



# All at Sea

Cheyenne Blue



# Chapter 1

SHE'D DONE IT.

The words on the screen blurred as Stevie's eyes filled with tears. She dashed them away impatiently and read the email from the university again. Three years of study came together in this moment. Stephanie Sterling: registered nurse. And she'd succeeded on her own terms.

Stevie sprang from the chair and took two paces to the window. She stared out without really seeing the street scene below.

*Registered nurse.* The words hummed in her mind. She closed her eyes, and the joy expanded in her chest, spilling over in a tumble of laughter. She'd actually done it. Stevie drew a deep breath, then another, and threw open the door to her small balcony. Flinging her arms wide, she screamed down at the quiet street below, "I passed! I'm a qualified nurse!"

A courier paused as he got into his vehicle and gave her a thumbs up. "Good on ya, love. Nurses make the world go around."

Stevie blew him a kiss and retreated inside before she made even more of a fool of herself.

Her email pinged, and she returned to her laptop. The subject line made her smile: *Kiss my arse, baby, I passed!* It seemed her former housemate Kate was also celebrating.

Stevie grabbed her phone and punched in Kate's number.

Kate answered on the first ring. "How'd you do, girlfriend?"

"I passed with honours."

"Fantastic! I knew you would. You worked harder than any of us. I'm so happy for you, Stevie."

"We both slaved. You deserve it too." Stevie closed her eyes at the memory of their long caffeine-fuelled late-night study sessions, when they

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had been so tired neither of them could remember the difference between myelopathy and myopathy.

Voices in the background rose and fell, and there was a burst of laughter. “That’s the rest of the gang,” Kate said. “We’re off to paint the Melbourne laneways red in celebration. I wish you were here. It’s not the same without you.”

“I wish I was too.”

“Go out on the town,” Kate said, her voice firm. “Celebrate. Promise me you won’t let your family steal this from you. *Make* them acknowledge your success.”

“I promise,” Stevie said automatically. And she would try. It was simply easier to promise Kate than to get into another discussion about her family.

“Good. And when things settle down, we must plan your next visit down to the big smoke! We all miss you.”

“I miss you guys too.” Stevie glanced around her bare flat, comparing it with the messy space she’d shared with Kate.

“And Stevie?” Kate paused. “I believe in you. There’s no better nurse in Australia than Stephanie Sterling.”

Kate ended the call on a burst of noise and shouting from their friends.

Stevie set the phone down and paced back to the window. Celebrate, Kate had said. Oh, how she wanted to, but it was easier said than done in a small town where she had few true friends.

For a moment, she thought about driving to Canberra and hopping on a plane to Melbourne. She glanced around the dingy flat. No. She wanted this space gleaming with fresh paint and cheery decor before she started her new job at Harbour View Aged Care Home, so a trip to Melbourne would have to wait.

Her fingers twitched with the need to call someone. Ash? But no, her sister had said she’d be in a meeting all afternoon. She couldn’t disturb her. If she wanted to call someone she might be able to celebrate with, that left only one option. Should she call her parents? Would they be happy for her? Would they even realise what this meant to her?

*Make them acknowledge your success.* Kate’s words echoed in her mind.

Stevie returned to the desk and picked up her phone. Her finger hesitated over the call button. Maybe her mother wouldn’t answer anyway. It was probably her bridge morning, or she’d be at some charity fundraiser.

Stevie had seldom presumed to interrupt, even as a child. But this was different. And it was part of her reason for returning home to Wallanbindi. She bit her lip and pressed the call button.

“Stephanie, darling.” Her mother’s cultured tones came down the line.

“Hello, Mother. How are you?”

“Waiting. My hair appointment is running late.” Annoyance threaded her mother’s voice.

That wasn’t good. A bored and irritated Linda was unlikely to give the reaction Stevie hoped for when she shared her news. “I can call back.”

“No.” A heavy sigh. “You can keep me amused while I wait.”

“I’m not sure about the amused part, but I’m calling with news.” Stevie took a deep breath. “I got my uni results. I passed with honours. I’m now a registered nurse.”

“Darling, that’s wonderful news! Of course, I always knew you would. We have a nurse in the family now, how marvellous. You can look after us when we’re old and infirm.”

“That’s a long way off.” Her mother always said the same thing. It hadn’t been funny, even the first time.

“But still,” her mother’s voice became brisk, “we must celebrate.”

“I’d love that. Maybe we could go out to dinner? Ash and Zach too, of course.” Warmth spread through Stevie, and she pushed aside her uncharitable thoughts of earlier. Her parents may not approve of her career choice, but it seemed they were willing to celebrate her success.

“Mm. I’ll arrange cocktails on the boat—just us and a couple of close family friends. The weather’s warm enough now for boat drinks. We’ll make it tomorrow evening.”

“I’ll be there. Thank you, Mother. That will be lovely.”

“Wear something dressy. Not those jeans.”

“Of course.” It was a family rule that unless you were actually out on the ocean, get-togethers on the boat were dress-up affairs.

“Congratulations, Stephanie. We’ll see you tomorrow at six.”

Stevie clicked off and laid the phone on the desk. She rose to her feet and, ignoring the computer, went back to the window.

Her flat was above a corner shop and boasted a sea view, according to the real estate agent who let it. That was true—if she stood on her toes and peered over the roof of the block next door. But it was *her* apartment, the

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first place she'd ever lived alone, away from family, and without a gaggle of rowdy housemates. The sea was a smooth and glassy blue—the impossibly clear blue it took on when the sun shone bright. Today, the Sapphire Coast was living up to its name.

She'd take her bike for a ride along the coastal path. The hills would provide a workout to burn off some energy.

Stephanie Sterling, registered nurse. Maybe she'd stop at the new craft brewery and have a pint of amber ale. Sit in the sun and watch the world go by. Stevie rose. Life sounded good right now.

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She should have known.

Stevie clutched her glass of champagne and pasted another smile on her face. It felt as fake as the last one. She propped her back against the bulkhead and stared out across the main saloon. Two dozen or so manicured people sipped drinks and mingled. Cocktail chatter passed over her, a muted overlay to the soft classical music playing from *Good Time Gal's* speakers. She slipped a foot out of the unaccustomed high heel and rubbed it on her calf.

“Lovely gathering, Linda.” A grey-haired man took a gulp of his red wine and addressed her mother. “Been too long.”

“It has. We'll have to have you over for dinner soon to make up.” Her mother smiled a practiced smile and excused herself gracefully.

The grey-haired man's gaze roamed the saloon and settled on Stevie. He crossed to her. “Stephanie? It is Stephanie, isn't it?”

She nodded and extended a hand. “You have the advantage; I'm afraid I can't recollect your name.”

“Michael Asula. I'm one of the town councillors, for my sins.” He laughed heartily at his own joke.

Stevie nodded and added a mental tick to the “local politician” column. So far, among the guests were three local bigwigs, the CEO of one of her father's major suppliers, and a local reality TV star. No one who fit the description of “close family friend”.

“I met you a couple of years ago,” Michael continued. “You were heading back to university. What are you studying again?”

“Nursing.”

“How’s that going? Tough job, nursing.”

“I’ve just graduated. I’m now a registered nurse.”

“Congratulations. I didn’t realise it had been that long. Good to have you home, Stephanie. I’m sure you’ll be off again, a job in the big city, eh?”

Was there any point in telling him? Stevie smiled and murmured something noncommittal. The smile stayed on her face like a photograph until Michael had moved away.

She expelled her breath and clutched the stem of her champagne glass. She threw back the contents in a couple of gulps and went over to the bar to refill it. Ha! So much for a small celebration of her achievement. *I should have taken that flight to Melbourne.* If she had, right now, she’d be out clubbing, happily excited with her friends. There’d be laughter and shared joy. She’d be whirling through the laneways of the city, in and out of bars and nightclubs. She’d link arms with Kate, and they’d drunkenly tell each other how much they loved each other and would always be friends. Maybe she’d have picked up a woman for a heated night. Maybe she and Kate would have gone home and crashed in a corner, curled up together.

It would have been good. It would have been fucking awesome. Instead, she was stuck here with a group of strangers who barely knew who she was, let alone the party was supposed to be her celebration.

The glass in her hand was empty again, and she refilled it. She pushed past a knot of chattering people and headed for the rear deck. Maybe there she could have some peace and quiet.

“Stephanie, wait a moment, darling.” Her mother appeared by her side. “I’ve barely seen you this evening.”

“You’ve been busy chatting.”

“And you haven’t. You could make more of an effort.”

Stevie shrugged. “I hardly know any of these people. I thought this was to be a small gathering of *close* friends to celebrate my news.”

“Oh.” At least her mother had the grace to look momentarily embarrassed. “It was short notice. Most people already had plans.”

*Not the people that matter in your world. Strange that.* She clamped her jaws together in case she blurted the words. Now wasn’t the time or a place to let them know how disappointed she was.

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The tinkling piano music covered the awkward silence. Faintly, the murmur of Ash's and Zach's voices reached Stevie from the rear deck. At least she could rely on her sister to understand. "I'll see what Ash is up to."

The music reached its end, and for a moment there was silence. Stevie took a step towards Ash, and her mother followed.

A cool breeze came in from the ocean, blowing across the stern of the boat, and Stevie shivered. Zach's voice reached her, quiet words she couldn't make out. And then as the breeze dropped, she heard him clearly.

"I love you so much. Ash Sterling, will you marry me?"

"Oh!" Her mother gasped. Her fingers sought Stevie's and squeezed. "Oh my goodness."

"We should go back to the saloon. Give them their privacy," Stevie whispered.

"Wait." Her mother's grip tightened. "I want to hear the answer."

Stevie couldn't pull away, not without being overheard by Ash. The low rumble of social chatter from the saloon reached her, and her mother's breathing was quick in Stevie's ear. A wavelet broke on the hull, the whisper of water sounding unnaturally loud.

"Yes, oh yes, I love you so much." Ash's voice trembled, but her words rang clearly in the night.

A choked sound from Zach and then their voices rose and fell, murmuring endearments Stevie could only dimly hear.

The music restarted, and mellow jazz wafted from the saloon.

"She said yes! What a glorious end to the night. I must tell George. I hope we have enough champagne left for everyone."

"Wait. Let Ash tell Father; it's her moment."

But her mother was gone, her heels clicking as she scurried across the wooden deck.

Stevie moved to the rail and gripped it with both hands. She stared out over the marina and let the bubble of happiness for Ash expand in her chest. Ash had found her prince, just as she'd always wanted. Even when they had been little and made blanket forts to hide in and whisper secrets, Ash's dream had always been about a prince and a wedding and a big family she would love so hard her heart would burst. Stevie had played along and talked about running a retirement home in the hills for old horses where

no animal would be turned away. “*What about a prince?*” Ash had said, and Stevie hadn’t been able to say it wasn’t a prince she wanted, but a princess.

At least Ash had found her dream.

Stevie picked up her glass and sipped, envisaging the moment when Ash would tell her the news; maybe not tonight, not at this ridiculous party that was so not what her mother had said—but later maybe, tomorrow, when the newly engaged couple emerged for a late breakfast. Ash would hold Stevie’s hands and tug her forward to whisper the news in her ear as she had when they were kids, as if it was a secret for Stevie’s ears alone.

“We’d better rejoin the others.” Ash’s voice drifted across to Stevie. Footsteps sounded on the deck, coming closer.

Stevie moved away in case Ash realised their private moment had been overhead. She cut through the saloon to the buffet on the foredeck and pretended to browse the artfully arranged canapés. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied Ash and Zach arriving back and started in their direction. She wouldn’t spoil their surprise, but she had yet to talk to Ash all evening.

She had just reached Ash’s side when the blare of the boat’s horn sounded. The ensuing silence was broken by the tinkle of silver on glass. Stevie turned towards the sound. Her father stood on the small platform by the wheel, a glass and fork in his hands.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “Please allow me the indulgence of a happy announcement.” His gaze roamed the crowd and settled on Stevie. A flicker of a frown crossed his face.

Oh! The champagne she had drunk was now a mellow buzz. Was she wrong about this evening? Was her father actually going to publicly congratulate her? He was still to fully accept her career choice, but it seemed he was taking another step along that path. She gripped her glass tightly, straightened her shoulders, and met her father’s gaze with what she hoped was an encouraging smile.

Ash’s lips brushed her cheek. “Well done, Stevie. It seems I’m not the only one proud of you.”

Her sister’s whispered words warmed her more than the crowd ever could. Stevie squeezed Ash’s hand, even as her gaze remained fixed on their father.

“I am blessed to have two wonderful daughters: warm and loving, intelligent and talented, and of course, so very beautiful.” Their father’s



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gaze travelled across the assembled people. “But today, I am especially proud of one of them who is fulfilling her life’s purpose.”

Stevie’s lips trembled as warmth expanded in her chest. To hear her father speak the words, to know he was proud of her—she’d never known that. She’d always pushed her uphill path against the one her parents had laid out for her. Joy bubbled over in her tight throat, and she ducked her head to hide her unexpectedly moist eyes.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I give you my daughter, Ashleigh, who has this evening given her hand in marriage to Zachariah Pettigrew. May they have a long and happy life together and may they swiftly give me grandsons.”

Applause and voices washed over her in a tide of noise. Stevie’s feet turned to stone and rooted her to the deck, and the heat of embarrassment crept over her cheeks. She was so wrong, so unbearably wrong. The happy tears of earlier burnt in her eyes, and her throat closed over so she could barely speak.

Ash’s hand in hers became a dragging heavy weight. “Stevie, I’m so sorry. Zach only proposed minutes ago—they must have overheard. I wanted to tell you first. Not like this.” She squeezed Stevie’s hand. “And I would *never* have usurped this evening. This is your moment, not mine.” Ash’s face had a pinched, worried look, so different from her earlier joy.

“Congratulations. I’m so very happy for you and your prince.” Stevie forced the words out, her voice trembling with emotion. “Now let me hug my sister.” Her arms closed tightly around Ash, and she buried her face on Ash’s shoulder to hide her expression.

“It’s not right.” Ash’s voice vibrated with anger. She disentangled herself from Stevie and turned to face the guests. “Thank you for your good wishes. But this evening doesn’t belong to me and Zach; it’s Stevie’s evening. After three years of study, my sister—”

Music swelled from *Good Time Gal’s* speakers, drowning her words as Cliff Richard’s old song “Congratulations” boomed out.

In the throng of people congratulating Ash and Zach, Stevie was able to slip away. Her face ached from the wide artificial smile pasted on it. She stood on the sidelines, watching the stream of guests.

Ash smiled and thanked each person with a kiss on the cheek. Zach shook their hands and kept Ash at his side. Their parents stood close by,

beaming in pride and also accepting congratulations as if they were the happy couple.

Stevie sipped on her champagne as she waited for a break so she could congratulate Zach. Ash would be happy with him; of that she was sure.

A heavily made-up older lady approached Stevie, not anyone she knew. Probably a *somebody*, she thought bitterly, a person of influence.

“You’re not joining in the celebrations,” the woman said. “Are you not happy for your sister?”

“I’m delighted. She and Zach make a wonderful couple.”

The woman peered at her. “I’m sure your time will come, m’dear. I’m sure there’s a lovely young man out there somewhere for you.”

Stevie clenched her jaw. Usually, she let the heteronormative assumptions wash over her, especially if it was someone she was unlikely to see again, but the curl of anger in her belly wouldn’t be pushed down. She finished her glass in two mouthfuls, willing the impulse for hot words away.

“Do you have a young man already?” The woman sipped her own drink.

“No. I haven’t yet found the woman I want to marry.” Where was the champagne bottle? Conversations like this needed a little extra assistance. With a muttered “excuse me”, she pushed away from the railing in search of more liquid courage.

Why were champagne glasses so small? Three gulps and they were empty. Stevie topped hers up again. Dimly, she heard her mother’s voice. So what. She was probably worried about making the morning social column in the local paper. That a small town like Wallanbindi even had a social column was ridiculous. Stevie turned her back on the chatter and gripped the railing, staring out at the boats in the marina, resting in their pens.

“Darling.” Her mother appeared at her elbow. “I think you’ve had plenty to drink.”

“I don’t think I’ve had enough.” Stevie lifted her glass and drained it in defiant gulps.

“You’re making a spectacle of yourself. Of us. The decent thing would be to be happy for your sister on her great day.”

“I am happy for her. And I’ve told her so. Leave me alone, Mother. Don’t make this worse than it already is.”

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Her mother was silent for a moment. “Stephanie, is this sour grapes? Because if this unseemly display is your way of getting back at your father and me, then it’s not working. You’re only showing your own immaturity.”

Stevie turned to face her mother. There were two blurry faces staring back at her, a polite frown creasing her mother’s immaculate forehead. Both foreheads. “I know you’re not proud of me. Nothing I’ve accomplished has made the slightest difference. Do you know how hard I worked to become a nurse? And you sweep it aside in favour of celebrating Ash’s accomplishment of being pretty enough, *nice* enough to be marriageable? I truly hope she’s happy.” She pushed away from the railing and lurched slightly in the unaccustomed high heels. “I’m going now. Please tell Ash I’ll call her tomorrow.” *Good Time Gal* moved fractionally under her feet, and Stevie swayed.

An opened bottle of champagne sat on a table, and she swiped it, tipping the bottle back and taking a long swig from the neck.

*Please, let me get out of here.* Stevie put her shoulders back, sucked her stomach in, and walked carefully down the gangway to the marina. Behind her, the music swelled, interspersed with loud and slurring voices. It seemed she was not the only one to avail of the plentiful champagne.

“Stevie, wait!” Ash’s voice reached her.

Stevie turned and wiggled her fingers. “I’ll call you tomorrow. I love you.” She continued walking, not looking back.

As she turned the corner of the jetty, the sound of running feet followed her. No doubt Ash, coming to see if she was okay. She closed her eyes for a second, then opened them again as a wave of dizziness engulfed her. She was okay. And she wouldn’t spoil her sister’s night any more than she already had. She put down the champagne, slung her small bag crossways over her body so she wouldn’t drop it, and hurried down the jetty. Hoping the light was dim enough that Ash hadn’t seen where she went, she ducked down a smaller pier.

“Stevie? Where are you?” Ash’s voice was closer. Any second now she’d see Stevie on the jetty, caught like a kangaroo in headlights.

Stevie glanced around. Most of the boats were million-dollar gin palaces like her parents’ cruiser, guarded with locked gates and blinking security lights. But a yacht at the end was in darkness. She hurried towards it. The boat was small and old, sails tightly furled, and the deck bare, but most

importantly, there was no security gate barring her access. Stevie assessed the gap. Maybe half a metre. She could make that. As she moved towards it, a gust of wind pushed the old yacht closer to the pier, closing the gap to a sliver. She slipped her shoes off and threw them onto the deck, then hiked up her dress to mid-thigh and gripped a stanchion. She swung herself over the railing to the deck. Her foot caught, and she nearly fell. She grabbed the wheel to save herself and lurched into the cockpit.

“Stevie, where are you?” Ash’s voice again. “I just want to know you’re okay.”

Stevie bit her lip. Better Ash return to the party and celebrate her happy evening. And if she didn’t find Stevie, that would happen more quickly.

There was nothing to hide behind in the shallow cockpit, but Stevie crawled over to the far side of the wheel, hoping the shadows would be enough to conceal her if Ash kept coming. She slid down, brought her knees up to her chest, and tucked her head down. The world spun for a moment in a champagne haze.

Ash’s footsteps slowed and stopped.

Stevie pictured her looking around at the silent boats. *Go away, go back to the party.* She breathed slowly, hoping the lapping waves would cover the sound of her breath.

For a moment there was silence, then Ash’s footsteps slowly moved away, as if she wasn’t convinced Stevie was hiding there somewhere.

A slightly bigger wave made the yacht rock, and Stevie gulped as the world spun once more. Exactly how much champagne had she drunk? It was a blur after the first couple of glasses, after her parents’ lack of interest in her achievement.

*I should have known.* Their reaction was nothing new. She swallowed hard against a surge of nausea. A wave of dizziness engulfed her. Once it had passed, she raised her head. The only noise was the chime of halyards against the mast and the slap of wavelets against the hull as the breeze picked up.

Stevie got unsteadily to her feet. She needed to get home, curl up in bed, hug her pillow, and try to forget about this evening. The wooden deck was cold and damp against her shoeless feet. Where were her shoes? She spied the gleam of the patent leather against the dark wood of the deck and moved over to retrieve them. As she bent to grab them, her head spun once

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more and she lurched, falling down a single step in front of a door. A crack and the door swung open. Stevie could see the top of the steps leading to the cabin below.

*Damn.* She hoped she hadn't broken it. Bracing herself, she leant in to close the door, but it swung out of her reach. The cabin was dark and silent. Stevie descended the first step, meaning to grab the hatch and close it, but the yacht swayed once more, and she lost her footing. Her hand grabbed at the door sill to arrest her fall, but she stumbled down the steps to the darkened cabin and landed in a heap at the bottom. The shoes skittered across the cabin floor, one coming to rest by her outstretched hand. *Hell and damnation.*

She lay for a few seconds. Was she hurt? Was anything broken? But as far as she could tell without rising, there was only her cloudy, pounding head and what felt like a bruise on her shin where it must have caught the top of the coaming. Carefully, she got to her feet, one shoe clutched in her hand.

The companionway back to the deck was an insurmountable obstacle in her current state. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, but try as she might, her blurry vision wouldn't focus. She turned around to face the steps, and the narrow entrances to two bunks swam into view, one on each side of the companionway. The curtains that would give privacy to the sleeper were open. Her second shoe rested on the floor nearby.

Exhaustion flooded her body and left each limb heavy. What difference would it make if she used one of the bunks to sleep off the champagne? The yacht was deserted. She'd already inadvertently broken in. No one would come now, not at nearly midnight. Then in the morning, she could make good any damage, leave a note for the owner, and return home. Far better to do that than try to make her way out and stagger the short distance to her flat. Even those few hundred metres felt like an insurmountable challenge. And what if someone saw her, drunk and dishevelled, shoes in hand, reeling home? No, in the morning, she'd be able to leave quietly and go home with some semblance of dignity. And the chances were she wouldn't bump into any departing guests from her parents' party either.

The bunk looked inviting. It was long and narrow and had a sleeping bag opened on the mattress. Stevie closed her eyes momentarily, and any inclination to return home fled. She crawled into the narrow bunk, threw

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both shoes and her shoulder bag to the foot end, and rested her head on a pile of stiff fabric. She pulled the curtain closed and yanked the sleeping bag over her body. Closing her eyes, she let the gentle motion of the waves soothe her to sleep.

## Chapter 2

KAZ WALKED ALONG THE JETTY towards *Delilah*. It was just past five in the morning, and the sky was starting to lighten over the sea. She dragged a hand across her face, thinking longingly of the coffee she hadn't stopped for before leaving her cabin. An early tide didn't wait for anyone, caffeinated or not.

Her boat rested in the calm water. Kaz dropped her small daypack on the deck, swung her leg over the railing, and gently set down the cat carrier. "Just a moment, Sinbad. I'll let you out soon."

She removed the wheel cover and turned to open the hatch. She frowned. The door was slightly ajar. She must have been in a hurry when she left last night and not bolted the door properly. The music and voices from the large cruiser moored on a nearby pier had been so loud, all she'd wanted to do was get home for a good night's sleep.

Kaz opened the hatch fully and secured it open. A rough piece of timber caught her fingers. The door had a crack in it, near the lock. She frowned. Surely no one had broken in? *Delilah* was the most unassuming boat in the marina—but also the least protected. Carefully, she stuck her head through the hatch and listened. There was no sound from the cabin, and nothing appeared to be disturbed. Kaz went down the companionway and glanced around. The cabin was neat and as she'd left it. She shrugged. She must not have bolted the door last night when she left, and it must have swung in the wind, cracking the timber on the outside of the cabin. She stowed her pack in a locker and ascended back to the deck again.

The sky now had a yellow glow in the east. Venus glowed bright on the horizon. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and a light breeze ruffled her short

hair. Perfect for sailing. Kaz removed the mainsail cover and stowed it in the locker under the bench. She removed the ties and had the sail ready to hoist once she reached open water. She fired up the donk, listening to the reassuring throb of the diesel motor. Swiftly, she cast off, then returned to the wheel, put the engine in gear, and let *Delilah* ease out of her berth.

Seagulls wheeled around the stern as she motored out of the marina to the harbour mouth. Once past the harbour wall, the water was choppier. Kaz hoisted the mainsail and turned *Delilah* to catch the breeze. The sail filled, and the yacht surged forward. She killed the donk and set her face to the ocean. This was the moment she loved best: when the engine turned off, and the only sound was the water slapping the hull before *Delilah* bore away from the wind and picked up the course.

Now that the initial flurry was out of the way, she opened the cat carrier. Sinbad stalked out, his tail a quivering question mark. He mewed once, gave her an affronted glare, and set off on patrol of *his* yacht.

“Sorry, Sinbad.” Kaz bent to stroke his head as he paraded past, his furry body brushing her calves. “You know I can’t let you out until we’re out of the harbour.”

Sinbad mewed once more and relented enough to arch up into her caress. Patrol completed, he jumped onto the bench and stared out to sea, whiskers twitching.

She glanced at the compass; yes, she was bearing sou’-sou’-west towards Bass Strait. *Coffee*. Oh, how she wanted a mug of it. Soon. Once she was catching a steady breeze, she could think about coffee.

Wallanbindi receded behind her, and the peaks and troughs of the ocean grew more pronounced. *Delilah* sliced through the waves, the foam rippling against the hull.

*Coffee*. Kaz set the autopilot and went about securing lines and making the deck shipshape once more. Once done, she returned to the wheel, checked the compass, and sat, propping her feet on the bench opposite. Seagulls wheeled in the wake, dipping into *Delilah*’s trail as she surged through the ocean.

Coffee could wait a little longer. Kaz sat back, scanning the horizon, and enjoyed the rise and fall of her yacht as she cut through the waves.

\* \* \*



*This isn't right.*

Something rough scratched against Stevie's cheek, and the air clung damply to her skin. She shivered and drew up her legs, curling into herself for warmth, but it had little effect. The room swayed around her, and there was an undercurrent of noise: the slap of the sea, the boom of water hitting the hull. She groaned quietly to herself. Great. She must have fallen asleep on *Good Time Gal*, and the weather must have changed. Stevie sighed and tried to find a softer place for her cheek. Her parents' bunks weren't usually this hard. Stevie rolled over, and her knee contacted something solid. She opened her eyes. The bunk was dim, and she was resting on a sail bag. Its unyielding surface was hard against her cheek. *What? Where am I?*

The bunk lurched down, and her stomach followed in a swoop of nausea. Stevie closed her eyes again and tried to shift through her fuzzy memories. This wasn't *Good Time Gal*. Snippets of memory assailed her: the party, Ash and her engagement, too much champagne. Stevie groaned as her stomach rolled in time with the boat. Way too much champagne. Ash following her down the pier, the yacht she hid on. And now, here she was on that same yacht, which was obviously out to sea.

*Shit. Double, triple fucking shit.*

Acid sat in the back of Stevie's throat as her hangover asserted itself. What wouldn't she give for a couple of ibuprofen and a vitamin B drink. But she had a more immediate problem: she was out at sea on a strange boat being sailed by God knows who. All she knew was they were unlikely to be happy when she staggered up on deck in last night's party dress.

And who was sailing the boat anyway? Her fingers trembled as scenes of mayhem and murder crashed through her mind. What if it were a couple of drug runners out to pick up their goods? Human traffickers? Or smugglers of illegal contraband of any sort, evading Australia's border protection? They wouldn't take kindly to an inadvertent stowaway. She'd be overboard before she knew it and forget about any sort of life raft.

Stevie stifled her panicked gasp. Now was not the time for an overactive imagination. No, more likely, she'd find a retired fisherman heading out for a spot of big game fishing. Tuna, marlin, sailfish. A few hours shivering in the stiff breeze, and then he'd deposit her back in the marina at Wallanbindi.

*Hah!* It was all very well to talk herself into believing in the benevolent fisherman, but she was still down here, while they were up on deck,

believing themselves alone. Stevie sat up, and her head crashed against the low ceiling. She bit back a curse. She swung her legs around and listened. No one seemed to be in the cabin; there was only the creak of the boat, and water rushing against the hull.

Stevie pushed back the curtain, exited the bunk on shaky legs, and looked around. The compact cabin contained a chart table, a neat galley space, and a sail bundled on the bench seats that faced a small table.

There was no sign of anyone in the cabin. The hatch was open, and the sound of the sea filled her ears. The boat lurched, and her head swam. A hangover and seasickness—could life get any more miserable? She took a tentative step towards the middle of the cabin. The boat swooped downwards, and she grabbed the table to stop herself from falling but hit her hip on the edge. At least she wasn't still wearing the high heels. Where were they anyway? She couldn't remember.

*Think, Stevie.* Her thoughts jumbled together in a panicked swirl, and she took a deep breath. *Think.* Of course. Stevie went back to the bunk and found her small bag she'd stowed there last night. She rifled through it until she found her mobile phone, but one glance at the display showed there was no signal. She must already be far enough from land that she was out of range. She tucked the phone back into her bag.

What to do? She could hardly spend the duration of the trip—however long that may be—hiding in a bunk, getting sicker and sicker. Even the most novice of sailors knew they'd feel better up on deck where they could see the horizon. And even if she did hide away, at some point the captain and crew would come down. *Crew.* It was likely there were at least two or three people on board. How would they react to an inadvertent stowaway?

Stevie groaned quietly. There was nothing to be gained hiding away and tormenting herself with possible scenarios. She had to get this over with: she had to go up on deck, apologise, find out what she'd gotten herself into, and hope whoever they were, they were understanding. She stood, smoothed down her dress, and moved across to the ladder.

\* \* \*

A stiff breeze kept Kaz occupied for the first couple of hours. By the time it eased and *Delilah* was sailing easily, she was gasping for a coffee. She was far enough from shore that it was a good time: away from pleasure

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cruisers, not yet in the shipping lanes. She scanned a careful three-sixty. There were no boats near enough to be a danger, no ships on the horizon.

She glanced over at Sinbad, curled up in a coil of line, sound asleep. "If only you could make coffee. I don't know why I keep you around."

Sinbad twitched a black ear but otherwise didn't stir.

Kaz took a step towards the hatch. A thump sounded from the cabin below. Kaz froze, and the back of her neck prickled. Something was not right. Things fell in rough weather all the time. But now, while there was chop and enough of a breeze to keep things interesting, it wasn't rough enough for things to go flying. And she was an experienced enough sailor that she knew she'd secured everything last night. The pots and pans were stowed, the chart table bare of anything that could fall.

She took another step towards the hatch, but another sound stopped her dead. Another thump. Kaz halted and stared at the companionway. *Think!* What had she forgotten about that could have fallen? But even as her mind sifted through the possibilities, she knew there was nothing.

The unlocked hatch flashed through her mind. One anomaly she could discount; two was not a coincidence. Surely there was no one else on board? But there had been a definite noise from below, the clumsy sounds made by someone who didn't have their sea legs. Kaz grabbed a winch handle. It wasn't the most threatening of weapons, but it was all she had.

"Who's there?" She made her voice as gruff and deep as she could. "Show yourself." She gripped the winch handle tighter and raised it up, ready to defend herself if necessary.

A shuffle of feet on the steps, and two hands and a head came into view. Brown hair, rather dishevelled, and small hands. Feminine hands.

Kaz released a shaky breath. A woman: that she could deal with.

The woman's head came up through the hatch. Short hair in a pixie cut, probably once smooth and layered, now standing on end. Smudged mascara-rimmed wide and frightened eyes. A patterned dress more suited to dinner at a high-end restaurant than to an old and weathered yacht.

The woman climbed awkwardly onto deck and held her hands out wide to show they were empty. "I'm so sorry. I can explain." Her voice was breathless, husky, tinged with apprehension.

Kaz tightened her lips and scanned the stranger from top to toe. Her clothing was rumpled as if she'd slept in it, and her feet were bare. Polished

toenails, painted a deep red to match her dress. She appeared to be in her late twenties, and her accent was Australian. She looked as if she should be smooth and polished, calm and collected, and clutching a glass of sparkling wine. Instead, she was obviously ill at ease, and her gaze darted around the deck and across to the horizon before returning to Kaz. The stranger swallowed hard.

Good. She *should* look nervous. She was a stowaway, a trespasser, and someone Kaz didn't want or need on board *Delilah*. Especially now.

Anger curled in Kaz's stomach. What the hell was she supposed to do? "You better have a good explanation if you don't want me to throw you overboard." Kaz made her voice gruff and aggressive. The threat was an empty one, but the woman didn't know that.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be here." Her gaze darted around the deck once more as if she couldn't believe where she was. "Are we far from Wallanbindi? I can't see land."

"About two and a half hours. And we're out of mobile phone range, so I think you better answer some questions."

The woman nodded, a jerky up-and-down movement.

"Who are you and what are you doing here? A truthful answer." Kaz hefted the winch handle and slapped it on her opposite palm. Instinct told her this woman wasn't dangerous, but she wasn't letting her guard down just yet. She'd heard the stories of yachts in Australian waters hijacked, forced to pick up parcels of hard drugs and smuggle them back into Australia. It would be foolish to trust this woman.

"Who are *you*?" the woman fired back. "Why should I tell you who I am?"

Her words were feisty, but her nervous glance at the winch handle slapping on Kaz's palm gave her away.

"It's my boat. You're the lawbreaker here. I'm not the one who has to explain herself." Kaz tossed the winch handle to her other hand. "You don't have to like it, but you do have to give me a reason not to leave you in the life raft and call marine rescue. Who may or may not come before the sharks do."

The stranger's face turned even greyer, and her gaze focussed on the winch handle.

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Kaz kept her face expressionless, and she slapped the winch handle on her palm.

The stranger hunched her shoulders, her face crumpled, and her bravado seemed to evaporate into the sea spray. “My name’s Stephanie Sterling, but most people call me Stevie. I live in Wallanbindi. My parents own a cruiser, *Good Time Gal*, that’s moored at the marina. There was a party on board last night.” Stevie hesitated. “I was there but I had too much to drink. I left the party and must have taken a wrong turn. My head was spinning. Your boat wasn’t locked. I came on board and lost my balance. I fell against the door and it opened.” She spread her hands, palms up in a gesture of supplication. “I’m sorry. I just wanted somewhere to sleep off the booze for a couple of hours. I didn’t mean any harm. If I’ve damaged anything, I’ll pay for repairs.”

Kaz kept her poker face. It was a plausible story, but a little too pat. Even if it were true, her gut told her Stevie was keeping some parts secret. But there *was* a party somewhere in the marina last night—the same party that had driven her to abandon her original plan to sleep on board ahead of her early start on the morning tide.

“Why didn’t you sleep on your parents’ cruiser?”

A corner of Stevie’s mouth quirked up. “Every corner was occupied with party people. Loud party people. I was heading home. I just didn’t realise how much I’d had to drink.”

Kaz studied her. Stevie was pale, and there were dark circles under her eyes. But that didn’t mean anything. She could have had a poor night’s sleep awaiting discovery this morning, wondering if her concocted story would be believed. “And the rest of the story?”

Stevie’s throat worked. “What do you mean? I’ve just told you what happened.” The breeze stiffened and swept across the cockpit, and she shivered, clutching her arms tight to her body.

“Most of it,” Kaz agreed, “but if you were going home, why did you detour down the jetty where *Delilah* was moored? It’s obviously not the way out.”

“I told you; I took a wrong turn.”

“Try again. *Delilah*’s pen is at the very end—it’s the cheapest berth in the marina. It’s very obviously not the exit. Why did you even trespass on my yacht at all?”

Stevie hesitated. "I was avoiding someone. I didn't want them to find me."

It was plausible, if a bit obvious. "Does anyone know where you are?" Kaz set the winch handle down on the bench.

Stevie's gaze flicked to it, as if she were assessing if she could grab it first. "Yes, of course. My parents, George and Linda Sterling. My sister Ash. All of the party guests who saw me leave."

"Really? All of these people saw you breaking and entering and simply watched? If that's your friends and family, then I'm sorry for you."

"You have no idea." Bitterness tinged Stevie's voice. "You're right. No one knows where I am. But I don't think you'll throw me overboard."

"I wouldn't be the first sailor to do that to an uninvited guest." Kaz kept her stare blank, threatening almost. "It's choppy out today. You're not wearing a life jacket and you're not secured by a line." She indicated her own life jacket and the tether running from it to the jackline. "One big wave and you could lose your balance, all that grog you've had, and you'd be overboard before I could save you." She lifted a shoulder. "Lot of sharks in the Tasman Sea."

If anything, Stevie blanched a whiter shade of pale. "Look, I realise you're worried. I know how this must sound, but it's the truth. My bag's below deck. Let me get my driver's licence; then you'll know at least I'm telling the truth about my name and where I live."

"In a minute." The wind had picked up and changed direction, and *Delilah* started to buck against the increased swell. Kaz returned to the wheel and disengaged the autopilot, adjusting course so *Delilah* sailed tight to the wind again. Kaz reefed the mainsail and gripped the wheel tightly. It gave her something to do with both hands. She eyed Stevie, still standing near the hatch, visibly shivering in the breeze.

Stevie's story was probably true. If she were a hijacker, surely she would have dressed in something more suitable than a sheer party dress that offered no wind protection. Her bare arms had goose bumps.

"Are you alone?"

Another flash of apprehension widened Stevie's dark-blue eyes. "No one else is on board with me, if that's what you mean." Her chin lifted. "But there are people in Wallanbindi who'll be wondering where I am. My parents, my sister. My sister last saw me on the marina. That's the truth."

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When I'm missing, they'll check what boats have left this morning. I expect marine rescue will come out."

"Possibly. Eventually. They're busy people. If you're on the run, they'll come sooner." She watched Stevie closely, looking for a reaction. If Stevie appeared nervous at that, then Kaz would call marine rescue herself.

"Call them if you're worried. I'm not hiding anything." A gust of wind plastered Stevie's dress to her legs, and she shivered again.

Kaz considered her. She didn't appear dangerous, and her story could be true. But what to do with her? She couldn't allow a stowaway to disrupt her plans.

Stevie wrapped her arms around her body.

"Come on." Kaz made her voice rough and offhand. With a swift movement, she engaged the autopilot again. She took a careful look around. Nothing on the horizon. "We'll go below out of the wind. I'll need to see your ID."

Stevie nodded, turned to the hatch, and hesitated.

"You first," said Kaz. She may be inclined to believe Stevie's story, but Kaz didn't want to be in front of her on the steep steps down. She waited until Stevie reached the cabin, then Kaz followed quickly.

Stevie was standing by the chart table, obviously ill at ease. She looked around the cabin. "You keep this very neat."

Kaz moved to the stove and lit it. "Most sailors are tidy. It's a safety thing. Please get your ID." She watched as Stevie went to one of the forward bunks and retrieved a shoulder bag. "Is this all you have with you?" If she was telling the truth, there was no way she had planned this. The tiny bag wouldn't hold much at all.

"Yes." Stevie held out the bag. "Take a look inside."

Kaz accepted the bag and moved past Stevie to the bunk. Pushing back the curtain, she took a look around. The sail bag that held her spinnaker was there, a bit squashed on one side as if someone had lain against it. Her sleeping bag was pushed to the bottom of bunk. Kaz yanked the bag up and a pair of high heels was revealed. Nothing else. Still...

"Can you make the coffee?" Kaz asked. "There are mugs in the drawer." If Stevie was occupied at the stove, she was less likely to come up behind Kaz with a winch handle to the back to the head. She waited until Stevie

was at the stove, then she swiftly moved the sail bag and felt down the sides of the mattress. Nothing was hidden that she could tell.

“Do you have milk?”

“No. No sugar either. I suppose you take both?”

“Milk only. I’ll cope.” Stevie set two mugs of instant coffee down on the table.

Kaz set Stevie’s bag on the table and with a glance at Stevie, upended it, spilling out the contents. A small coin purse, a set of keys, two tampons, and a folded piece of paper.

“My licence is in the purse,” Stevie said.

Kaz unzipped it and pulled out a twenty-dollar note, a couple of coins, a platinum credit card, and the licence. Kaz studied it. “Stephanie Laura Amelia Sterling. Bit of a mouthful.” The Victorian state licence was a few years old, but the picture was obviously Stevie, albeit with longer hair that waved softly around her face.

Stevie wrapped her arms around her waist. “Blame my parents. Those are all family names.”

Recognition stirred. “Are you one of those Sterlings? The family that owns Sterling Enterprises?” Memory tickled further. There was more to the family than that, but right now it wasn’t important.

“Yes, my parents run it.” Her voice was curiously flat.

Kaz unfolded the paper and scanned the contents. The email was brief, congratulating Stephanie Sterling on successfully completing a Bachelor of Nursing. “Congratulations.” She pushed the contents of the bag over the table. “I believe your story. The question is now what to do with you.”

“Thanks.” Stevie’s shoulders lost some of their tightness. “I realise it’s an imposition, but I’ll try to stay out of your way. Are you out for the day?”

“Unfortunately, it’s not that simple.” Kaz closed her eyes momentarily. What she had to say was unlikely to be well received. “I estimate this will be a ten-day round trip. Five or six days if I drop you off at the earliest opportunity. You can relay the fact that you’re safe at the next radio check. You can speak to the radio operator, Alana, who will pass on a message to whomever you want.”

“Ten *days*? There’s no way I can be away that long.” Stevie’s face froze for a moment. “I’m sorry, I’ve obviously gate-crashed your holiday. If you can drop me back to Wallanbindi, I’ll be out of your hair.”



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“It could be less. Maybe only five or six days.”

“That’s still—I can’t.” Stevie offered a tight smile. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t insist if it weren’t important.”

Kaz gestured to the bench seat by the table. “Why don’t you sit for a minute? I’ll be back.” She waited until Stevie sat, and then she ascended the companionway. A careful three-sixty scan reassured her there were no boats or obstacles in her path, then she returned to the cabin. She picked up her mug and propped her butt against the chart table so she could see Stevie more clearly. “I can’t drop you to shore. My schedule won’t allow it. I was already late leaving Wallanbindi, and I can’t spare the time.”

“How far are we from Wallanbindi?” Stevie clasped her hands together. “Surely it couldn’t take too long to drop me back?”

Kaz snorted. “You were out for the count for over two hours, Sleeping Beauty. And the wind is behind us as we head south. It could take five or so hours to tack back to Wallanbindi against the wind and current from the north, and then I’d have to get in and out of the harbour on the tide. I’m not going to waste a day to drop you off.”

“Then drop me off at the next port.”

“Sorry. I have a schedule. I’m not going to wreck it for you.”

“A few hours detour has got to be better than putting up with me for ten days,” Stevie shot back.

“This isn’t a negotiation.” Kaz took a sip of coffee. It was good and strong as she liked it. “I’m under no obligation to do anything for you except try to keep you safe.”

Stevie bit her lip. “I can’t be here for ten days.” An edge of desperation shimmered in her voice.

“Trust me, I don’t want you around for that time.”

“If that was really the case, you’d take me back to Wallanbindi. Where the hell are you going that’s so important?”

Kaz shrugged. She might believe Stevie’s story, but right now, she didn’t want to tell her any more. She would have to—and soon—but her gut told her it wouldn’t sit well with her.

“What are you, an ASIO spy?” Stevie narrowed her eyes.

“I don’t think the Aussie intelligence agency would want me.” Kaz studied Stevie over the table. How much should she tell her?

Stevie spread out her hands. Her fingers trembled. “I’m not asking you to return me for any shallow reason. You saw the email in my bag stating I’m now a registered nurse. I have a job waiting for me. In four days, I start at an aged care home in Wallanbindi. I can’t miss my first day.”

The email had been folded and refolded, and had a creased look about it, as if Stevie had taken it out many times to reread the contents. A nurse. Kaz stared across at the stove swinging gently on its gimbals. It was easier than facing Stevie’s accusing stare. She calculated the distance again in her head: the likely wind, the strong currents, her own estimated ETA and destination. It was still no good. Even to drop Stevie to shore would mean her own schedule would be shot to smithereens.

“I’m sorry, I really am, but I can’t take you back right now.” She gestured to the radio. “I’ll try to raise Alana on the radio. She can pass on a message so you can let someone know you’re safe. She could probably pass on a message to your employer too.”

“That’s it?” Stevie stared across the table. “I could lose my job because of your holiday. I don’t know what sort of world you inhabit, but a call from a third party saying I can’t make my start date isn’t going to endear me to my employer.”

A twist of sympathy uncoiled. Stevie was pasty, her eyes wide. And she was a nurse. Even so, it wasn’t enough to make Kaz change her plans. “I’m sorry.”

And right now, she needed to get out on deck. “Bring your coffee and come back up.”

Without waiting for an answer, Kaz stretched up through the companionway to set the mug outside on the deck before she shimmied up the four steps to the cockpit.

\* \* \*

Stevie’s death glare seared into a spot between Kaz’s shoulder blades.

Her inadvertent passenger was not a happy camper right now. Kaz stared out to sea, her gaze sweeping the horizon. She took longer than usual for the sweep; it was easier than looking at Stevie. But, of course, when she faced the deck again, Stevie was there, nursing her coffee mug, her eyes radiating a mixture of hurt and anxiety.

Kaz almost felt sorry enough to take her to shore. Almost.

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Stevie's chin raised, and she stared at Kaz down her nose. "Aren't there laws obligating you to return a stowaway as soon as you become aware of their presence?"

Kaz shrugged, her moment of sympathy disappearing like a dolphin diving into the deep. "I have no idea. I've never had a stowaway before. But I'm the captain of this vessel, and my word is law around here. You've obviously never done much sailing or you'd know that."

"I've done enough to know I don't like it very much. Too many blustering blokes shouting: 'Get over that side.' 'Pull this.' 'What are you, a bloody big girl's blouse?' 'Get the fuck out of the way.' Sailing around buoys in Port Phillip being yelled at for a couple of hours isn't my idea of fun."

"It's not mine either, which is why I'm not part of the yacht racing set. But one thing is correct: a boat has only one captain, and what they say goes. *Delilah* is no different. I left Wallanbindi this morning, believing myself to be alone, with a specific purpose. I'm sorry if this wrecks your weekend, keeps you from the next party, but returning you to shore isn't an option. Final answer."

A gust of wind sliced across the cockpit, and Stevie shivered. "I *need* to get back."

"And I *need* to keep going." Kaz took a slug of coffee. The caffeine hit the spot. Stevie's eyes boring into her were a guilt trip masked in navy blue. An intense, unusual shade of blue. "Unfortunately for you, it's not up for debate. A boat is a dictatorship in that respect." She studied Stevie, noting the shaking hands. Was she nervous at being at sea, simply hung over, or was there a more serious problem?

As if reading her mind, Stevie said, "What if I'm diabetic and need insulin?"

"Are you? Or have you just discovered that in the last couple of minutes?"

Stevie bit her lip. "What would you do if I said I was?"

"Depending on the urgency, I'd either head for the nearest port or call for the rescue chopper. I won't knowingly endanger someone's life. But if this is a fabrication, then my reaction won't be pretty. Are you diabetic? Or have any other health condition I should know about?"

Stevie's mouth twisted. "No, I'm fine. I won't lie. But I can't stay here."

"Boyfriend missing you?" Kaz tilted her head.

Stevie laughed, a short, sharp sound. “Way off.” She sat abruptly on the bench, huddled against the cabin, as much out of the wind as she could.

Kaz glanced at the compass mounted on the wheel. *Delilah* was still bearing sou'-sou'-west. She scanned the horizon again, noting the whitecaps as the wind gusts increased. It must be nearly twenty knots.

Stevie was a problem. It was all very well for Kaz to refuse to take her back to shore, but where she was headed was not without risk. Indeed, open-water sailing had its own dangers. Did she have the right to impose them on Stevie?

Kaz studied her. Stevie's short hair was mussed, but the cut was a good one. Hair-salon couture, not like her own chopped cut, done by Alana after a couple of pale ales. “Is there some reason as well as the job why you're so desperate to return? Big party next weekend? Seasickness?”

“You still think I'm a socialite party girl, don't you?”

“Not entirely. But you party way harder than I ever did.”

Stevie spun around and stared out to sea, but not before Kaz caught a glimpse of moisture in those unusual eyes.

“At least tell me what's so important about your holiday that you won't take me back.”

Kaz's instinct was to evade the question, but given Stevie was stuck with her, Kaz would have to say something. She checked the tell-tales streaming out in the breeze while she thought. “Have you heard of Ocean Rights?”

Stevie's forehead wrinkled. “The organisation that protects oceans and sea life? They were in the news recently for intercepting a Japanese whaling boat.”

“Yup, that's us.”

“You're part of a greenie organisation?”

“Careful.” Kaz kept her voice even. There had been curiosity in Stevie's tone, not disparagement, but the word irked her. “I can still throw you overboard as shark bait. But yes, I'm part of Ocean Rights. Our aim is to keep the oceans ecologically sustainable, while protecting those species that are in danger from humans.”

“Like whales?”

“Yes, whales. But also those less visible species that are coming under threat. Species in danger of being overfished—southern bluefin tuna, for

example. But we have a broader mandate too: to keep the oceans free from the dumping of waste.”

“Like cruise ships emptying their toilets into the water?”

Kaz shrugged. “That’s a problem too, but we aim for the bigger picture. Like superpowers carrying nuclear waste through New Zealand waters. Did you know New Zealand is nuclear-free?”

“Yes.” An acerbic tone. “I’m not an idiot.”

“There’s a Chinese ship, *Li Jing*, coming down the east coast of Australia. It will swing west and pass along the south coast. It’s carrying nuclear waste.”

“Where’s it going?”

Kaz stared out to sea as she considered her answer. “I don’t know. Technically, it’s bound for southern Africa. But our intel suggests the ship intends dumping the waste overboard.”

“Why would it do that?”

“To save a considerable amount of money and red tape at the far end. Its cargo manifest doesn’t list nuclear waste.”

“So how do you know that’s what it’s carrying?”

“Intel. That’s all I’m telling you.”

Stevie set down her coffee mug and stood. “Seems like you’re expecting me to take a lot on trust here.”

“Says the woman who’s yet to give me a complete reason as to why she’s on board my yacht.”

Stevie’s shoulder’s hunched. “Fair enough. But you know who I am and how I got here. You now can tell me where we’re going.”

Kaz met Stevie’s eyes across the cockpit. Her eyes were slightly bloodshot. If Stevie was a good-time party girl, that would explain the bloodshot eyes. Well, she was in for a shock, all right.

“We’re joining an Ocean Rights convoy and we’re on an intercept path with *Li Jing*. We’re going to protest its presence in Australian waters.”

“And where do you expect to intercept?”

“Our best guess is somewhere in the Bass Strait between mainland Australia and Tasmania. The ship won’t dump anything there—the shipping lane is too busy, and it’s too close to marine rescue and other patrols—but once the ship has cleared Tasmania, we expect it to veer out to sea and lose its cargo.”

Stevie huddled down as a stiff breeze blew into the cockpit. “It sounds fantastical to me. How do they think they’ll get away with it?”

“It’s hard to police Australian waters. Too much ocean, too few people.”

Stevie stared down at her feet. “So, surely before you join the convoy, you can drop me off at a port en route? Any port. A jetty in the middle of nowhere. I’ll hitchhike to the highway. You don’t want me on board, and I don’t want to be here. I’ll reimburse you for your time.”

Kaz sighed. “I’ve already said I’m on a tight schedule. You’re stuck with me until after the protest.” She took in Stevie’s stricken expression. “So, five days at the absolute minimum.”

“Five days.” Stevie’s voice was flat.

“If we run into foul weather it could be a lot longer.”

“Please. I’m begging you. Take me back to Wallanbindi—or at least the nearest port. I get this convoy is important to you, but my job means a lot to me.” Stevie’s fingers shook, and she clenched them on her mug.

For a split second, Kaz considered it. Stevie looked so defeated. And her reason for wanting to return was sound. “I’m sorry. I really am. But my needs take priority here. Final answer.”

## Chapter 3

THE COFFEE HAD GONE COLD, but Stevie drank it anyway. The liquid swam uneasily in her stomach, but at least the caffeine would help her hangover. The wind had also helped, but only temporarily. Now it was cutting through her thin dress like a scalpel through skin. Things were so totally out of her control right now, but at least she could stay warm. With a glance at Kaz, she went carefully down the companionway and grabbed the sleeping bag from the bunk. She returned to the cockpit and wrapped the bag around herself.

Worry churned with the coffee in her stomach. She'd miss her start date. She'd be letting her employer down before she'd even set foot in the door. Would they give her a second chance? She didn't know and would prefer not to have to find out.

Kaz stood at the wheel, tanned hands holding it easily, her gaze on the top of the sail. *Kaz*. What sort of person sailed for five days to intercept a tanker? Many of Stevie's uni friends in Melbourne worried about the planet, about climate change, about animals becoming extinct. There were protests—but they generally involved banners and chanting at Parliament House followed by a few beers in a pub afterwards. Nothing like this. Nothing as committed as this.

Was Kaz even telling her everything? *Delilah* was an old yacht. Maybe Kaz planned to sail her into the side of the tanker in a final blast of glory, live action captured by a news chopper overhead.

She took a deep breath and steadied her panicked thoughts. She was being ridiculous. For all that she was stubborn, Kaz seemed quite sane, not a person on some crazy suicide mission. And *Delilah* may be old, but she was lovingly maintained. Her wooden decks were varnished, the cabin well

maintained and tidy. The deck was shipshape, lines coiled, sails in good order.

*Final answer*, Kaz had said. She wouldn't take Stevie to shore. She was stuck here. Whether she was safe was another matter. Surely Kaz didn't really intend sailing into the path of a tanker going full steam ahead? It sounded a foolhardy pastime. "This protest... It sounds risky."

"It is."

"*Very* dangerous. What can a small yacht expect to do against a tanker? It will run right over you. It may not even see you."

"We'll make sure it knows we're there. The point isn't to tackle them head-on; it's to gain their attention. But yes, small boats have been smashed to matchsticks by tankers in the past. None of our boats. But there is an element of danger."

Stevie pulled the sleeping bag tighter around her, and her thoughts ran away in a spiral of fear. "I didn't want to be here before you said that, and I definitely don't want to be here now. I'd rather leave this boat alive. I'm asking you again: please drop me to shore."

For a moment, Kaz's golden eyes softened. A muscle twitched in her jaw. "No. I'm truly sorry. But if I drop you off, I won't be able to join the protest. Tankers move fast, and in case you hadn't noticed, *Delilah* isn't a speedy boat. We need to be in place when the ship comes through. Each boat in the protest has their allocated spot. We interfere as much as possible, force the boat to slow down. If I miss my spot, it will affect the next protest boat, and the next and so on. I can't take the time to drop you off."

"You must." Worry forced its way up Stevie's throat. "Please."

"Sorry. If I was out here for any other reason than the protest, I would turn around immediately and take you back. But I can't this time."

Stevie turned away to face out to sea. The whitecaps leapt, whipped into froth by the wind. A lone seabird followed in *Delilah's* wake, high above the boat. She turned back to Kaz. "I can't spend five days wrapped in a sleeping bag. How can I possibly last out here with no change of clothes, not even any warm clothes?"

Kaz measured her with her gaze. "You're a similar build to Alana. She keeps some spare clothes on board, plus there's spare wet-weather gear below. They'll keep the wind out. Go below and look in the lockers above



the table. You'll find something there. There should be a packet of new underwear too."

Stevie made her way cautiously down the companionway. Once inside the cabin, she dropped the sleeping bag back on the bunk and opened the locker Kaz had mentioned. It held shorts, jeans, a couple of flannel shirts, some T-shirts, the new packet of underwear, and thick socks. A beanie sat on the top. She stripped off her dress and folded it on the bench, then dressed quickly in a T-shirt, jeans, and flannel shirt and jammed the beanie on her head. The jeans were a little big in the waist but otherwise fit well.

She turned to look for the wet-weather gear, and the radio mounted above the chart table caught her eye. She went over and studied it. Dials, buttons, a handset. How did it work? For a moment, she wished she'd paid attention on the few times her father had used the radio on *Good Time Gal*. Did it automatically go through to someone? Stevie bit her lip. Even if she got through to marine rescue, what would she tell them? That she was being held against her will? That wasn't quite correct. She'd been the one who'd trespassed, and Kaz would put her ashore as soon as she could—just not immediately. If it wasn't an emergency, marine rescue would surely charge for a callout—if they actually came.

If she could get a message to her parents, she was sure they would arrange to get her off this old tub in a blink. Maybe her father would be able to put pressure on Kaz to take her back to shore. Maybe when Kaz let her relay a message through Alana, she could get a message to her parents. She could be home within a day, settling into her flat, preparing for her new job.

There the picture shuddered and closed down. Sure, her parents would help. There would be a helicopter rescue; she would be hauled off *Delilah* on the end of a cable and whisked off to land. Her parents would pay the thousands of dollars that would cost—and they wouldn't let her forget it. It would be just one more thing they would hold over her, one more hymn to the joys and necessities of money, one more paean to the ease of life she could be having—if only she stopped this ridiculous nursing career and came home to work in the family business, as Ash did.

No. Stevie tightened her lips. The last thing she would do was ask her parents for help. Right now, she didn't want to talk with them. If it weren't for Ash, she wouldn't even bother to let them know where she was.

She donned a yellow weatherproof jacket, and, deciding against a pair of canvas sneakers, she pulled on a pair of yellow boots that were only slightly too big and ascended the companionway again.

Kaz was hoisting a foresail with quick, economical movements. Even as Stevie watched, the sail sprang free and billowed for a moment, before Kaz trimmed it taut. It filled with wind, and *Delilah* picked up speed, heeling to port as she sliced through the water.

*Meow.*

Stevie shook her head. She must be hearing things. Surely there wasn't a cat on board? This crazy journey must be getting to her big time.

*Meow.*

A jet-black cat crouched on the deck, regarding Stevie with unblinking green eyes.

Stevie rubbed her eyes, but when she removed her hands, the cat was still there. She hadn't expected to see that. She extended her fingers to the animal. It arched its back and crept away warily.

"That's Sinbad." Kaz secured the line and returned to the wheel. "He's been with me since he was a kitten. Seldom misses a sailing trip."

"He doesn't seem very friendly." *Like his owner.*

"I found him as a wee scrap clinging to a plank drifting out of Wallanbindi Harbour. I have no idea how he got there, whether it was accidental, or someone thought it would be funny to cast him into the ocean. I rescued him, looked after him until he was healthy again, and he's been with me ever since."

"Did you take *him* back to shore?" Stevie bit her lip. She hadn't meant the words to sound so bitter.

Kaz gave her a cool stare. "Yes. I wasn't going anywhere in particular that day, so I did. And he would have likely died if I hadn't."

Stevie turned away, staring out to where the whitecaps were whipping. Salt spray brushed her face. She was stuck on this damn boat with an irritating woman and a cat. Already, she was further from shore than she'd ever been in a yacht, and it was a bit unnerving. *Delilah* rocked along in an uneven rhythm, and spray coated the deck. Was this even safe?

As if reading her mind, Kaz opened the bench locker and pulled out a life jacket. "Put this on. See those jacklines?" She indicated two wire cables that ran from bow to stern along the rails on either side of the boat. "Clip

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your life jacket to the jackline with this tether.” She tossed over a short length of rope with a shackle at either end. “From now on, you don’t come on deck without it. The jackline lets you move about freely but gives you a measure of safety. Clip on when you ascend the companionway, and only disconnect when you go below. Got it?”

Stevie nodded, eyeing Kaz’s chest. She was already clipped on.

“One rogue wave, one big gust, a large roller, and you can be gone. And if you’re man overboard, you’re as good as dead. Even if I see it happen, the chances of getting back to you are Buckley’s and none.”

Stevie widened her eyes. People did this for fun? Going out on her parents’ cruiser was fun—if you discounted having to spend time in their company. So far, this was not pleasant at all.

Kaz scanned the horizon. “It’s quiet. Seeing as I’m stuck with you, you might as well earn your passage. Come below now, and I’ll give you a quick tour.” She led the way down to the cabin without checking to see if Stevie was following. “You’ve already found the galley. Cooler over here. I hope you’re not a fussy eater; I eat simply on board. Stuff that’s quick to prepare. Although with two of us, we’ll be using the emergency rations before the trip is over.”

Stevie caught a glimpse of dehydrated meals, the sort bushwalkers used. She nodded, trying to take it all in.

“You can keep using that forward bunk if you want—I have the port side—or if you want something less claustrophobic, you can bunk in the main cabin. Up to you. Just keep the chart table clear.” She moved across to the table. “Radio is here, plus GPS and compass. Do you know how to use any of them?”

“Just the GPS in my car.” For a second, she thought longingly of her little car. The system on the wall looked nothing like the simple one in her Mini. There was no comforting bright screen with an arrow showing the way.

“Then it’s probably best if you leave the GPS to me. The radio is more important—you need to know this. Ocean Rights has volunteer shore operators. If we don’t check in on schedule, there’s an alert pattern generated. Other boats will come looking. Check in at six every evening. Mornings too, when we’re closer to where we need to be.”

Stevie watched closely as Kaz explained the buttons and dials. She'd already placed her trust in Kaz—indeed, she didn't have any other option at this point—but knowing how to work the radio seemed like a sensible precaution. And if something happened to them, then at least she'd know how to call for help. “Will we meet up with other boats?”

“Some. Out to sea like this, it's harder to work together to hassle the tanker. If we're in a harbour, then it's easier. Then we can work as a flotilla.”

Stevie bit her lip. Kaz's “protest” seemed idealistic at best, suicidal at worst. “If it's only a couple of boats hassling a ship, then what's the point? The ship will ignore you at best, run you down at worst, and no one else will know.”

“Ah, but they will. We're the mosquito that brings down an elephant. Niggling and worrying. They have to avoid us. We slow them down. They take notice. And we take photos, broadcast our radio communications. There are press releases, a live feed. If things get interesting enough, often a TV channel will send a helicopter.” She shot a quick smile in Stevie's direction. It transformed her face, lighting it from sombre to lively in an instant. “You could be on TV.”

“Been there, done that. Don't need that again.” The words snapped out before Stevie could suppress them. Inwardly, she groaned. Her family and their ties were not something she wanted to bring up with Kaz. She shrugged before Kaz could ask her about it. “Nothing important. Just TV crews and reporters lurking around places I've been.” Reporters who were probably right now taking pictures of Ash and Zach and preparing a piece for the local paper—if not the nationwide ones.

Ash. A curl of anxiety pushed aside the nausea in her stomach. Ash would be worried. Stevie was sure her sister had tried to call her already, despite how busy she doubtless was. “When can I get a message to my sister? She'll be worrying about me.”

Kaz nodded. “I'm sorry, I didn't realise you were so concerned. Let me scan the horizon once more, then we'll try to raise Alana.” She exited the cabin up on deck once more.

Stevie bit her lip. She looked around *Delilah's* cabin. She was a small boat, but one that would accommodate the two of them easily.

Kaz returned. “Right, let's see how much you remember about the radio.”

Stevie picked up the handset and flicked the power button. What was the sequence again? She pressed buttons and turned a dial, knowing it was correct when Kaz gave her the briefest smile. The radio crackled as Stevie sent out the call.

There was no answer from Alana.

“I’m sorry. We’ll try again at the six o’clock check-in. She’ll be there then.”

Stevie nodded. “Thank you for trying.” It should be okay until then. Hopefully, Ash would assume she was sleeping off a hangover. Hopefully. She turned her attention to the chart on the desk. “Do you know where we are?”

Kaz touched the map with her finger. “In rough terms, we’re about here.” She traced a path around the bottom of Australia, towards Melbourne. “This is where we’re heading.”

Mere centimetres on the chart. Stevie stared at short distance they’d travelled and the distance to go. There was no way she’d be home in time to start her new job. And if she blew this, who knew when she’d get another, especially not in the small communities on the Sapphire Coast. Small communities could be so tight-knit; stuff up once and you may not get a second chance. Word travelled fast.

“I really can’t do this.” Stevie spoke steadily, forcing her voice to remain calm. “You’re going to cost me my job, the start of my career. Please, it’s not too late. Drop me off somewhere. I’ll pay you.”

Kaz set her jaw. “No. It’s not up for negotiation.”

“Name your price.”

“I’m not for sale.”

“Do you realise what you’re costing me?” Stevie fought to keep the tears from her voice.

“I wasn’t the one who got drunk, did a spot of breaking and entering—the hatch won’t close properly, so I’ll send you a bill for that—and who might well sabotage my participation in the protest anyway. A protest which I consider to be far more important than you playing nurse.”

“*Playing nurse!*”

A wave slapped the hull with a loud boom, and *Delilah* rocked.

Stevie grabbed the edge of the chart table for balance. “Three years of study is not *playing nurse*. Why would you think that?”

“Your expensive clothes, your parents’ cruiser. The Sterling name.”

“You’re making assumptions based on my being at the party last night. I’m sure even you own a set of decent clothes for parties. I could make assumptions about someone who’s able to take off on some fool’s protest mission for ten days. Do you have a job?”

Kaz’s smile didn’t reach her eyes. “My boat. I ask the questions. I don’t think you’re in any position to be making demands.” She shrugged. “We’re stuck with each other. I suggest we both make an effort to get along.”

Stevie tried to swallow. The salt air seemed stuck in her throat. “Look, I’m sorry I’m here. Trust me on that. I understand this is important to you—but nursing’s important to me too.” She spread her hands out in appeal. “One tiny yacht in a protest—what difference do you hope to make? But one nurse in an aged care home—I can make a difference. I *know* I can. I’m sorry for offering money. I didn’t mean to imply you could be bought.”

An acrid taste sat at the back of Stevie’s throat. Because that was what she had thought. She’d judged Kaz, made assumptions based on the old and worn yacht, based on Kaz’s casual appearance. She’d fallen into her parents’ method of getting their own way. Be nice, be polite, ask as if you’re granting a favour, and when that doesn’t work, offer cash. It was entitled, it was condescending, and it reeked of the privilege of wealth. Stevie had sworn not to fall into that trap. It was why, after all, she’d funded her own way through her nursing degree, why she’d shared a tumbledown house with Kate in inner-city Melbourne rather than letting her parents find her a sleek modern unit in a trendy area. It was why she’d studied nursing rather than business as her parents had wanted.

It was why she’d forged her own path.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

Kaz studied her, her head tilted to one side.

She had the most incredible eyes. A warm brown, with golden flecks. *Tiger’s eyes. Like the beast. Like the semi-precious stone.* That stone had always been her favourite. Stevie shivered as Kaz’s golden gaze travelled at a leisurely pace from the top of Alana’s red beanie that covered Stevie’s pixie cut, down to the rubber boots.

Kaz’s stare was assessing, as if she was checking out Stevie’s physical strength and sturdiness, weighing up whether she’d be of any use at the

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physical tasks of sailing a yacht. Or maybe she was concerned about her own safety, much as Stevie had been when she'd first woken up.

"A truce, then." Kaz's lips tilted up in a natural smile. It reached her eyes, crinkling the corners. Her teeth flashed white in her tanned face.

"A truce."

"And now, I have to get up on deck. We've been down here twenty minutes—that's the limit." She turned and ascended the companionway.

Stevie followed. She watched as Kaz clipped her shackle onto a ring at the hatch, and then as she moved further out on deck, she moved the shackle to the metal jackline. Stevie copied her, clipping her tether onto the other jackline, which ran the full length of the railing.

Kaz scanned the horizon, slowly and deliberately, taking her time in each direction before turning.

"What are you looking for?" Stevie asked. The question seemed a stupid one. Surely it wouldn't be hard to see a ship?

"You can't just take a quick look. You can miss a boat when it's in the trough of the waves. Not to mention debris. You don't want to hit anything if you can help it." Kaz completed her scan and moved to the wheel. She released the autopilot and stood, legs akimbo against the roll of the boat, her hands loosely gripping the timber wheel.

Stevie sat abruptly as *Delilah* yawed. Water splashed over the side. Thank God for the waterproof jacket. She stared out to sea. There was no land in sight, no ships, no markers. There was just the deep, blue, rolling ocean. A couple of seabirds wheeled overhead, following in *Delilah's* wake. She focussed on Kaz's hands. They were strong, tanned. Capable looking. Her long fingers curved over the wheel, her nails short, with one ragged thumbnail, as if she habitually chewed it. There was a neatness about Kaz, a self-contained awareness of her own movements. Nothing unnecessary. Stevie guessed that was from time on boats. A clumsy person would find it hard.

Kaz was silent, as if all her conversation had been washed overboard.

Stevie's stomach gave a gut churning rumble accompanied by a hunger pang so intense she felt momentarily faint. She wondered what time it was.

Kaz turned to her. "It must be early afternoon. I don't keep normal mealtimes on board; I just eat when I'm hungry. Do you want to make us a

sandwich?" At Stevie's nod, she continued, "You'll find sliced bread in the cooler, and ham and cheese."

Stevie lurched to her feet and, careful of the rolling deck, made her way to the hatch.

\* \* \*

Kaz swung the hatch experimentally to and fro. She'd patched the crack with waterproof filler and managed to cobble together a fix for the hinge Stevie had broken. Hopefully, it would hold. She glanced at her watch. It was nearly time for her scheduled check-in with Alana. She looked over at Stevie. She was huddled in a corner propped against the rail, staring out to sea. Her face was pale, and she looked tired.

Kaz took a long, slow three-sixty scan. There was nothing to be concerned about.

Stevie had mentioned family. Surely they would be wondering where she was?

"I'm going below for the scheduled check-in," Kaz said. "Who do you need to contact? I can ask Alana to pass on a message."

"My sister, Ash. She'll be worried about me."

No mention of her parents, the owners of the gin palace moored at Wallanbindi. Still, at least she had someone who cared about her. "Come below and you can pass on her details to Alana."

Kaz sat at the chart table and picked up the handset. Stevie rested her butt against the table and watched closely as Kaz activated the radio.

"O.R. Shorebase, this is yacht *Delilah* calling O.R. Shorebase. Are you there, Alana? Over."

Stevie leant forward and studied the buttons. "This flashing light indicates an active call?"

Kaz nodded, just as the radio crackled to life.

"Yacht *Delilah*, this is O.R. Shorebase. How are you, Kaz?"

"All's fine here. I'm making good progress and am on schedule."

"I've heard from all of the boats now except for *Dolphin's Leap*," Alana said. "Everyone is on course and on schedule. Your first intercept should be in three days' time. No changes so far."

"Thanks, Alana. There's one more thing. I have an unexpected guest on board."



“Unexpected?” Alana’s voice sharpened. “Have you caught enough fish for everyone?”

“Plenty.”

“Good.”

Kaz smiled. The question was their safe phrase. If she had replied that they’d all have to eat less, then Alana would have ended the call as soon as possible without making anyone suspicious who may be listening in, and then she would have called marine rescue. “I’ll put her on to you,” Kaz said. “Her name’s Stevie Sterling. Would you be able to call her sister and let her know she’s okay?”

“Sure,” Alana said. “No time to let the family know before she sailed into the sunset with you? You haven’t lost your touch, girlfriend.”

Kaz flicked a quick glance at Stevie. “It’s definitely not like that. She’s... just a friend.” She wasn’t even an acquaintance. But explaining the situation now would cost precious time, and only raise more questions. She’d tell Alana once she made it back to shore.

“Right. So you say.” Amusement hummed in Alana’s voice.

Kaz stifled a sigh and gave the handset to Stevie.

“Hi, Alana, thank you for doing this. My sister’s name is Ash, and she’ll be worried about me.” She recited Ash’s phone number and email address.

“What would you like me to say?”

Stevie looked at Kaz, a tiny wrinkle appearing between her eyes. It was kind of cute. “That I’ve just gone sailing with a friend for a few days?” She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

Kaz nodded. As an explanation it was brief, but it would suffice, as long as Ash believed it.

“Yes, tell her that,” Stevie said with more assurance in her voice.

“No worries. Will she want to know anything else? Like who you’re with?”

Stevie sighed. “She probably will, but please say you don’t know and you’re simply relaying a message.” She hesitated. “If she’s suspicious, tell her congratulations on her engagement to Zach, and that I love her, and I’ll be in touch in a week or so.”

“Got it.”

Stevie gave the handset back to Kaz. “I’ll go back on deck.”

When Stevie was gone, Kaz said to Alana, “You still there?”

“Of course. Why do I think you’re not telling me everything?”

“Because I’m not telling you everything. But you’ll have to wait.”

“Okay. If I must.” Alana’s sigh gusted over the channel. “But tell me this: is she really not a girlfriend?”

“Really not,” Kaz said firmly. “I’m not even sure if she’s gay.”

“Oh-ho. That’s telling. My seductive friend is losing her touch. Did your gaydar get swept overboard in heavy seas?”

“No, I think it’s working. But I’m not checking it. If you want to hear more, you’ll have to wait until I’m back, Al.”

Alana was silent. “I know you. We may not be *girlfriends* anymore, girlfriend, but I know when you’re hiding something. I demand craft beer and pizza when you return, and an evening to catch up.”

“You’ve got it.” Kaz grinned. “I’ll look forward to it, Not-Girlfriend.” She closed the channel and went back on deck.

Stevie stood studying the autopilot as it made tiny course corrections. She watched as Kaz disengaged it and took the wheel once more.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Is Alana your girlfriend?”

Kaz studied the tell-tales on the sail to save herself from answering. Why did Stevie want to know that? She mentally shrugged. She was probably just making conversation; nothing more. “She’s my ex. We remained friends.”

“That’s not an easy thing to do.”

“It was for us. We were friends before we were lovers, and we just slid back to the friendship zone. Plus we’re both in Ocean Rights, so we have to see each other fairly often.”

“Yes. Ocean Rights.” There was an edge to Stevie’s voice. “The organisation that trumps all else.”

“What do you mean?”

Stevie shrugged and stood staring out to sea. Kaz followed her gaze, which was fixed on the horizon.

When it became obvious Stevie wasn’t going to respond, Kaz said, “Tonight, we’ll take two-hour watches. Two hours on deck, alternating with two hours sleep. I’ll leave the autopilot on for your watch, but you’ll still need to scan three-sixty at least every ten minutes. Whether you stay on deck or go up and down is up to you.”

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Stevie bit her lip. “You trust me with your yacht?”

“It’s either trust you or come up every twenty minutes to do my own scan. This way, I’ll get better sleep.”

“You said ten minutes to me!”

“I did. It’s the safer option. But when I’m by myself, I can catnap in twenty minutes, and it’s better I’m not comatose with tiredness.” Kaz looked across at Stevie. She didn’t look too happy at the thought of being on watch. Well, Kaz wasn’t too happy about trusting Stevie with her boat. It seemed life was throwing the unexpected at both of them right now.

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# ALL AT SEA

BY CHEYENNE BLUE

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