Well, you had one under the dashboard which was in plain sight.”

“Only if you were lying on the deck and craning your neck up underneath and behind the wheel. And it’s called the helm.”

“Whatever. I found it easily. Criminals always hide guns there.”

I frowned. “I’m not a criminal.”

“I know.” He kissed me lightly on the lips. “You just think like one.”

He was right. I had been trained by the best. I would have to find new places to stow my weapons. “You knew how to shoot.”

“It’s not difficult when you’re two feet behind your target.”

Good point. “Great job anyway.”

“The hard part was getting your scrawny ass out of the water. Your life jacket failed to inflate.” For a brief moment, I thought I saw fear or horror in his eyes, then he blinked and it was gone.

“They tend to do that when they have holes in them. And my butt isn’t scrawny.” Okay, still working on that profanity thing. “Butt” was better than “bottom” or “derrière” at least.

“But you, my brilliant man,” Eric leaned over and kissed me again, “were wearing one that the Coast Guard guys called something like a hybrid? One that’s supposed to be inflated but also has stuff in it that will float on its own?” Oh yeah. “The jacket didn’t inflate, but there was still enough buoyancy to keep you afloat until I got to you. Plus it was the type that you can survive in the longest.”

Nodding, I explained. “Most of the ones I looked at were too bulky around the neck. The sales guy said these were more comfortable and safer and that a lot of seasoned boaters use them. I just thought it looked cool.” No I didn’t, I couldn’t care less about looking cool. I had just bought what he showed me to

get out of the store as fast as possible because I was getting claustrophobic, but of course I looked it all up because knowledge was power.

I continued. "There are five types of life jackets, and I had a choice between Type 1: Offshore Life Jacket, and Type 5: Special Use, which is what all the people on commercial fishing boats use. They're the ones that are full jackets like a parka, or complete suits. Type one can be made of foam which is why it's bulky, or completely inflatable, or a hybrid of both. The others types aren't good enough for our waters so far from shore. I should have gone for the full suit that protects you from the cold—What?"

He was grinning. "I love it when you talk all smart." He kissed my forehead. "I'm glad you got the right kind." He looked a little upset again. "I would have been really pissed if you had just had an inflatable one."

Okay, subject change. "This gut shot in me is pretty big. I'm kind of surprised I didn't bleed out." For some reason, Eric looked guilty. Maybe that wasn't the best new subject I could have chosen.

Eric bit his lip. "I called for help before I got you." He wouldn't meet my eyes, and instead turned his head away a little. His expression was dark, which wasn't like him at all, and I hated it. "I was already up top, and I really didn't know if any of those assholes were still alive, so I radioed for help before I jumped in after you. It was so hard, and I feel really horrible that I did that first."

I reached for his chin and turned him to face me. "Look at me." He lifted his eyes warily. "That was probably one of the smartest and bravest things you've ever done."

"Huh?" He looked puzzled.

"An average person would have panicked and either started screaming or jumped in after me. You kept your head and called for help first. If Ferguson had gotten free, she could have killed you, and no one would have ever found our bodies, let alone rescued us. If you weren't able to get us back to the boat, we would have eventually frozen to death or drowned. It's the whole putting on your own oxygen mask first thing. That's why what you did was so smart."

I saw that he was at least listening and continued. "Despite your indifferent facade, you are a good guy and care about people. I know it was hard to see someone go down. But still, you did what needed to be done before you came after me. That's why it was so brave."

His eyes were intense as he stared at me. "You're not just 'someone.'" He fisted his hands in the front of my hospital gown where it peeked above the blankets. "I thought you were dead." The cloth pulled further around my body as his fists tightened. "I've never been so scared in my life." He pressed his forehead to mine. "Don't ever fucking do that again."

"Okay." I tried to laugh to lighten the mood, but my chest still hurt, and I was a little emotional, so all I managed was to titter a little. "Don't worry. I'll try to avoid getting shot again. It really isn't very fun."

He chuckled at that and pulled back to look at me. "Good. I'm kind of fond of you." He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine and that ended any conversation for quite a while. I thought I should write a book: *Fast Healing through Kissing*. But then I would have to remove my tongue from his mouth long enough to even dictate the thing, and I really didn't want to ever stop kissing him.

When he slipped his arm around me to pull me closer, I forgot about the book idea and the pain, and just melted into his embrace. Yeah. Making out with Eric was way better than getting shot. The only thing better was having sex with him, and although that was not in our immediate future, I pulled him down onto the bed, and showed him that I was kind of fond of him, too.

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### *Hotel*

I healed quickly and grew stir-crazy fast. I was used to being alone, living by myself in a shack where I could not only smell the waves, but practically feel their thunder from my bed. It had been days since I had even been outside let alone going the miles I was used to walking and running every day.

For his part, Eric did his best to keep my mind occupied and as many people away as possible. But there were doctors and nurses, and detectives with questions that were difficult to answer. When an adorable therapy dog and her equally adorable human came bouncing into the room one day and I nearly bit their heads off, I knew it was time to go, regardless of doctor's orders.

The hospital didn't really fight me. I was much better and they needed the bed. Medical facilities kicked patients out as soon as possible because insurance companies didn't want to pay. I didn't even want to think what the stay was going to cost me since I didn't have insurance, living off the grid as I did. The hospital probably worried that I would stiff them.

They might have been right, as unintentional as it would be on my part. I had some money, but this could end up costing a fortune. Hopefully they had a payment plan. Someone just made me sign a form, took one last set of vitals, then plopped me in a wheelchair and shoved me out the door, good riddance. I agreed.

Eric had booked a hotel on the outskirts of town for me to stay in until I figured out what I was going to do. I couldn't go back to the island yet, not when the nearest medical care was hours away by boat. I needed antibiotics, follow-ups, and physical therapy for starters. So a hotel it was, at least until I was well enough to live on my boat. I could moor it nearby and have access to what I needed.

When Eric opened the door to the mini suite, my jaw dropped. "This is your idea of a low to mid-range hotel?" He must have had a lot more money than I thought.

He surveyed the room. "Not nice enough? I can get you something better. I thought you'd be more comfortable here since it's close to the water and quiet—"

"It's huge. You could fit my whole cabin in here and still have room for the outhouse and my boat."

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration, and since your boat is quite a bit bigger than your cabin, you should have mentioned that one first.”

“It sounded better the way I said it.” I looked at the room again. It was luxurious. Perhaps my judgment was a little off, given my recent living accommodations, but this was nicer than any hotel I had ever stayed in, and I told him so. “I’m a simple guy, I don’t need this.”

He looked sheepish. “I just wanted you to have a nice place to recuperate. It’s the least I could do. I nearly got you killed.”

“Don’t start that again.”

“Okay, fine.”

I sat on the bed to test it out. It was very comfortable. I leered at him. “This is the biggest bed in the biggest room we’ve had access to together.”

He grinned. “That it is.”

“I think we should see if it’s worth the money.”

“Are you sure you’re well enough? You don’t want to pull your staples out.”

“I can handle enough movement to make it work. We can’t do what we did last time, but we can still have fun.” Anything more strenuous would have to wait.

Erik leered. “I’ll just grab the free lotion from the bathroom.”

So much for using something without a lot of additives or chemicals. Well, needs outweighed preferences sometimes.

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Sometime later we lay in each other’s arms, sated, and I would daresay glowing. I was content and drowsy, but I didn’t want to go to sleep just yet. I was enjoying myself too much.

Eric turned to look at me. “I love being here with you.”

I grinned. “It’s not bad.”

He smiled, too, but his face was sad. “I can’t stay here forever.”

Why did he have to go ruin a perfectly good moment? But he was right. “I know.” I shrugged. “You’ve got responsibilities. Life goes on.”

“You almost died.” His voice was thick. “I almost lost you forever.”

“But you didn’t. I’m here. I’m fine.”

“Yeah, but—” He choked on his words.

I pulled him close, and we held each other awhile. Eventually we slept.

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### *Hope*

“It’s time to go.” I was trying to look strong and cool, like Eric’s leaving didn’t matter, but inside I was such a mess of emotions, I couldn’t sort them all out.

“I know.” Outside, the town car he had rented was already packed with the clothes he had bought while in town and the souvenirs he was taking back to his employees and friends. He wasn’t pulling off his whole “whatever” look any more than I was.

He put on his coat, then I handed him a bag with food for the plane. I picked up the portfolio with the remaining pieces of the painting and held it out. Eric still had to deliver them to his employer. Their final disposition would be up to whoever it turned out had owned the original work. For now the remains would be sealed away in a vault as previously planned.

The case hung between us for a moment before he took it and put it down. He pulled me close. “Come with me. There is so much more I want to know about you. I think I got maybe a paragraph of that complicated biography of yours. I want to hear all of your stories.” He laughed. “I never finished telling you about my scintillating art and language studies. I have a whole lexicon of romantic phrases in Russian, Hindi, Indonesian...”

I pulled away, and he ran his fingers through his hair like he wasn’t sure what to do next, like he knew he needed to go but wanted to wait until the last possible second.

“I should use the bathroom one more time. I hate airplane toilets.” He walked away from me to do just that, and I didn’t point out that he’d have another opportunity at the airport.

My breakfast was fighting back. I rubbed my stomach to alleviate the nausea and walked out onto the balcony to get a breath of sea air. Were there even natural bodies of water where Eric lived?

He had a point about there being so much more for us to share. I had never confessed my sins, and I knew that soon he would have to deal with the psychological ramifications of killing someone. Maybe sharing my past could help him through it. He was strong, but the worst days were yet to come. He pretended that nothing bothered him, but I knew this would. Could I leave him to that?

Maybe I needed his help, too, because by my count, I had killed three people that day. Although technically Ferguson shot Carmichael and threw Steve overboard, I had shot Scholtz, and the reality was that I was instrumental in all three deaths. I doubted it was very likely, but maybe I would need someone to talk to at some point as well. Maybe, and it was very much a maybe, someday I could tell Eric a lot more about my past, things I tried not to think about, things I only remembered in dreams.

Then there was the fact that this whole thing wasn't over. Ferguson had confessed she had been hired and wasn't the originator of the crime but didn't know specifically who was, what with all the black ops-like precautions the person (or people) had taken. She had also revealed that her employer had masterminded other heists, at least one of which Eric had thwarted. Whoever it was must still be angry with him. I looked back at the bathroom door. Was he still in danger? Who would protect him?

The toilet flushed and water ran in the sink. Finally Eric emerged. "I just remembered something else. You also agreed to let me sell some of your art. I can't do that easily with you hell and gone." He lifted his eyebrows expectantly like that was a huge selling point.

I smiled. "That's what the U.S. Postal Service is for." At his look, I shook my head. "Yes we have mail service in this 'hell and gone' place. We even have the Internet, I've heard. Now that I'll be living on my boat, I can come into town, and we can email each other whenever we want. We can even use that Skype thing." The look on his face made me feel like a salmon shark had bitten into my heart.

"Crusoe, please. You nearly died and that... that kind of freaked me out." He looked at the floor. "I've realized that I'm not ready to let you walk out of my life just yet. I'm still getting to know you, and I'm just not done with you yet." His tone was light, but his words still surprised me. "Email isn't good enough." I could tell that admitting that made him uncomfortable when he went back in the bathroom like he had forgotten something.

It was true; I had almost died. I almost died doing what I had considered safe: going from where I lived to Yáxwch', something I had done more than a dozen times over the past four years without incident. What was safe? I could die at any time. There were numerous things out there that were deadly, not just the people I was running from.

I could blame Eric for bringing Ferguson and her cronies to my world, but there were many more nasty people out there. Even if Eric hadn't washed up on

my doorstep, the art thieves might have found the island and the bits of painting in the shallows and tried to kill me anyway. Without Eric, no one would have even known I was dead until months down the road when Dzóox' worried because I didn't show up for my seasonal supply run and sent someone to check up on me.

Eric hadn't chosen to bring misery to my door; he hadn't done anything wrong. Bad people were out there and if not those men, probably someone else would have shown up eventually. Could I really stay hidden away from the world forever? Did I want to be alone and isolated the next time something bad happened? Hell, I could choke on a piece of crab or get appendicitis and die simply from being alone out in the middle of nowhere.

When Eric came back in the room he looked at me intently, waiting for an answer, as if the question were simple, like whether I wanted an apple or an orange with my lunch. He knew I was hesitating. I had been going back and forth on the decision since we'd left the island, and I was obviously still waffling. We both knew that when he left, the urgency would diminish and we both might just let it go.

He tried one last time. "We haven't had a chance to make Knotty Lady Shrimp. I'm sure I could come up with something fantastic, and you have to be there to taste it. I wouldn't want to inflict it on any unsuspecting person without trying it out on someone with poor taste buds first." His smirk was impossible to resist, and I chuckled.

What would my world be like without Eric's sense of humor? Being around him was so wonderful. Could I go back to that sad, lonely, nonexistence I had been surviving? Five minutes of thinking I was alone when I was in the hospital, and I had nearly fallen apart.

It wasn't that I couldn't be physically alone or away from him. We hadn't been around each other 24/7 since I had gotten out. He went browsing for gifts, and I abhorred shopping. I went on my daily runs, well more of a fast walk right now, and I enjoyed some alone time when he slept in. But knowing he would be in my bed at night felt so good.

It finally sunk in that he was right: email wasn't enough. I wasn't ready to give him up yet, either. With the decision finally made, I felt depression seep out of my bones and something a little like joy but a lot like terror work its way in.

I pretended to weigh my options. “We do have great sex.” We hadn’t had much; I was still in considerable pain, and I hated how the strong analgesics made me feel. But what we had done so far was mind-blowing, at least for me.

Eric nodded thoughtfully. “It would be a shame to give that up. It’s hard to find a compatible partner.”

“You’re still the preferred choice in being the first person to stick his dick up my ass.”

My lover looked surprised at my wording but he rallied. “It’s a big responsibility few would be willing to take on. I’m really your best bet.”

“It wouldn’t be the same returning to the island now. The place will be crawling with investigators, journalists, and thrill seekers trying to find the rest of the painting. I do need to find somewhere new to live.”

“Good point.” He nodded. I couldn’t miss the hope in his eyes.

“I’d need a place to dock my boat.”

“There’s a marina or two around my town.”

“I’d have to find a way to ship it, because I’m not rounding the Horn.”

“The Panama Canal would probably do, but neither would be preferable.” He waited, his knuckles white on the bag of food, and his jaw clenched.

“I guess your town is as good as any other.”

The decision was worth it just to see how his face lit up. Heavens, he was a beautiful man. “Yeah? I mean, yeah. Of course. Good choice.”

I laughed and pulled him into my arms for a deep, toe-curling kiss and then another and another. Breathless and panting, I somehow managed a grin when we finally parted. Eric’s smile outshone any I had seen before. “Let me just grab my go bag.” And I did.

**The End**

## Author Bio

*S. H. Allan has been a therapeutic foster parent for fifteen years, focusing on teenagers—which is a lot like herding cats, but a lot more rewarding. Dogs make her happy, and the senior dogs for which she provides hospice have to tolerate a giddy younger pup or three. Whenever possible, she ignores them all in favor of reading smutty gay love stories. S. H. knew writing was her destiny when her classic, Mr. Cuke and Mrs. Tomato, was put in the school library in third grade (coincidentally, along with the stories written by all her classmates). Politically active and socially conscious, with a useless M.A. and over twenty-five years working in high tech, S. H. fits in well in her beloved Pacific Northwest, except for that health conscious stuff. Tofurkey is one thing, but she says, “Seriously, no fry bread?”*

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