

New York Times Bestselling Author

ADRIENNE
YOUNG

Drift

Willa & Koy

A NARROWS NOVELLA

DRIFT WILLA & KOY

A NARROWS NOVELLA

ADRIENNE YOUNG



WEDNESDAY

BOOKS

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ONE

This ship is going to sink.

The thought echoed in my mind each time I swung the adze, driving plug after plug into the hull of the *Featherback*. The ship rocked against a wave, and I propped my feet against the wood to keep the sling that held me still. The ropes suspended from the deck's railing above creaked as I waited for the water to settle.

Out of habit, I checked the horizon for any sign of a storm. But the sky was blue and clear, the sun hot on my shoulders. It wouldn't so much as rain today, and that was good. The roof on the new merchant's house wasn't complete yet, and we couldn't afford to miss any trade. Not when we were still trying to convince helmsmen that a stop at Jeval was worth the day it cost them on their route to or from the Unnamed Sea.

I dropped the adze back into my belt. "Ailee! Pitch!"

The girl's small frame moved like a scurrying mouse on the dock below as she made her way to the anchored line that controlled the bucket of hanging above me. With quick hands, she lowered it, and when she was sure I could reach it comfortably, she re-tied the line. Her cropped, curly black hair blew across her face as she looked up at me, waiting for my next instruction.

This was the third time the *Featherback* had docked at Jeval needing to be patched, and by my estimation, the next storm would finish her. It wouldn't be the first vessel I'd worked on to sink since opening up for business, and it wouldn't be the last. Crews like this one knew their time was running out—they just wanted to rack up every copper they could before it happened. There were enough arrogant bastards in the Narrows to think that when the vessel succumbed to its fate, that they'd be spared.

The stink of the black pitch in the hanging bucket beside me burned in my nose as I took up the swab and painted it over the last plug.

"What'ya say, Willa?" the helmsman called out from below. He peered up at me, squinting, Ailee posted dutifully at his side.

"Hard to say." I returned the swab to its bucket, reaching for the knotted lines behind me. In a series of movements I had memorized, I unlocked the pulley and lowered myself down.

He stepped aside when I made it to the dock and I caught hold of the post, pulling myself in. My legs were half asleep from hanging in the sling so long. I could hardly feel the hot wood planks under my feet.

Ailee was waiting with her hands extended as I unfastened the heavy tool belt and draped it over

her shoulder. Her curls danced around her sharply cut jaw, her pale blue eyes rimmed in thick black lashes. Two months ago, that face had been hollow, her skin pallid. Now, she was sun-kissed, her bony frame less gaunt. She was small for eleven years old, but that would serve her well as a bosun. Only in the last few days had she stopped swaying under my belt's weight, and I could see the first signs of strength taking shape in her arms and shoulders. Before long, she'd be able to hoist herself up on the lines.

"Bag's empty." I nodded to the canvas pouch that had held the wooden cone plugs. "And the adze needs sharpening."

She gave a quick nod, turning on her heel and disappearing up the dock.

"Well?" The helmsman waited.

I looked up to the *Featherback* one last time. The hull was spotted with patches from stern to bow.

Yeah. This ship was *definitely* going to sink.

"Stay out of the shallows, even when the winds aren't too high," I said. "One scrape and that hull will breach. I'd also keep anything valuable you're trading fitted with floats and tied down up on the decks. That cargo hold is a disaster waiting to happen."

His mouth twisted to one side, but he eventually nodded. The man wasn't a fool. "All right. What do I owe ya?"

I pulled the ledger from where it was tucked into the back of my pants, flipping through the wrinkled pages. "That's eleven shot plugs, the pitch, the work..." I did the math in my head. "Forty-two coppers should do it."

The helmsman was already pulling one of the coin purses from his belt. He counted, mouth moving silently around the numbers.

Behind him, the harbor was busy. Nine of the fourteen bays were filled with everything from schooners to cutters to a large brig from Ceros stopping on its way to Sagsay Holm. The Jevalis hadn't been happy when Koy showed up with me and my coin to launch a port on their island, and they hadn't let me forget it. But there was no denying the transformation underway on Jeval.

When I'd first arrived, there'd been only dredgers hocking pyre on these docks, with the exception of a few women selling guinea fowl eggs and kids trading polished abalone shells for scraps of food. Now, there were hucksters who walked the bays with Jevali-made palm rope and island-forged iron riggings that every ship had need for. There was even a young sailmaker who'd left the island and apprenticed in Sowan and was now setting up shop next to my post.

It had been almost seven months since we finished the new docks that encircled the barrier islands, and the first opening bell of the merchant's house had rung just six weeks ago. There was only room enough for twelve stalls inside, and not all of them were even filled most days, but in another year, it would be a different story.

"There you go." The helmsman dropped the purse into my hand and I nodded, tucking it into my vest.

The feeling had come back into my legs, but my stomach was already twisting with hunger. Even so, it would be hours before I got a chance to sit down and have a meal.

I snaked through the bodies on the docks, headed for the brig in the distance. The ship's crew

members were quadruple those of the other vessels that docked here, which meant there was copper on its way into a lot of Jevali pockets. It was the second time the well-known *Iris* had docked, and with luck, the helmsman would spread the word about the growing enterprise we were building. As long as the Jevalis didn't do anything to muck it up before they left.

I shouldered past the crowd of dredgers waiting in line at the merchant's house and found my way to the end of the harbor, where Fret set up his makeshift stall each morning. He sat on an overturned barrel behind a little wooden table that was littered with rare seashells and bits of valuable coral.

"Any luck today?" I asked, leaning against the post. I kept my distance, eyes on the highest rise of the island. It was in both our best interests not to draw attention to our arrangement.

"Here and there," he rasped. "Never underestimate the power of a good story, Willa. It can sell the most worthless piece of junk to any fool."

I smirked. He had a knack for conjuring up old sea tales about a rusted piece of metal from a famed ship or a mythical creature who'd lost a tooth. There was at least one bastard a day who gave in to temptation and bought whatever he was selling.

"Anything else of note?" I asked.

His bottom lip jutted out as he thought. "Other than the number of times I've heard your name mentioned in somewhat unsavory conversation?"

"Yes," I exhaled, "other than that."

"Then, no. Nothing of note."

I scanned the docks, eyes flitting from one sun-leathered body to the next. I hadn't been able to win the Jevalis over, but that didn't stop them from making coin on the docks I'd helped to build. If it weren't for me and my copper, the island would still be living off of its dwindling caches of pyre.

My eyes stopped on a face I recognized. Bruin.

He stood at the corner of bay three, hands tucked into his pockets as he watched a cluster of the brig's crew coming down the docks. There was something about that look in his eye that made me follow his gaze. He was looking past the deckhands, to a woman with a coil of rope slung over her shoulder. She fell into step behind the crew, catching up in just a few seconds, and then Bruin was moving, folding himself into the crowd from the opposite direction.

As soon as he was weaving in and out of them, the woman lurched forward, tripping and throwing her arms out to catch herself on the man in front of her. Not just any man. The stryker of the *Iris*. He went toppling down and then Bruin was hoisting him up, back onto his feet. A string of words I couldn't hear passed between them as he brushed off the man's jacket and clapped him on the back. But the shine of gold clutched in his hand made me grit my teeth.

"Shit," I muttered, taking off in their direction.

The crew was already at the end of the docks, heading up the steps that led to the tavern by the time Bruin tucked that gold into his pocket.

I was only steps away when a hand caught me by the shoulder, twisting me around. Koy had hold of my vest, his attention on the end of the docks as he led me in the opposite direction.

"Don't even think about it." His voice was low, but his face was cast in a calm, unbothered expression.

I shrugged him off, whirling to face him. "I just watched Bruin pickpocket the *Iris*'s stryker."

If Koy was surprised, he didn't show it. There wasn't the slightest shift in the way he looked down at me. He was a whole head taller, maybe more, and his once long black hair was now cut almost to the scalp. Beneath one arm, he was carrying a crate filled with messages that had come in on one of the ships.

"Did you hear what I just said?"

He looked bored. "I did."

"How long do you think it's going to take him to realize his pocket watch is gone?" I flung a hand into the air.

"People are pickpocketed at every port, Willa."

"*We're* not every port. Every trader in the Narrows already thinks this island is nothing but a squatting place for thieves. If we want ships to keep docking here, to pick us up on their routes, we can't play into that story."

His eyes lifted over my head, to the bays behind me. "Doesn't look like it's keeping them away."

"Do you see a single crest from the Unnamed Sea in this harbor? It's not enough to plug holes for low-level traders. If we want Jeval to become a real port, we need the Saltbloods," I said, exasperated. "If we don't have their coin, then we don't have inventory. We don't have merchants or piers. We'll never have a drydock—"

Koy sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between his eyes. "If I have to hear about this drydock one more time," he muttered.

"I'm telling you we need one. Only two other ports in the Narrows have them and we're the last stop before Sagsay Holm."

"There are about a hundred other things we need before that, Willa."

"We have a whole island just waiting to become a port city, Koy. And it's never going to happen if Jeval's reputation doesn't change."

"I told you. You have to pick your battles with them. We were living a life here long before you arrived, and things aren't going to change overnight."

"It's been almost a year, and I didn't just *arrive* here. I didn't wash up on that beach one day—you and I have a business agreement. We're partners."

"I know." His tone changed, softening. "I know that."

We'd had this conversation more times than I could count, and I knew that he agreed with me. Koy was the first person to see the potential of this place, but he was still stuck between the boy who'd grown up surviving here and the man he was trying to become—harbor master of the port of Jeval.

"I know it's not your strong suit, but you need to be patient," he said. "This is going to take time."

I glared at him. That, he wasn't wrong about. I'd never been good at waiting for anything, and it had gotten me into trouble more than once. But I also didn't want to fail at what we were doing here. In five years' time, we could be the first port of call for the ships from the Unnamed Sea who were coming to trade in the Narrows. The first gateway. That wasn't nothing.

His gaze went behind me and I looked back to see Ailee. She ducked under elbows, turning sideways to wedge herself between the crush of people. She still had my toolbelt draped over her shoulders like a sash, a new, full bag of shot plugs in one hand, my adze cradled protectively in the other.

“What is she still doing here?” Koy sighed.

“I told you, she’s my apprentice.”

He rolled his eyes. “And which one of us is paying to feed her?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I am.”

“Good.”

He started back up the docks and I watched him go. Ailee cowered a little as she passed him, getting impossibly smaller until he was out of sight. When she reached me, she was already rattling off the orders for the next ship on the docket.

“Bay nine, the little sloop with the red mainsail. Helmsman says the bilge pump is shot.” She let the toolbelt slide from her shoulders into my hands.

I fastened it around me. “Please tell me it’s not made of bronze.”

“Wood.” She smiled.

“What else?”

“Should have time for the schooner in bay one. I told him he’d have to wait until morning, just in case.”

I nodded. “All right. Let’s go.”

“Oh!” She reached into her jacket pocket, pulling out a wad of cloth. “Here.”

She set the small bundle into my hand and I unwrapped it to see a small hunk of cheese cut from the round in my post and an apple. I looked up at her.

“Haven’t seen you eat today,” she said, eyes bright.

The first time I saw her, I’d seen my brother. She was skin and bones, climbing down the ladder of a ship with a rusted scraper clenched in her teeth. For a month, each time that ship docked in our harbor, she climbed out like a rat to clean the hull before scuttling back in. It was a job for a grown deckhand, not an eleven-year-old girl, much less one that looked like she hadn’t seen sunlight in weeks.

I knew what it looked like when a waterside stray was being starved in the belly of a ship, because I’d seen those signs in West. Every few weeks, he made port in Ceros long enough to give me and our mother a few coppers he’d earned, and each time he showed up, he was sicker. Weaker. That all changed the day he came home and said that he’d taken a place on a crew for a trader named Saint—the best and worst thing that ever happened to him. To us.

The irony wasn’t lost on me. I’d left the *Marigold* and West to finally sever the binds that kept us beholden to each other. Yet, here I was, tying myself to the first person I saw who reminded me of him.

I looked down at the apple and cheese in my hands.

The day I offered to wave the ship repair fees in exchange for that helmsman to leave Ailee behind in Jeval, I’d known, deep down, what I was doing. There was part of me that needed someone to take care of. But worse than that, there was also a part that needed someone to take care of *me*.

TWO

Speck's tavern wasn't really a tavern at all. Not yet anyway.

The only part of the harbor that sat between the barrier islands and the beach was a series of narrow planks that stretched out over the water. They led to one place—a crude structure that was still mid-build, with a palm thatch roof and no walls to speak of. It didn't have the dark, lamplit glow of the taverns in the other port cities, but that seemed prudent given the track record of the Jevalis. Even in the wild, somewhat lawless waters of the Narrows, there were certain rules. But here, people took what they wanted, and I preferred to feel like I could keep my eye on them, even if that was just a lie I told myself.

I followed the planks, my back aching from the work on the bilge pump. Ailee had been right. I'd had time for the schooner, too, which meant more copper before sundown. It also meant I'd need a glass of rye to curb the pain that settled between my shoulder blades. Otherwise, I'd never sleep.

The tavern was also the only place on the island that could pass as an inn. Four shanties had been constructed at the end of four separate docks and at high tide, especially on windy days, the water rose close enough to sometimes slosh in through the open door. It was a luxury Koy had fought me on, and the fact that they hadn't gotten much use yet only served to prove his point. The other dredgers who'd formed a kind of council agreed with him. The only purpose they really served was to oppose me, though they'd also been useful in organizing building crews for the docks. Still, the shanties had been a strike against me that even I couldn't argue with.

The chairs and tables were mostly full beneath the canopy, and a few peals of laughter carried away on the wind. I was beginning to recognize faces among the ship crews, and that was a very good sign. Helmsmen were coming back, even when they weren't made destitute by a storm or a cargo hold of beetles ruining their grain stores.

"There she is." Speck stopped wiping the wood counter when he caught sight of me.

The sun had just fallen behind the almost-mountain that crested the island, making the water reflect pink and orange around us. In this light, even Speck looked like a decently fed and watered creature. He smiled as he set a rye glass down in front of me and took a bottle from beneath the counter. He didn't wait for my copper before he poured.

I took one of the stools, studying the tables along the edge of the docks. I didn't see the stryker of the brig, but if there'd been a scene about the missing pocket watch, I'd hear about it soon enough.

"Where's the kid?" Speck asked, setting his elbows on the bar.

"Sleeping."

She'd been out cold before I'd even gotten my tools cleaned, curling up in her hammock only seconds after she'd finished her porridge. We'd had it every night for the last two weeks because that was all I could afford, but she hadn't once complained.

"How are you doing on rye?" I asked.

"Been runnin' low, but Koy put in the order with that helmsman headed to Sowan. Should be here in a few days and we have enough to last 'til then."

I stared into my glass, rubbing my temples with my fingers. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. If I wanted my drydock, then we needed more coin. In order to get it, we had to have more ships docking. But the more crew we had in this harbor, the more rye we needed for them to drink. It was a delicate ecosystem that needed constant management and attention. I hated to admit it, but Koy happened to be very good at that.

A body sat down on the stool next to me, and Raef's ring-clad hand tapped the counter beside my elbow. I turned my head toward him, the pain between my shoulder blades now creeping up my neck.

Koy's brother looked like he'd just come in off a dive. White, wayward trails of salt crusted the hair on his arms, his pants still wet. His black hair was even longer than Koy's was when I first met him, but Raef was a few years younger and had a softness to his face. It put people at ease, and that had come in handy when he was one of the only Jevalis on the island who didn't want to see me tied to the reef.

"You look like shit." He smiled up one side of his face, making him twice as handsome.

"Thanks."

Speck poured him a glass and Raef turned on the stool to face the tavern. He'd told me once that he'd never left the island. Not in his entire life. Looking at him now, with that sunset on his dark skin and the sea wind in his hair, I couldn't imagine him anyplace else.

He drank the rye in two swallows. "How'd it go with the schooner?"

"Shipworm," I said, flatly.

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Let me guess, something you'd be able to fix with—"

"A drydock!" I cut him off, groaning.

He and Speck met eyes, both burying smiles.

"If we had a drydock, I'd have ships from every port fighting for one of those bays out there."

Speck frowned. "Well, we wouldn't have enough rye for them all. I can tell you that much."

I glowered at him. "I need you to talk to Koy, Raef. Make him see reason."

It wasn't the first time I'd tried to use Raef as a go-between, something he didn't appreciate. But I didn't have much choice when Koy wouldn't listen to me.

The sound of a coin purse drew our attention down the counter, where a group of Jevalis crowded around the last few stools. When I saw the purse, I followed the hand beside it to its owner. Bruin.

"A bottle, Speck." He was grinning smugly, his chin lifted.

He'd probably hocked the stryker's pocket watch before the merchant house's closing bell. Now he was going to blow it all on a bottle of rye we couldn't spare just so he could do it all over again tomorrow.

I slid off my stool and Raef immediately caught my arm, holding me in place. "Not a good idea, Willa."

I tore myself from his grip, shoving through the Jevalis until I reached Bruin. He stood so much taller than my own height that he had to step backward just to look at me.

“Speck,” I said, eyes still fixed on Bruin, “don’t touch that bottle.”

Bruin laughed. “What?”

“That coin’s going back to the stryker. You can buy your own rye.”

Bruin stepped closer and the crowd around us drifted back.

“Willa...”

I could hear the warning from Raef, but I ignored him. Behind the counter, Speck’s gaze jumped from me to Bruin.

“That’s *my* copper,” Bruin said, voice lowering.

“No. It’s not. I’ve told you before, all of you, that stealing will get you barred from these docks. Permanently.”

His smile widened. “And how exactly do you think you’re going to make that happen?”

Half the tavern had taken notice now. I could feel dozens of eyes on me.

Bruin’s stare didn’t break from mine as I lifted my hand. I didn’t hesitate before I snatched up the coin purse, turning on my heel. But a second later, his shadow was moving on the floor beside me.

I sank down and slid to the side as I reached to the back of my belt, pulling my dagger free, and as I pivoted, it lifted between us. The sunset glinted off the jewels set into its hilt, making tiny purple and red flecks of light dance up my arm.

The tip of the blade was pointed at Bruin’s chest, and that was enough to push him over the edge. His fist raised up, ready to come down on me when I was suddenly pulled out of reach. I nearly fell, toppling into the table beside me and knocking over two chairs.

Koy was standing between us, his tall frame matching Bruin’s.

Anyone in the tavern who hadn’t been watching us was staring now, the eyes of the ship crews lit with the anticipation of a tavern brawl. But Koy looked placid, his calm exterior intact. He squared his shoulders to Bruin, giving me his back.

“You should talk to your girl about taking what doesn’t belong to her.” Bruin’s eyes cut to me.

Your girl.

My blood boiled. That’s what they called me when they wanted to humiliate me in front of Koy, but I hadn’t seen him react to it once. The Jevalis didn’t seem to get under his skin the way they did mine. If they did, he was good at not showing it.

“Speck.” Koy’s even, steady tone was the same it always was. “Give him his bottle. He can drink his rye on the beach tonight.”

Bruin’s head tilted a little to one side, sizing Koy up. Koy was always finding a compromise, and the Jevalis didn’t like it. They were in a constant game of trying to make Koy choose between me and them, and so far, he’d managed to avoid the trap.

Speck obeyed, taking one of the unopened bottles and sliding it across the counter. Bruin stared at Koy for another long moment before he took it and stalked out, the others on his heels.

The rest of the tavern begrudgingly went back to their drinks, and Koy watched them go as I slid the dagger back into my belt. When he turned, he didn’t face me. He was looking at Raef. “What did I tell you?”

Raef's hands lifted into the air in front of him, mock innocence on his face. "Hey, I tried," he said, looking to Speck for back up. "Right? Didn't I try?"

Speck, the only one smart enough to keep his mouth shut, didn't say a word.

"What do you mean, *what did I tell you?*" I looked between the brothers. "Koy?"

He ignored me, snatching the coin purse from my hand and tossing it onto the counter in front of Speck. "I told you to leave it."

"And I told *you*, we can't run things like this. Not unless we want it all to fall apart."

Koy shook his head. "You don't understand how things work here. I do. Would it kill you to listen to me?"

"Would it kill *you* to listen to *me*?"

Raef drained his glass, attempting to slip away unnoticed.

"Did he tell you to watch me?" I said, stopping him. "Is that it?"

Raef shot a panicked look in Koy's direction.

"You've got to be kidding me," I muttered, raking a hand over my face. "So, what? You have your brother keeping watch over me now?"

"Believe me, it's the last thing I should have to do," Koy shot back.

"No one asked you to. I don't need you watching out for me. I can take care of myself."

"Really?" He took a step closer, voice lowering. "Then what's this?"

Before I realized what he was going to do, his hand touched my face, rough fingers grazing over the scar that marked my cheek.

I recoiled, putting several feet between us. My hand instinctively went to the scar, the words striking deep. It felt as if the air had been sucked from my lungs, the shame of it burning beneath my skin.

I could feel the sting of traitorous tears in my eyes as I stared at Koy, but I breathed through it, refusing to be the first to look away. The regret was already there in his expression, some form of an apology folded in the way he was staring back at me.

"Uh, Willa?" Speck's voice was no more than an echo at the back of my mind.

I'd caught Koy staring at the scar more than once, but he'd never said anything about it. In fact, he was the only person who hadn't. And now he wanted to dangle it between us like a counterweight to an argument?

"*Willa*," Speck said again, the nervous sound of the words finally pulling my gaze from Koy.

Behind the counter, Speck's eyes were wide. He was staring out past the barrier islands.

I moved past Koy to the edge of the dock, squinting at the shape of a ship drifting into the harbor. It was a brig, but even larger than the one already docked, and it had three towering masts with a carved bow in the shape of a draped, floral garland.

"Is that...?" Raef's words sputtered out as the ship turned just enough for us to see the gloss of the wood. The crisp white sails. Even the bowsprit was tipped in bronze.

This wasn't a Narrows-born trader or a Narrows-built ship. This vessel hailed from the Unnamed Sea.

THREE

I didn't sleep.

By the time the sun was rising and the seabirds were calling out over the water, I was up, pacing the floor of my post in an anxious pattern that had Ailee staring at me. She was sitting in her hammock, toes brushing the wood planks as she gently swung.

"Should we ... go out there?" she asked, eyes moving again to the door.

I bit down on my thumbnail, watching through the window. The brig from the Unnamed Sea had dropped anchor after dark and the only sign of the crew was the coin master who'd come down to pay three nights' docking fee. Koy had done well and played it cool, marking down the ship as if it were any other. But when he met my eyes over the woman's head, they held everything I was thinking. That *this* was our chance.

"We wait." I said.

"And what exactly are we waiting for?" Ailee tried again.

"If they're staying three nights, they most likely need some kind of repairs, but waiting on the dock like a beggar isn't the right move. Letting the helmsman know how desperate we are for business will only invite them to take advantage of us. Remember that."

Ailee nodded, her expression serious.

"You can't trust these Satlblood bastards."

"So, we want them here. We just don't want them to *know* we want them here," she said.

"Exactly."

She still looked confused, but she didn't press it. She swung in the hammock, fingers tapping her knees until we finally heard footsteps on the dock outside.

I stopped pacing, meeting her eyes as she sat up. We were silent for several seconds before a knock sounded on the door.

I crossed the small room as Ailee unhooked one side of her hammock and let it fall to the floor. Then she lowered the counter latched to the wall beneath the window, and in an instant, the little room was transformed from a hovel to a post.

Koy stood on the other side of the door when I opened it, his ship roster propped on one arm. "Ship in bay twelve is asking for the bosun."

I let out a tight breath, giving him a nod.

"You ready?" he asked.

There was still the hint of that apology in his eyes from when he'd embarrassed me last night, but

his nerves were as shaky as mine. A lot could hinge on this. If the helmsman had a good experience, he'd likely return. He may even spread the word about the small but economical port developing in the wide stretch of barren water that connected the Narrows and the Unnamed Sea. If he *didn't* have a good experience, that information would travel, too.

I fell into step beside him and Ailee followed.

"Ship's name is the *Wellworthy*. Port of origin is Bastian, the helmsman's name is Dennon. My guess is they trade mainly jewelry and gems, that kind of thing."

"And their route?"

Koy scanned the docks around us as we walked. "That's the strange part. They're not on a regular route. I got a glance at the navigator's logs when he was marking coordinates and it looks like they've been stopping at every port there is. Ship's riding light in the water so I don't think they've got much inventory."

"So, what are they doing?"

"I don't know. I don't care, either."

I nodded, agreeing.

"Hey." He stopped, waiting for me to turn.

It wasn't until then that I got a good look at him. He'd cleaned up his boots and put on a clean shirt. I lifted my eyebrows when I saw that he'd even tucked it in.

"Look," he said, glancing at Ailee. "I'm sorry about last night."

"It's fine." The words came out curter than I meant them to. The words had been somewhat unforgivable, but even thinking about the feeling of his touch on my face again made me flush.

"No. It's not. I know you can handle yourself, but you don't always have to. You said yourself that we're partners, right?"

I looked into his eyes, trying to read him. "Yeah."

"That means that we need to trust each other."

"I know." I sighed.

That wasn't the problem. There was something about Koy that felt solid and steady to me. He was a knot that wouldn't easily break. In the last fourteen months, he'd proven that I could trust him, but if he had his brother watching me, then he didn't feel the same about me. I couldn't exactly blame him.

"From now on, I'll let you handle the Jevalis." I said.

He gave me a skeptical look.

"I mean it." I lifted my hands in the air. "I'll back off."

"Thank you."

"And I *can* handle myself."

A smirk broke on his lips. "I know you can."

Beside us, Ailee's lips were pressed together in a flat line. She was looking between us, waiting.

"You ready?" Koy said, eyes lifting to the other end of the harbor.

I exhaled. "Ready."

When bay twelve came into view, I picked up my pace, pressing through the crowd. A man and a woman were already waiting at the mouth of the slip, their fine jackets and shiny brass buckles noticeable on the dock of Narrows-born traders.

Koy waved to them as we approached and I reached to the back of my belt. “Shit,” I whispered, my steps slowing. “I forgot my ledger.”

“No, you didn’t.” Ailee was beside me a second later, my ledger and a sharpened pencil pressed between her hands. She discreetly handed them to me before finding a place at my back to stand.

The man waiting at the bay greeted us with a nod, his white mustache combed and beard trimmed.

“This is Willa, our bosun.” Koy gestured to me. “She’ll be able to help you with whatever you need.”

He looked me over carefully, brows coming together. The woman beside him didn’t look convinced, either.

“How can I help?” I said, not breaking his gaze.

“Dennon.” He finally reached out to shake my hand, an impressive gesture from a Saltblood. “I’m the *Wellworthy*’s helmsman. This is our navigator, Nathaly.”

“Pleasure to meet you.”

“We have some repairs in our second quarters we need done, but we’re on a tight schedule.”

“Understood.”

The four of us looked at each other for a beat too long.

“If you show me, I can go ahead and get started.” I offered.

Dennon nodded again, moving aside so that I could climb the ladder leading up to the deck. I stuck the ledger into back of my pants and climbed, and the thick smell of oiled wood grew heavy in the air. Even before I reached the deck, I could see that it was a pristine vessel. It couldn’t be more than a few years old.

I came over the railing and Dennon followed as Koy and the coin master talked down on the dock. Ailee was waiting patiently beside them, not wanting to make a move until I told her to. At least one of us was good at listening.

I turned to the ship and several deckhands were at work on the masts, some of them restringing lines and others polishing the rust off of pulleys. None of them seemed concerned with me or the island, their attention on their work.

“This way.”

Dennon led me toward the helm. It sat before the mouth of a wide, ornately carved archway beneath the upper decks. I smelled it before I saw it. Black char stained the wood just inside, the evidence of a fire.

I followed him into the passageway, inspecting the damage. The ruined wood paneling darkened as we neared one of the closed doors. That was where the fire must have broken out.

Dennon raised a fist, knocking twice, and I could feel the confusion twist my features. I’d never seen a helmsman knock on any door of his own ship. Had I heard him wrong? Had I gotten the two titles mixed up somehow?

Dennon gave me a taut but polite smile, as if his patience was being tried. When there was no sound inside the quarters, he knocked again.

A loud ping hit the floor on the other side of the door and I could feel the vibration of it under my feet. Something had fallen. It was followed by the scrape of wood and a couple of clumsy steps before the handle finally turned.

The door swung open and a young man stood on the other side, leaning heavily into the jamb. His blond hair fell into his face, half of it tucked behind one ear as if he'd made no attempt at taming it. His shirt was crumpled, his boot laces untied, and despite a very handsome face, he was an utter mess.

His eyes slowly moved over my body before they met mine straight on in a level of eye contact that made me want to flinch. He'd clearly spent the night drinking. I could smell that, too.

"Sir, this is the harbor's bosun." Dennon clasped his hands behind his back. Was this man a helmsman or a butler? I couldn't tell. "She's here to take a look at the damage so she can make repairs."

The man, who couldn't be more than four or five years older than me, stared at me.

"Willa," I said, my own name sounding like a question. I had no idea what was going on here.

The young man stood up straighter, letting the door open wider. Behind him, the half-burned quarters were in complete disarray. There was a hole in the bulkhead between this room and the upper decks, where a patch of blue sky was visible.

"Coen Fuerst." He held out a hand and I reluctantly took it, shaking. His grip was tight and warm, matching that smolder in his gaze as he watched me.

"As you can see." Dennon stepped inside, going to the place on the wall that was the blackest. "The fire broke out here. Most of the damage is localized, thanks to the quick work of the crew, but we'll need to put it right before continuing on."

I studied the pattern of the burns. It looked like it had originated beside the bed before it climbed the wall and spread across the floor. My guess was that Coen had knocked over a lantern in his drunken stupor. He was lucky he hadn't caught fire himself.

As if he could hear the thought, a wry smile lifted at the corner of his mouth. It made his eyes sparkle mischievously.

I pressed a hand to the wood panels, systematically leaning into each section to test its give. Most of the wall and floor looked as if they were sound, which meant the real work would be in repairing the ceiling. Everything else was a matter of sanding and re-staining. Those were tasks Ailee had mastered already, which meant I could get this done quickly and efficiently.

I took the ledger from my belt and started taking notes. "I have everything I need here on the island. Shouldn't take more than three days. Four, at most."

"Good." Dennon glanced at Coen and for the first time, I saw the hint of reproach in the helmsman. Whoever Coen was, this poor man clearly had the job of babysitting him. "Just let us know what you need. You can get started as soon as is convenient to you."

"Thank you."

I didn't miss the fact that he hadn't asked for a price, and I imagined it was because whatever I'd charge would be a drop in the bucket for a ship like this one. The bronze on the bowsprit alone would pay for it ten times over.

I closed the ledger, tucking it under my arm. "Anything else?"

"That should do it," Dennon answered.

Coen reached up, buttoning his shirt without taking his eyes off me. There was no mistaking the suggestive nature of that look. "Now." He raked one hand through his hair. "Where can I get a drink?"

FOUR

Koy was already waiting with a fresh pot of tea when I arrived at the tavern the next morning, his ledgers open before him.

“You missed quite a scene last night,” Speck said, both hands in a bucket of suds. He was working his way through the stack of dirty glasses that lined the counter.

I looked around me at the empty tavern. The evidence of last night’s chaos was still littered about the tables, the birds grazing along the docks for the crumbs left behind.

I grinned. “I take it things went well?”

“Very well.” Speck flung the water from his hands, drying them on his apron. “Those Saltblood bastards spent triple the coin in one night that the Narrows-born crews do. Could get used to that.”

“You might have to.” I climbed onto the stool beside Koy, sliding his almost empty cup toward me. “So?” I filled it with tea, taking a sip.

He held up a hand, eyes still skipping over the numbers as he finished the sums in his head. He had that look I recognized on his face—the one that said he was focused. From the beginning, he’d taken his job as harbor master more seriously than I’d expected, which was probably one of the reasons all of this had worked.

He made another mark with the quill before he set it down, taking the cup from my hands and drinking. “He’s right. More than triple.”

My smile widened and he handed the tea back to me.

“Another ship just arrived from Sowan, too. They’ve got a full hull so we can probably do some trading and get enough rye to last us until our order comes in. How’s it going with the repairs?”

“Good. Got the unsalvageable wood torn out yesterday and the new planks should be cut and ready for me when I get down there. It’s just a matter of getting everything replaced and sealed. I’m running low on tung oil, so Ailee’s waiting for the merchant’s house to open to get some more. Should be done in a couple of days.”

“Might go faster if you hire a couple of hands to help you.”

I glared at him. “Let me guess. The Jevalis aren’t happy that I’m not recruiting workers for that ship.”

“They are not,” Speck chimed in, looking between us.

“Yeah, they left me a little present last night.”

Koy turned to face me. “What do you mean?”

I shrugged. “There was a dead rat at the door of my post this morning.”

Koy exhaled. “Who?”

“Does it matter? They all want to drag me down to that beach and drown me.”

Koy didn’t look amused. “I’ll find out who did it and handle it.”

“That’s not what I meant when I agreed to let you deal with them,” I said, giving him a meaningful look. “Crews do it on ships all the time. They’re harmless.”

Koy didn’t look convinced.

“They’re not too keen about the Saltbloods drinking all the rye, either,” Speck added.

“If it means copper in our pockets, the crew of the *Wellworthy* can have every last bottle of rye on this island. And I’m not changing my mind. Bruin and his guys aren’t stepping foot on that brig.”

Koy ran a hand over the back of his head, letting his ledger fall closed. He knew I was right. He had to. The bigger problem would come if I actually got what I wanted out of this deal. If more ships from the Unnamed Sea started showing up at our docks, I wouldn’t be able to control who worked on what ship. At some point, it would become like every other harbor in the Narrows, theft and rotten deals included. I just needed to keep it at bay long enough to get more ships in the harbor.

“What about this Coen guy?” I changed the subject, looking to Speck.

His eyes drifted to one of the shanties turned inn rooms at the end of the nearest dock. “He spent a few hours in here looking for someone to take to bed before he disappeared. Haven’t seen him since.”

I rolled my eyes, unsurprised.

“Took a whole bottle of rye with him.”

“As long as he paid for it,” I muttered.

“Oh, he paid for it.” Speck laughed. “About twice over. Not sure he was even looking at how much copper he was laying down.”

I turned back to Koy. “You find anything out about this guy?”

Koy checked over his shoulder before he answered. “He’s the son of some big merchant in Bastian. The navigator made it sound like he’s fallen out of his father’s good graces and somehow, they got landed with him.”

That explained the strange interaction between Coen and Dennon yesterday. Dennon was the helmsman of the *Wellworthy*, but Coen’s father probably held a contract on the ship.

“Where are they headed next?”

“Dern. Ceros after that, then Sowan.”

“What are they doing at all these ports?”

Koy shrugged. “Maybe mapping out a new trade route, setting up new contracts? There are more and more of them every month.”

“All the more reason to make sure Jeval is on the map.”

Koy nodded.

“Just make sure they enjoy the rest of their stay, Speck. Even if you need to dip into the emergency stores of rye.”

“Understood.” He nodded, hands on his hips.

He was enjoying this. We all were. For the last year, Koy and I had done nothing but build this place from the ground up, plank by plank. We’d torn out the old docks, reconstructed and expanded them, given loans to the island’s makers to build up inventories of supplies, and even helped fund

Speck's tavern. Now, it was all very close to paying off.

I drained the teacup and refilled it, sliding it back in front of Koy. "You know, I think we just might pull this off."

He smiled, and this wasn't the wry, mocking grin that usually adorned his face. This was his real smile, something I'd only seen a few times before. "I think you might be right."

I slid off the stool just as the door to the inn room creaked open and all three of us looked up. Coen was coming up the dock, disheveled blond hair blowing in the wind and shirt half-untucked. He squinted as if the sunlight hurt his eyes, but when he spotted us, his suave, cool expression returned.

"Morning." He made his way toward us.

"Good morning." I nodded.

He was, somehow, incredibly handsome despite the rye-soaked look on his face. Saltbloods, especially ones from Bastian, seemed to have an inexplicable ability to appear polished no matter the circumstances.

Coen gave Speck a nod, gesturing to the teapot, and Speck obediently turned on his heel, heading to the kettle suspended over the coals.

"This is Koy, our harbor master," I said.

Coen gave his hand a shake. "Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," Koy answered.

"And how are things going in my ill-fated quarters?"

Coen returned his attention to me and I realized he was closer than I found comfortable. Beside me, Koy seemed to notice, too. His eyes dropped to my shoulder, where Coen's sleeve brushed mine before I took a discreet step backward. There was a lack of distance about Coen that I didn't like, but I imagined there were plenty of people at each port who found it charming.

"We're making headway," I said, "it'll be good as new in two or three days."

"Wonderful."

"I hope it's not too much of an inconvenience. I know you have to be on your way."

Coen laughed. "I have exactly nowhere to be. Take your time."

I studied him, thinking it was an odd thing to say.

"I know poor Dennon likes to keep a schedule, but he'll manage."

Poor Dennon. There was that condescension again. I imagined it was difficult for the helmsman to resist the urge to smack Coen on a daily basis.

Speck set down another teapot. He'd chosen one without chips or cracks in it, and I met his eyes for a silent beat in appreciation.

"Why don't you let me buy you two a drink tonight? A thank-you for your impeccable hospitality."

"That's not necess—" Koy started, but I cut him off.

"That's very kind, thank you."

Coen shot a look at Koy, clearly amused by the exchange. "Good." He pulled the pocket watch from his vest. "Should we say about seven?"

"Sure," Koy managed.

The door to Coen's inn room squeaked again and when I saw who came out, I had to bite my bottom lip to keep my mouth from falling open. It was Raef. He looked like he'd just rolled out of

bed, his shirt off and draped over one shoulder. The muscles in his sculpted arms flexed under the skin as he tied his hair back in a knot at the nape of his neck.

I immediately looked to Koy, who was watching his brother saunter up the dock, headed for the main harbor.

Koy's gaze slid back to Speck, his annoyance only barely at bay. He'd failed to mention who Coen had eventually found to take to bed with him last night.

"Well, I'd better get started," I said, breaking the tension. "Ailee will be waiting for me."

"I'll walk with you," Koy said.

Coen took a seat at the counter and we walked shoulder to shoulder toward the main dock that led around the barrier islands to the harbor. Raef was already out of sight.

"I don't like that guy," Koy muttered.

"Really?" I laughed. "I couldn't tell."

"What the hell is Raef thinking? The crews from the Narrows are one thing, but..." He shook his head. "All we need is a jealous Saltblood on our hands."

"I hardly think Coen will be jealous of anything. I'm pretty sure he was inviting *me* to bed when I met him yesterday."

Koy stopped walking, forcing me to turn back. He leveled his gaze at me.

"What?" I was laughing again.

"What do you mean *he was inviting you to bed*?"

"Not actually inviting me. But there were definitely some insinuations. You know men like that."

I waited for him to say something, but he was quiet.

"Koy?"

"If you want me to behave around that bastard, I need you to not spend the night in his room."

I gaped at him. "*What?*"

"I'm serious."

"So am I," I snapped. "Why would you even say that?"

"I just feel like I need to be really clear about what will happen."

"I don't know if you've noticed, Koy, but I don't exactly make a habit out of climbing into bed with crew."

"He's not crew."

I groaned. "You know what I mean."

"And *you* know what *I* mean," he said, letting the weight of the words settle.

I didn't want to admit it, even to myself. Koy and I had an unspoken understanding and so far, it had worked. We didn't call attention to or acknowledge the fact that there was a very real, very dangerous tether forming between us. It had started the first day he stepped foot on the *Marigold*, and it had followed us here, to Jeval. We were partners, but we were also more than that, and this was the first time he was calling it out.

"You don't want me to break that guy's face? Then don't let me find out that you're messing around with him."

I exhaled. "I'm not."

"Good."

He looked at me another moment before he finally started walking, shouldering around me to head up the dock. I waited until he disappeared before I followed.

FIVE

“Alright, let’s hear it,” I said.

Ailee lowered down to her haunches in the middle of Coen’s dimly lit quarters, looking over the tools I’d laid out on the floor. She’d mastered the names and uses of the different nogs, nails, and larger tools, but so far, she’d failed to get the irons right.

Her black, curly hair was barely contained in the scarf wrapped around her head, the frayed ends of the cloth dangling from a knot at the nape of her neck. Her hand hovered over the first iron, the name still coming to her. It was the one she usually missed. “Meaking iron.” She looked up to me for confirmation before she pointed to the next, then the next, “Sail iron, horsing iron...” She bit her lip, thinking about the last one. “Reeming iron?”

I grinned. “That’s right. So, which do you need?”

“The meaking iron,” she answered.

I nodded. “Well done.”

She picked it up, smiling wide as she went to the exposed timbers of the dismantled wall that was waiting to be reframed. She’d use the iron to scrape the old oakum from where it had once stuffed the spaces between the planks. I’d be right behind her, replacing them so that when she was finished, she could fill the cracks with new oakum.

“When do I get to go up in the masts?” she asked, glancing at me over her shoulder.

“When you learn to use the harness correctly.”

“I can’t learn if you won’t teach me.”

“There’s about a hundred other things you need to master before you go climbing up in the lines like a stowaway rat,” I said.

Even from here, I could tell she was pursing her lips. But unlike me, Ailee knew when to hold her tongue and how to be patient. From day one as my apprentice, all she’d wanted to do was climb the masts, and her light weight and small frame would make it easy for her. But I remembered clearly the first time I’d fallen from the ropes, nearly killing myself when I was her age.

I took up the next wooden plank, feeling along its edge to be sure it was straight. It wasn’t easy to get raw oak on the island and Koy had questioned the expense, but having the stores had paid off now that we had a ship like the *Wellworthy* to repair.

“How many nogs per plank?” I asked, testing her again.

She arched an eyebrow at me. “Per plank, or per *end* of plank?”

I couldn’t hold back my smile now. “Per end.”

“Three.”

“Correct.”

We worked side by side, her clearing the oakum and me laying the new planks until the wall that had once been a blackened, fire-eaten mess was reconstructed. The new wood was pale compared to the older oak, and if Coen could keep from setting it aflame again, it would last a dozen years or more. My eyes roamed over the bulkhead, where the carved edges caught the light. It made sense that Coen was the son of a gem merchant. No detail had gone overlooked, no adornment spared in these quarters. Ships like this one lasted generations, its helmsman's honor and prestige reflected in its elegance. But if the *Wellworthy* wasn't trading gems and jewelry, what was it doing in the Narrows?

Ailee packed up the tools as I took the rectangle of sandstone to the walls, wiping back and forth until it was free of any straggling splinters. The last step would be to oil the wood, which would take two consecutive days. We wouldn't be able to match the color, but at least Coen would have a roof over his head again, and then the *Wellworthy* would be on its way.

It was nearly dark by the time Ailee and I were climbing down the ladder to the docks. She was tired, like every other night, her eleven-year-old body struggling to keep up with the backbreaking work of being a bosun. I remembered that feeling. I also remember wanting the job bad enough to do it anyway.

When she started in the opposite direction of the tavern, I stopped her. “Supper, Ailee.”

“Do I have to?”

I took the heavy tool belt from her shoulder and she stretched her arm, now free of its weight. “There's no more porridge at the post. Come on.”

Reluctantly, she followed me up the dock. The island was cast in a dark pink glow, the somewhat calm water reflecting the last of the light. One of the young men Speck paid to clean up after his patrons was on the floor of the tavern when we arrived, wiping up a smear of blood. There were three chairs toppled over, but whatever had taken place, it was over now.

I spotted Coen and Koy at a table along the edge of the dock before I handed Ailee two coppers for a bowl of stew and a small loaf of bread. Then she pressed herself between the tables, headed for the man who was standing over a large, steaming pot.

Most of the Jevalis liked Ailee better than they liked me, but that wasn't saying much. The man barely looked at her as he took her coin, ladling the broth into the bowl without much care and tossing the smallest loaf into it. Ailee stared at the sopping mess before she picked it up, sipping from the lip. She didn't seem to mind.

I left her at the counter and Coen combed his neat blond hair back from his face with his hand as I took the seat in front of him. He'd managed to clean up and now he looked like a proper Saltblood, but there was still that haze of drink in his eyes.

“Dennon says the repairs are coming along. My quarters are at least whole again.” He smirked.

“All patched up. We just have the sealing to do,” I answered.

He nodded. “Impressive. I wasn't sure you'd get it done that quickly without a crew.”

The comment sounded innocent enough, but there was a look in Coen's eye that said it held more meaning. Was he curious why I was working alone or annoyed because it could have gotten done quicker? I wasn't going to tell him I could trust the Jevalis as far as I could throw them, and I wasn't

going to play down the job I'd done, either. So, instead of answering, I took a sip of my rye.

He did the same, hiding the smile on his lips. If we were sharing some kind of secret, I didn't know what it was.

A loud group of men came into the tavern, settling at the table behind us. It was the crew from the *Iris* and from the look of them, they'd already been drinking. That was the thing about crews. They didn't belong on land. Any stop that lasted more than a day or two was asking for trouble.

As soon as they sat, Speck was making his way toward them, glasses in hand.

"I hope Speck has been taking care of you?" Koy said, mustering his best harbor master tone.

I was relieved. I'd spent the day unsure if he'd be able to put aside the irritation he'd had about Coen last night, but now he was ready to do his job.

"He has," Coen answered. "Hopefully we'll be out of your way soon. I know the crew is probably drinking the island dry."

That was rich, coming from him. I was pretty sure that Coen had had his fair share of rye.

"Well, you're welcome back next time you're crossing to or from the Unnamed Sea. We'll be resupplied in a matter of days and we have plans for a drydock before next year."

I could feel Koy's reaction without even looking at him.

Coen's eyebrows lifted. "A drydock. Really?"

"That's right."

"Well, that is certainly something to keep in mind. Though, if you get a drydock you might not be able to handle all the ships that'll show up in that harbor."

I finally looked to Koy, not bothering to smooth over my smug expression.

He looked more annoyed than ever now. "So, you're headed to Sowan next?" He changed the subject.

"That's right."

"Is the *Wellworthy* setting up a trade route, or...?"

"Not exactly."

"Something secret, then?" Koy pressed.

The men behind us began to sing a sloppy tavern song and I nudged Koy's knee with mine. The edge was coming back into his voice and if Coen hadn't already noticed, he would.

"Nothing that exciting, I'm afraid." Coen propped himself up on his elbows, folding his hands in front of his chin. "I've been tasked with righting my wrongs. I lost something of my father's, and now I'm expected to get it back."

"What is it? Maybe we can help," I said, watching Speck make his way again to the rambunctious table behind us. This time, he had two bottles of rye raised in the air. The men started clapping when they saw him.

"It's not jewels or a ship or anything like that. It's a person. Two people, actually."

I leaned in closer, unsure if I'd heard him right through the singing voices at my back. "People?"

Coen met my eyes. "A silversmith. A man about my age with black hair and scars that cover his hands and arms. He's with a girl."

There was a chill in the air suddenly. I made a point of knowing who dropped anchor on these docks, and I hadn't seen anyone like that come through Jeval. But if he was talking about someone

whose own soul was a debt, the way West's had been with Saint, then he wouldn't find any help from me. Or Koy. We didn't get involved in the business of traders.

When we said nothing, Coen laughed. "Yeah, I didn't think they would have come through here. But worth a try."

It was only then I noticed that Koy hadn't touched his rye. He still sat unmoving, his scrutinizing gaze roaming over Coen as if he was searching for something there.

"I've been banished from Bastian until I find them, and that's not looking like a feasible task. So, who knows, you might be seeing more of me." Coen winked.

"You're just going to float port to port?" I asked.

Coen shrugged. "Why not?"

That was a good question. Coen had his own personal envoy taking him around the Narrows and beyond so that he could drink and find brief companionship in tavern inns under the guise of making things right with his father. If I had to guess, I'd say he wasn't looking all that hard for the people he was supposed to find.

"She's got what she deserved, I'll tell you that much!" a man from the other table shouted, bringing the song to a stop.

I turned to see one of the *Iris*'s new deckhands staring into his empty glass. The others went on with their conversation, but I couldn't take my eyes from him as he mumbled on.

"She thought I didn't see, but that handkerchief she carries is stained with blood." The man beside him blinked sleepily, clearly too drunk to even hear what the deckhand was saying. "No, the great Emilia Marley isn't long for this world. Mark my words. She'll be rotting by the end of next month."

I froze, hand tightening on my glass as I stared at the floor. A chill crept over me, a trail of pinpricks dotting my skin.

Emilia Marley was a crofter. Not just any crofter—*the* rye crofter in Sowan. The head of the rye guild and the mastermind behind the trade that had built an entire economy for the Narrows.

I tried to think. The *Iris* had just come from Sowan. Did this man know Emilia? And what exactly was he saying? That she was ... *dying*?

I shifted in my seat, trying to listen. But if the man was still talking, it was drowned out by another song that had struck up among the crew.

My eyes shifted to Koy, who had finally lifted his glass to his mouth. By all appearances, he hadn't heard what I had. But when I looked across the table to Coen, he was rigid, his gaze pinned on the table behind me.

Had he heard the name?

It wasn't the kind of harmless rumor that made its way through the taverns of the Narrows. This was something else. If what the man was saying was true, it had enormous consequences. Emilia had built an entire industry on the production of rye, giving the Narrows legs to stand on against the trade of the Unnamed Sea. She had also committed the lion's share of her inventory to one contract—Saint.

The less than equitable business relationship was a constant point of contention among rye merchants and even the Trade Council at large. But Emilia was the lynchpin. At the end of the day, she was a merchant, and merchants had control over their own contracts. There were only two ways to end one. The first was for the merchant to dissolve it themselves.

The second was for the merchant to ... die.

As soon as I thought it, Coen relaxed back into his chair, the calm demeanor returning to his face. Had I imagined his reaction? He was sitting farther away than Koy was. It was possible he hadn't heard anything at all.

"Yeah, I'm not in any hurry," he said, returning his attention to Koy.

I'd forgotten what we were talking about, my heart still racing.

I looked around me at the tavern filled to the brim with Saltbloods. The words the man had uttered weren't just a scrap of news. They were a vulnerability. A secret that, in the right hands, could compromise the Narrows.

"I'd better get going," I said, getting to my feet.

Koy's brow cinched as he looked up at me. Coen, too, looked surprised by the abruptness of my exit.

"I've got supplies to prep for tomorrow and Ailee will be waiting," I lied.

Koy looked suspicious, but Coen was already refilling his glass of rye. "Good night then."

I forced a tight smile and kept my pace slow as I headed for the harbor. The rumble of the open-air tavern was replaced by the soft slosh of water beneath the docks.

I'd met Emilia before, because Saint had had the *Marigold* making deliveries to her on a schedule. We'd been at her croft at least once a month until we got all but banished from Sowan. As soon as it got out that West had set that fire in Lander's warehouse, we'd been prevented from docking and as far as I knew, the *Marigold* still wasn't welcome there. But if there was any truth to what the man from the *Iris* had said, any at all, then I needed to be sure the information got to the right people first.

I slipped into my post, closing the door behind me. Moonlight streamed through the open window where Ailee's hammock was strung up over the floor. I lit the lantern, searching for my ink pot.

I didn't like the idea of sending such sensitive information in a letter, but I wouldn't be able to leave Jeval myself for at least two days. By then, anything could happen.

W—I scribbled across the parchment. News came through Jeval today you should look into. If you can get to Sowan and check on our old drop there, you should. As soon as possible.

That was as clear as I was willing to get in a message that would pass through multiple hands. I sealed the parchment and addressed it to the Port of Ceros, where it would be waiting for West when he got in from Dern. If the letter left on the *Featherback* tomorrow, it would beat the *Marigold* there.

SIX

I paced the dock at a clip, sending a huddled flock of seabirds flying.

The letter burned in my vest pocket as my eyes scanned the ships in the harbor. Most of the crews were just beginning to wake, their duties trimmed as long as they were anchored, but the *Featherback* was bustling, the deckhands up in the masts and getting ready to set sail.

I glanced over my shoulder to the harbor master's post. The shutters of the single window were still closed, which meant that if Koy was up, he wasn't open for business yet.

Fret was already set up in his chair when I made it to the end of the docks, his collection of strange wares on display at his feet. I pulled the copper from my pocket before I'd even reached him.

"Morning." He looked up at me warily, gray eyes flat against the brilliant blue sea.

I found a place to lean on the railing, more closely than usual. "Hey, Fret."

Two men came down the ladder of the nearest ship, headed for the merchant's house. I watched them, waiting until they were out of earshot.

"Everything okay?" Fret's brow wrinkled with concern.

"Yeah," I forced a smile. "Just checking in to see if you've heard anything."

He tucked the copper into his jacket. "Just the usual. Bruin grumbling to whoever will listen, some dredgers from the beach complaining about the trades yesterday."

"Is that it?"

Fret crossed his arms, leaning back in his rickety chair. He was suspicious now. "Something in particular you're after?"

I lowered my voice. "Nothing new going around since that ship the *Iris* came in? Rumors or anything?"

His bottom lip jutted out as he thought about it. "No, don't think so."

I exhaled, relieved. "Okay. Thanks."

"No problem, Willa."

I started back the way I'd come, gaze fixed on the *Featherback* in the distance. It was usual practice to send messages to other ports through the helmsmen of ships, and they were bound by agreements with the Trade Council to treat them with discretion. But that didn't mean that I trusted them to get my letter to West all the way to Ceros unread. If someone did open my letter, they wouldn't find anything damning, but it was enough to peak curiosity and that made me nervous.

The bigger problem was that I was almost sure Koy wouldn't approve of my sending it. We'd agreed from the beginning that we wouldn't get involved in the business of traders, and I'd already

broken that promise once when I bought Ailee from her helmsman. Koy hadn't let me forget it, either.

I stopped walking when I saw that the harbor master's post window was now open. I could walk straight past it and give my message to the *Featherback* and Koy would know no different. Eventually, however, if what the deckhand said last night was true and this thing blew up the way I thought it would, it might come out that the news originated here on Jeval. And Koy wasn't stupid. It wouldn't take long for him to put together what I'd done.

What happened with Ailee had been different. I knew that. I'd given her the protection no one else would because I knew what it was like to *be* her. But I'd paid fairly, taken her room and board on myself, and we'd kept business with the ship she'd been on. We were no worse for wear, even if I had less coin to show for it.

This letter in my pocket—that felt like a lie.

I pulled the watch from my pocket and checked the time. If I was going to get the first coat of seal done on the *Wellworthy* before sundown, I needed to get started, but there was no getting around the fact that if Koy and I were partners—and we were—then I owed him the truth. If we couldn't trust each other, we wouldn't last another year in this harbor.

I knocked on the door of his post, almost instantly regretting it. Through the window, I could see him slipping his faded white shirt over his head, the sliding over dark, tanned skin. His trousers hung low on his hips, and since he'd shaved his long hair off, his shoulders looked even broader over his narrow waist.

There were times when I let myself look at him. There were even times when I imagined myself touching him, but there was a self-imposed limit to how much I'd let myself feel. The clear boundary I never crossed was the moment that warm liquid feeling surfaced in the center of my chest. That's the place I kept my toes on the sand. Just far enough from the break of the wave to not be pulled out to sea.

When he opened the door, he looked surprised to see me. "Oh, Willa." He didn't have that sleepy look, so he'd likely been up for a while, going over his manifests.

"Morning," I said, gesturing inside. "Can I come in?"

"Sure." He let me pass, closing the door behind me.

The post wasn't much bigger than mine, built to be both his home and his office. From the window, he could see the full length of the harbor from the first bay to the last. Only a year ago we'd stood on the old, crumbling docks together planning the exact spot for this place. It still smelled like freshly planed wood.

"I need to talk to you about something," I said.

Koy stoppered the ink pot on his little table, but I could tell he was already listening.

"Last night, I heard something in the tavern. Something ... important."

"All right." He waited.

I swallowed. "Do you know who Emilia Marley is?"

"The rye crofter?"

I nodded. "She's also the rye guild's master."

"Yeah, I know who she is."

"When we were having a drink with Coen, I heard someone from the *Iris* say something." I

hesitated.

“Spit it out, Willa.” Koy almost laughed.

“It sounded like she’s sick. Like maybe she’s dying.”

The smile melted from Koy’s face.

“And, I don’t know, the way he said it was almost as if it was being kept secret.”

“Well, if it’s true, then I’m sure they aren’t advertising it. I mean, if Emilia Marley died, that would...” He tried to find the words.

“Change everything,” I finished.

He met my eyes in a silent agreement.

“If Emilia dies and her contracts die with her, every merchant and trader in the Narrows will be tearing each other apart for a seat at that table. And it won’t just affect them. The guild, the Trade Council, it would disrupt every facet of our trade, our ports, our copper, everything.”

“We don’t know that she isn’t making arrangements.”

“Maybe she is. Maybe she isn’t.”

“We don’t even know if it’s true, Willa.” His voice rose. “You’re putting a lot of stock into a rumor you heard at a tavern from a drunk deckhand.”

He was right. But I couldn’t shake the feeling I’d had last night, like I was holding my breath. Like I was carrying a secret that wasn’t mine.

“I think we should tell West. Just let him know that—”

“No,” Koy answered, cutting me off. “No way.”

“Why not?”

“Because that is the exact opposite of staying impartial in trade business. You can’t just tip off the *Marigold* every time we have valuable information.”

“That’s not what I mean. I just think we should let him know,” I pressed. “Just in case. He could go there, make sure that nothing’s going on.”

“It’s none of our business.”

“How can you say that?” I gaped at him. “If this is true, it could affect *all* of us.”

“Traders and merchants rise and fall. That’s how things go. This is no different.”

“It is and you know it,” I said. “Imagine if someone from the Unnamed Sea found out before our own Trade Council. We can’t just keep this to ourselves.”

“Yes, we can. And that’s what we’re going to do.”

“Koy.”

“How are we supposed to run like a real port if we’re passing on rumors from trading ships and getting mixed up in their affairs? There’s supposed to be a separation between us and them. You know that.”

“I also know that’s not how ports really work. They break those rules all the time.”

“It’s how *we* work. How we *agreed* to work. Those ports have the luxury of ships needing them. They have villages and cities and resources. We haven’t earned the right to break the rules yet. This is the first of many times we’ll be in this position. We’ll have ships from the Narrows and the Unnamed Sea docked side by side every single day. You think we won’t hear things?”

I rubbed my hands over my face, trying to think.

“You keeping saying you want to make your own way, Willa? Then do it.”

I glared at him. “That is what I’m doing. I’m here. I left everything, gave all of my copper to be here.”

“And now you want to run to West the moment you feel like you need to.”

“That’s not what I’m doing! I’m not running to anyone!” I was shouting now, and I didn’t care who out on the docks could hear me.

“Have you broken from him or not?”

I stared at him. *Broken* wasn’t the right word. I’d never be broken from my brother. But the real question Koy was asking me was what I was choosing. West and the *Marigold* and my life before, or Jeval and the port and my new life here. With him.

“I have.” I breathed. “You know I have.”

“Then you know you can’t send a message to West.”

I grit my teeth, eyes pinned to the floor as heat licked my face. Koy was the only one seeing this clearly. It wasn’t clean or simple, but the bottom line was that there were consequences we could both face if I inserted myself into an unfolding crisis of this magnitude. We had to be impartial. And Koy wasn’t wrong about the fact that it could all be a lie. I could be making all of this into something it wasn’t.

“All right,” I said. “You’re right.”

Koy’s eyebrows lifted. “I’m sorry?”

“I said, you’re right.”

A smile broke on his face. “I don’t know if you’ve ever said that before.”

“Very funny,” I muttered. “I have to go. I’m running behind as it is.”

I opened the door and stepped back out into the sunlight, closing it behind me. When I looked back, Koy was watching me from the window as he picked up the quill on his table. He still had that smug look, but the teasing in his eyes made my heart flutter just a little bit.

Ailee was waiting for me at the mouth of the slip where the *Wellworthy* was anchored in the distance. Her black curls were flying in a cloud around her head, her attention on something across the docks. It wasn’t until I got closer that I could make out the expression on her face. She was worried about something. Maybe even scared.

I picked up my pace, opening my mouth to call out to her when I heard voices shouting. When I passed the next ship, I could finally see what she was looking at. A crowd was gathered a few bays down, lining the edge of one of the docks where it followed the black rock face. They were peering down into the water.

“Get a hook!” someone called out, and a woman went running.

More people were appearing on the decks of the ships, streaming toward the bows to see what was going on. I pushed through the crowd when I reached them, prying a path between the bodies until I reached the edge.

I froze when I caught sight of what they were looking at, my hand flying to my mouth. It was a body. Floating face down in the water.

There was no rescue being made because it was clear the person was dead. A few crabs had already been eating at the man and he was drained of color in a way that only happened after many

hours in the water.

The woman reappeared with a large iron hook in hand and someone fished the man from the sea. The throng of people moved back as they pulled him up onto the dock and as soon as he rolled over, face to the sun, all the air left my lungs.

It was him. The man from the *Iris* I'd seen last night. The one who'd been talking about Emilia.

It was bound to happen eventually, but in the year we'd been operating, we'd never had a death of a visiting crew occur. It just so happened that it was now, and it had happened to a man who'd been slurring dangerous rumors at the tavern. That couldn't be a coincidence.

My eyes roamed the faces that surrounded me, looking for anyone who didn't look shocked by the sight. If I'd heard him, it was completely possible that others had, too. But I hadn't seen a single reaction last night, not even from the numb-faced man who sat beside the deckhand. The only moment I thought I'd caught a glimpse of something was when I'd turned back around and seen that almost imperceptible rigidity in Coen.

I lifted my gaze to the *Wellworthy* in the distance, my blood running cold.

There, on the deck, he was leaning into the foremast, hands stuffed in the pockets of his unbuttoned jacket. But when he caught my eyes on him, he turned into the wind, disappearing.

SEVEN

All but a single sliver of light was shut out of the helmsman's quarters as the door closed, the window fastened tight. The helmsman of the *Iris* stood before his desk in the glow of a lantern, arms crossed over his chest as his gaze moved from me to Koy.

The ship was one that had visited before and we'd managed to work out an agreement for supplies to be couriered from Ceros once a month, but this could wreck everything.

"Did he have any disagreements with the crew that you're aware of?" Koy asked, playing the part of harbor watch. We didn't have one of those, something that I now realized had been a mistake.

"Hasn't been around long enough to make any enemies. We just hired him on in Sowan. He was working there on a croft for a few years, didn't seem to know anyone when he came on board."

That lined up, if the deckhand had really known Emilia. If he had worked on a croft in Sowan, there was every reason to believe it was hers.

"None of the crew seems to know where he went last night, so that's no help." He added.

"Look, I think the most likely scenario here is that this was an accident," Koy said.

I turned toward him just slightly, trying not to give away what I was thinking. Koy knew as well as I did that the odds of this man being the one to say what he had about Emilia *and* ending up dead the same night were slim.

"We were both at the tavern last night and we saw him. He'd definitely had more than a few drinks, and I think your crew would say the same."

"With these barrier islands," I added, "it can be dangerous if you fall in. Especially in the dark."

The helmsman seemed to buy it. "Just as reasonable as any other explanation."

"If you'd like, we can take care of the body," Koy said.

I shivered. It wasn't the first dead man I'd seen. Far from it, in fact. But the significance of the timing made a chill creep over my skin. I could feel it. Something about all of this wasn't right.

"I'd appreciate it."

"And we'd appreciate your discretion." Koy's voice deepened with meaning.

"As far as I'm concerned, you two have done right by the *Iris*. No reason to muck that up now. But this happens again, and we'll be having a different conversation."

I nodded in agreement. We were responsible for what happened in our harbor just like he was responsible for what happened on his ship. If it got around that crews were disappearing on our docks and washing up on the beach, that would be a problem. One that could sink us before we even really got our legs beneath us.

“If there’s nothing else, I do need to get the ship underway.”

“Of course.” Koy gave the helmsman a grateful nod and the door opened again, flooding the cabin with bright light.

We didn’t speak as we crossed the deck and climbed down the ladder. We didn’t so much as look at each other until we’d reached the main dock, the *Iris* out of sight.

“What the hell is this?” Koy muttered through clenched teeth.

“How long did you stay with Coen last night?”

“What?”

I stopped, turning toward him.

“When you left last night,” I whispered, “did you see where he went? Did he go back to his room or to the harbor?”

Koy was trying to follow my thinking, but he was coming up short. “I have no idea. What does it matter?”

“I think.” I paused, weighing the cost of what I was about to say. “I’m pretty sure he heard the same thing I did last night.”

He stared at me.

“When I looked back at him after the deckhand said what he said, he had this expression like he was as shocked to hear it as I was. But then he smoothed it over, like he hadn’t heard, and I thought I’d imagined it.”

“Maybe you did.”

A woman with a string of fish passed, eyeing us as we fell quiet. I waited until she’d reached the next bay before I continued.

“If you didn’t see where he went last night, he could’ve have followed that man.”

“But why kill him?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. To make sure he doesn’t repeat what he said?”

Koy wasn’t buying it. “You think the deckhand was murdered by that tidy merchant’s son?” Koy laughed. “I doubt he can even throw a punch, Willa.”

I shook my head. He was wrong about that. I didn’t know how I knew, but I did. There was an edge to Coen beneath his charm. A coldness brimming beneath that look in his eye.

“Just ... just tell Raef to stay away from him. I mean it, Koy.”

Koy looked at me for a long moment before his eyes went over my head. “Great. What now?”

Down the dock, the helmsman of a schooner called the *Grouse* was stalking toward us, three of his crew on his heels. Even from here, I could tell he was furious.

I positioned myself next to Koy and when the helmsman reached us, he tossed a coin purse to the dock. Its contents spilled out, falling through the cracks. It was nothing more than what looked to be lead pellets.

My gaze lifted to meet his.

“This is the third time in two days I’ve found a swapped purse. Third time!” he shouted.

Koy lifted a hand in the air that was meant to calm the man, but it only made him draw a knife. I stepped forward, my hand going to the handle of my dagger. Before I could pull it, Koy grabbed me, holding me in place.

"I want three full purses by sundown. Then we're raising anchor and we're not coming back." He seethed.

Koy kept his tone even. "I apologize for the—"

"We came here to do business, not lose coin."

"I know. And believe me, we will find whoever is responsible and we'll make it right."

The man lowered his knife and shoved between us, starting toward the tavern. "Sundown!" he called back over his shoulder, slipping his blade into his belt.

I rounded on Koy, my hands clenched into fists. "You'll handle them, huh?" I said, daring him to argue.

I didn't give him a chance to respond, starting toward the other end of the harbor where I knew Bruin and his friends would be waiting to catch a skiff back to the beach.

"Willa."

Koy's voice was barely audible over my racing thoughts. I'd known this would happen. I'd known the minute I stepped foot on this island and Bruin fixed me with that demeaning look that he was going to be trouble. That he'd cost us if we didn't deal with him.

My boots pounded on the dock and the closer I got, the higher the scream was rising in my throat. Bruin didn't see me coming until I was shoving him in the chest with both hands, nearly knocking him into the water.

"What the—"

Koy caught up to me just in time to put himself between me and Bruin.

"Your pickpocketing just cost us a ship," I spat. "You're going to pay every single coin back. Now."

Bruin laughed and the others joined, making my head swim. He didn't get it. None of them did. They didn't understand what we were trying to do here or what this place meant. They never would.

For the first time since I'd come to Jeval, I felt so utterly foolish for being here. For thinking that this idea, this dream could be real. I'd spent almost every coin I had on this harbor and left everything I'd known. And for what?

"You need to get your *girl* under control, Koy."

I reared back and swung my fist as hard as I could, knuckles slamming into Bruin's cheek. Pain exploded between every bone in my hand, making me gasp, and I cradled it against my chest.

As soon as he got his balance, Bruin was lunging for me. Koy caught him by the shirt with both hands, driving him back until he hit the post behind him. He pinned Bruin there, peering down into his face with a look I hadn't seen before.

Everyone on the dock went quiet as he began to speak. "You just lost your permit to trade in this harbor," he said, voice like thunder.

Bruin's eyes lit with panic. "Permit? What permit?"

"The one I'm issuing today to every Jevali who wants the right to trade on *our* docks."

"You can't do that!"

"Yes." Koy shoved into him once more before letting him go. "I can. You risk our business and you risk the future of every Jevali on this island. If you don't see that, you don't belong here."

Shock riddled every face that surrounded us, including mine. I'd never seen him like this with a

Jevali. My guess was that no one had.

“You pay back the coin, take a skiff to the beach, and if I see you back here or in the merchant’s house again, you *will* regret it.” He turned to the others. “Anyone else?”

A few heads shook nervously. No one spoke up.

It was only then that I noticed the skiff full of dredgers behind us. It had pulled up in the chaos of what had just unfolded, and every one of them had seen the exchange between me, Koy, and Bruin.

“Well?” Koy flung a hand toward the spectators in the harbor. “You have work to do, or what?”

They dredgers climbed out of the skiff one by one until it was empty and Bruin stepped inside, making it rock. There was a scratch on his cheek where I’d hit him and the bloom of red below his cheekbone was spreading. Between my fingers, the pain was only growing. I was pretty sure I’d broken something.

The woman running the skiff avoided Koy’s gaze, turning the small sail before she pushed off from the dock. Bruin’s eyes didn’t leave mine as it caught the wind, drifting toward the beach.

Koy sighed, watching the boat grow smaller in the distance. “We’re going to pay for that.”

EIGHT

The thick scent of tung oil burned in my nose as I watched a single star move across the sky. The breeze coming through the window wasn't strong enough to cool the cramped bosun's post, but it carried the smell of a storm—a scent that made me miss the *Marigold*.

I'd never felt that way about the hovel we called home in Waterside. I didn't miss the streets that always seemed to be wet, even if it hadn't rained, or the sounds of the city. I didn't miss my mother, either.

I just missed West.

The *Marigold* was the first place I ever had to come back to. A place that I belonged. And now that I was gone, I couldn't quite remember why I'd been so set on leaving. For the last few hours, as I painted oil onto the unsealed wood in Coen's quarters, I'd been asking myself the same questions over and over.

Had I made a mistake when I came here? Was any of this even real? Could I really make it without my brother?

I could see it in my mind, everything falling apart piece by piece. The harbor, the port, all the copper I'd sunk into this dream. It was all crumbling before my very eyes. How had I been so stupid?

Only a few steps away, Ailee's soft breaths echoed the faint brush of waves outside. She was curled up in her hammock, one foot dangling from the fabric. We'd worked until well after sundown to finish the sealing in Coen's quarters and after another coat, the *Wellworthy* would be on its way. Their departure couldn't come soon enough, and while only days ago I'd been convinced it was our big chance, now I was hoping it was the last we'd see of the ship.

That blank, empty look in Coen's eyes when he'd stood up on the deck of the *Wellworthy* was burned in my memory. I couldn't shake it. What had that look meant? Did he know that I knew? If he did, what would he do about it?

I hadn't seen him on the ship as I worked for the rest of the day, and I hadn't gone to the tavern because I didn't want to run into any Jevalis looking for payback in Bruin's name. I'd also been hesitant to let Ailee out of my sight, surprising myself with how protective I felt over the girl. The old rules we lived by would have forbidden the risk Ailee had brought into my life, and it was possible I was just filling the empty place West had once occupied. But the thing I feared even more than that reality was the possibility of being alone.

The wind picked up, making the bosun's post groan around me and I smiled to myself, thinking it almost sounded like a ship. Almost. But the smile fell when I heard the creak of wood on the dock

outside. I stilled, listening.

A bigger wave crashed against the barrier islands and I relaxed, letting out the breath I was holding. I was skittish, and I didn't like that feeling. It reminded me of those months after Crane, when the burn on my face was healing about as fast as my heart was. I'd been truly terrified, and even more terrified for anyone to know it.

I closed my eyes, trying to push the memories from my mind. I listened to the sound of the water. The wind. The ring of grommets on tilting masts. But my eyes popped back open when I heard a metal click outside the door. No, *at* the door.

My heartbeat quickened as I sat up, silently touching my bare feet to the floor. There were whispers drifting in through the open window. Shadows moving over the wall. Someone was coming.

I stood, reaching into Ailee's hammock to cover her mouth with one hand before I shook her awake with the other. She startled, eyes widening in the dark as they focused on me.

I leaned down, putting my mouth close to her ear.

"Get up," I whispered.

Ailee obeyed, her skinny limbs untangling from the fabric as I helped her to her feet. Another scrape of metal sounded, drawing her gaze to the door, and I could see the moment the panic gripped her. She pushed the curls back from her face, frantically searching the darkness around us.

I pressed a finger to my mouth and pointed to the small window at the back of the post above the counter. It was too small for me, but she could fit. She could get out before that door opened.

Ailee looked from the window to me before shaking her head.

The lock on the door clicked and I went still, watching the flicker of light beneath the door. When I pushed Ailee toward the back window, she planted her feet, refusing again. She didn't relent until I had all but picked her up, hauling her toward it.

I lifted her to the opening and she scrambled through, her black eyes meeting mine for a breath before she melted into the dark. My pulse was a sprint now, my breaths coming so fast that I could feel my head going light. This is how it had been before. That buzz in the air telling me that somewhere terrible was about to happen, only there was nothing I could do to stop it.

My hands fumbled along the wall in search of my belt and when I found it, my fingers hooked the handle of my dagger. My grip closed around it as the door to the post opened, bringing a stream of moonlight inside.

Two silhouettes were painted against the glare and I squared my shoulders to them, my skin going cold as ice. It was Bruin. I'd known it must be, but seeing his shape there against the black sky filled my insides with pure fear. By the time anyone heard me screaming, he'd have his hands around my throat.

"Where's your harbor master now, Willa?" The grin was thick in Bruin's voice.

I lifted the dagger before me, letting my weight shift back and forth from one leg to the other. It was possible I could outrun him, but I'd have to get past him first. That didn't seem likely with two of them. My best chance was to fight like hell and hope I'd bought myself enough time for Ailee to get help.

Bruin took a step toward me and I stood my ground, tightening my grip on the blade. Moonlight glinted off the jewels set into the handle as my hand shook. I could barely keep hold of it.

Bruin waited for three silent, agonizing seconds before he finally charged in my direction, crossing the space so fast that I barely got my dagger through the air before he was knocking me off my feet. The edge of the blade grazed his arm before it slipped from my fingers and the ping of it hitting the floor was the last sound I heard before his fist came down on me.

Bright light erupted in the dark as the blow struck my temple and I cried out, a sob breaking in my chest.

“Help!” I screamed as he jerked me to my feet, and as I drew another breath to scream again, a hand was shoving something into my mouth. A cloth. The bitter taste of tung oil made me gag as he dragged me through the door onto the dock. The other figure stalked behind me as I kicked, desperately reaching out around me for anything I could catch hold of.

The ship decks overhead were dark, the wind covering the sound of the men’s footsteps as we passed each slip. Hot tears stung my eyes as the stars in the sky blurred, making me dizzy. No one was coming, I realized. No one was coming for me.

Bruin stopped walking before he hooked his hands beneath my arms and the other man grabbed my feet, lugging me to the edge of the dock. I couldn’t see what they were doing, but I could hear it. The clink of chains. The snap of irons as they closed around my ankles.

It hit me all at once what was happening here. He wasn’t going to just kill me. He was going to tie me to the reef. Leave me there to drown so the sea creatures could pick my bones clean.

The sound of my scream was muffled in the oil-soaked cloth as I thrashed, nails scratching every surface they could find. Bruin was cursing, pinning me to the dock with all his weight until I couldn’t draw breath, and then I heard it. Actually, I could *feel* it.

Footsteps.

The reverberation of a steady beat shook the wooden planks beneath me, but Bruin didn’t seem to notice, his focus on the irons. I tilted my head back, but the docks disappeared in the dark, an inky black bleeding through the air as a cloud moved across the face of the moon. It wasn’t until the light flickered back that I could see him.

Koy.

Again, I screamed, and Bruin finally looked up, eyes going wide when he saw him.

“Shit.”

Frantically, he dragged me closer to the edge and I clawed at the dock, fingers desperately catching each crack in the wood as I slid. But he was too strong. I was going over the edge a second later, and as soon as the splash beneath me sounded, I knew. It was too late.

I saw Koy’s face for a split second before the weight began to sink, pulling me under so fast that I barely had time to suck in a breath. I plunged into the cold water, blinking as the salt stung my eyes, and the bubbles raced up in the beams of moonlight that cascaded around me. My hands raked helplessly through the current as the surface drew away from me, and my ears popped before the weight hit the sandy bottom and I halted.

I kicked at the chains, clumsily pulling the cloth from my mouth before I reached down, trying to find the clasp of the iron. He’d only gotten one fastening around my foot, but I couldn’t get it free. The opening was just small enough that I couldn’t wiggle my heel past it.

Another pathetic cry escaped my lips, sending another stream of bubbles racing up to the surface,

and I reached out, hoping I might be close enough to the submerged dock posts to reach. But there was nothing. Only the sound of the waves breaking against the barrier islands and the pounding of my heart.

The light shifted over me, followed by a muted splash, and a figure dropped through the water toward me. Pain bloomed in my chest when I recognized Koy's shape coming closer. He sank past me, pulling at the chains until he'd reached the bottom. Then he was yanking at the iron, trying to wedge my foot out of the loop.

It was no use.

I went still, suspended in the darkness, the glittering pool of light above like a rippling puddle as Koy floated up to meet me. My muscles instantly went weak; every bit of the survival instinct that had been coursing through my veins was gone now, replaced by an inexplicable numb feeling as his hands found my face.

My lungs squeezed, my arms weightless, and the pain left my body the minute I could feel the warmth of his palms. I stopped fighting the gravity tugging at my feet and he pressed his forehead to mine, meeting my eyes. He was waiting for something.

I couldn't make out his face, but suddenly I understood what the tenderness in his touch meant. That moment of silence. My foot wasn't coming out of that iron unless he broke it. It was that or drown.

His fingers grazed over my cheeks, finding my jaw so that he could tilt my face up toward the moonlight. He waited for me to nod, and when I did, I pressed my face into his palm, closing my eyes.

He let me go, pulling himself down again until he had my foot in his hands, and before I could change my mind, his hand wrapped tightly around my ankle. I pinched my eyes closed as the sharp pain dug into the back of my heel, and he didn't stop, prying the metal relentlessly against the bone until that pain was shooting up my leg, into my hip. The moment it cracked, the sound tore through me with a white-hot heat that made me feel like I was on fire inside.

Then I was floating. The lack of air was no longer detectable in my chest. The ache in my ears and throat were gone. I drifted toward the moonlight as my mind all but wiped every single feeling from my body. And when I broke the surface, I gasped, filling my lungs so fast that I was sure they would explode.

Koy came up beside me as I choked and he pulled me alongside him toward the dock, where Ailee was waiting. Bruin and the man were gone, and a few crew from the ships littered the harbor as they watched. Koy's labored breaths were hot against my ear as he pulled me, dead weight, from the water and lifted me into his arms. Then I could hear the sound of his footsteps again, like a heartbeat that brought my own back in line.

I curled into his arms, pressing my face into his neck, and I cried. I wept, a deep, ragged sound breaking me in places I didn't think could crack. His arms tightened around me, holding me to him, and his words were hot against my ear, the only thing I could feel.

"I've got you."

NINE

I woke in Koy's hammock, wrapped in the smell of him.

Sweat dotted my skin everywhere the light touched it, and I turned my face instinctively toward the window, where Koy was leaning into the wall, watching the sea. His gaze was calm, missing the tautness it usually carried, and for a moment, the version of him I first met flashed through my mind. His long, damp hair blown into his face, his black eyes like onyx. He was someone different now. I was, too.

A nearly empty bottle of rye was still cradled in my arms from last night, the pain throbbing between my temples nothing next to the excruciating agony in my foot. It was propped up high, my swollen ankle blackened to a color that turned my stomach when I looked at it. At some point in the night, I remembered being sick and when I spotted the bucket on the floor beneath me, the fuzzy memory resurfaced. I winced, wishing I could erase it.

Koy blinked, eyes finding me, and he immediately left the window, coming to my side. He took the bottle from my hands, pushing the hair back from my face.

"You slept." He looked down at me, hand stalling on my forehead a beat too long, like he was checking for a fever. "Can you move it?"

Again, I glanced at my foot, cringing. "I don't want to."

"Okay. That's okay."

I turned my face to search the post, looking for Ailee.

"She's checking in with the *Wellworthy*."

"You should be doing that," I croaked, my throat like sand.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"You can't just—" I tried to swallow back the tears springing to my eyes. This was a mess, all of it. "One of us has to be out there, handling things."

"Raef is discharging the ships that are leaving and doing intake for the new ones."

I looked at him. "New ones?"

He nodded. "Two more came in last night."

"I hope they don't need repairs." I pressed a hand to my sweaty forehead.

Any other time, the comment would have been darkly funny. But here, curled in this hammock like a child that needed tending, I was only humiliated. The very thought made the tears spill over and I wiped them with the back of my hand angrily.

"Where's Bruin?" I rasped.

“He’s gone.”

I didn’t look at him, because I didn’t want to know exactly what those words meant. Maybe he’d banished him from the island. Did he have the authority to do that? Or maybe he’d gotten rid of him some other way, like West had done with Crane.

Koy’s eyes traveled over me before landing on my foot. His mouth opened and closed before he finally spoke. “I’m sorry, Willa.” He breathed. “I had to.”

I reached for him, pulling on his shirt until he was close to me. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him thank you or tell him that he’d saved my life in more ways than one. I couldn’t form the words to say out loud that when I’d seen him on the docks, I’d known I was safe.

“I know I should have listened to you. I should have dealt with them months ago,” he said, the words faint.

Maybe he should have, but I wasn’t convinced this wouldn’t have ended the same. There were those on the island that needed the change, like Speck. Then there were those who would die to prevent it. Jeval was a simmering pot, just waiting to boil over, and it finally had.

“Say it.” I smirked through my tears.

When he caught my meaning, he smiled sadly. “You were right.”

“I’ve never heard you say that before.”

The tension uncoiled itself from around him and he laughed, a sound I now found myself craving. When my eyes landed on the bundle on the floor behind him, I lifted myself up onto my elbows.

“What is that?”

Koy turned to look at my hammock. It was piled in a heap in the corner.

“You’re moving in here,” he said, not even an edge of sarcasm in his voice.

“What?”

Koy folded his fingers between mine, turning my hand over to look at my busted knuckles. “You should have done it a long time ago.”

So, he did know how I felt about him.

“I wasn’t ready,” I whispered.

“Well, you are now.”

I gave him a brittle smile, the movement making the corner of my lip hurt, and I remembered that my face must be busted, too, after Bruin hit me. I pulled his hand up to where my heart was beating behind my ribs, holding it there. I’d spent so long trying to break free of needing anyone, but the thing was, I didn’t *want* to be alone. How long had he known that?

“What about Ailee?” I asked.

“Her, too.”

I nodded.

The ring of the bell rang out over the docks, signaling the opening of trade, and almost immediately the harbor came to life outside the window. Shadows flitted over the post as people passed, commands echoing as they were called out on the anchored ships.

Again, I looked at my mangled foot. It would be weeks, if not months, before I could get around on it like I had before. I resisted the urge to ask myself what would happen if I couldn’t. In that time, ships would come and go and other than what we had on hand to trade, Jeval had little to offer beside

rye and a place to harbor from a storm.

“We’ll have to pull some of the Jevalis who have basic bosun skills and make assignments,” I said, thinking aloud. “Ailee and Raef can keep an eye on them and in the meantime, I can work on inventory and plans for the drydock. It won’t be a total waste. I promise.”

“Willa, a year ago this place didn’t even exist. We built it. You and me. I’m not worried.”

I smiled again.

The door swung open and a breathless Ailee appeared on the other side, her wild hair flying. She was paler than usual, her dark eyes glinting.

I sat up, instantly regretting it when the pain shot through my leg. “What’s wrong?”

“The *Wellworthy*.”

I stilled. “What about it?”

“It’s—it’s gone,” she stammered.

“What do you mean it’s gone?” My voice rose.

Ailee wrung her hands. “Some of the crew from the *Iris* said it raised its sails well before dawn. When the sun came up, they were already west on the horizon.”

My brow pulled. “West? I thought they were headed to Sowan next.”

“That’s what the navigator told me,” Koy said.

I stared at him, putting it together slowly. “I wasn’t even finished sealing the wood, Koy.”

Understanding settled between us.

“The only reason the *Wellworthy* could possibly have for leaving without discharge from the harbor master and with no notice at all is because they are running,” I said.

“But from what?”

That was the thing. I had my suspicions about Coen being responsible for the death of the deckhand from Sowan, but there was no evidence. Nothing linking him to what happened. What was the urgency?

“Or.” A sick feeling pooled in my stomach. “Maybe they weren’t running *from* something, but *to* something.”

Ailee’s eyes jumped back and forth between us.

“Koy,” I panted, “if Coen did hear what I heard that night...”

“He’s headed to the Unnamed Sea,” he finished my thought. There was a hollow silence for several seconds before he finally spoke again. This time, it was to Ailee. “Get up to bay one. Tell the *Featherback* to wait.”

Ailee nodded, turning on her heel, and then she was gone.

“What? Why?”

“It’s too dangerous to send a letter. You’re going to Ceros yourself.”

I was struggling to sit up now, gasping as I lowered my damaged foot from the hammock. “What the hell are you talking about?” I ground out.

Koy didn’t meet my eyes. He went to the counter at the back of the post, taking a purse of copper from the shelf and lifting something from one of the hooks on the wall. It took me a moment to realize it was my belt. My dagger was safely fastened in its sheath.

“The *Featherback* is headed straight there. We’ll pay for passage. West should be there in a week

at most, right?”

“Yeah, but...”

“But what?”

I couldn't find the words, my eyes fixing on his as a storm of thoughts swirled in my head. Only last night I'd nearly died, and now the last thing I wanted to do was leave.

“I can't just go.”

“You need a physician anyway, Willa.”

“But,” I said the useless word again, though I didn't know what came after it.

Koy draped my jacket over his arm, holding out a hand to help me stand. “You'll come back,” he said, sifting out the root of this panic that was overtaking me.

A flood of relief filled me, as if I'd just needed one of us to say it out loud. I nodded and he smiled before he pressed his lips to mine. For the first time. He drew in a long, slow breath as he kissed me, making that fire in my chest spill over. It pulled me out to sea.

When his mouth broke from mine, he was still smiling, and the tears were back in my eyes without my permission. I wrapped my arms around his neck and he lifted me the way he had last night, careful not to hit my foot as he ducked out the door of the post. Over his shoulder, I scanned the harbor, counting each bay in my head, the way I did every morning.

“Don't let Ailee work on any ships alone. And don't take on repairs unless you know we can fix it,” I said, mind racing. “Make sure you take at least half the payment up front.”

“I know.”

“And don't—”

“Willa, I know,” he said again.

“What's all this, Koy?” A voice called down from the *Featherback* and I looked up to see the helmsman peering over the railing.

“Passage. She needs a physician,” he called out. “We can pay.”

The helmsman's mustache twitched. “Well, of course.” He motioned in the air. “Get the sling down there!”

A moment later, the lines were lowering and I was hoisting myself into them. “I have about as good a chance making it there as I do sinking with this rotten ship,” I muttered. “Look after Ailee.”

Koy nodded.

“I mean it,” I said, a quiet desperation surfacing in my voice.

His hand squeezed mine. “I will.”

The ropes creaked as they tightened and he kissed my fingers as the crew lifted me into the air. Then hands were gently pulling me over the railing onto the deck. Beside Koy, Ailee was watching me with wide eyes. I could have sworn I saw her lip quivering.

The sails snapped as the wind caught them and the ship drifted from the dock, slipping into the current. They were all growing smaller by the second. Koy, Ailee, the harbor, the island. A rush of cold dread slowly took shape inside of me, my mind spinning around one single thought.

I was headed back to the *Marigold*, but for the first time, it didn't feel like going home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Adrienne Young is a foodie with a deep love of history and travel and a shameless addiction to coffee. When she's not writing, you can find her on her yoga mat, sipping wine over long dinners or disappearing into her favorite art museums. She lives with her documentary filmmaker husband and their four little wildlings in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. She is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling Sky in the Deep duology and the World of the Narrows series. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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