

A Killing Tide

by

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Prologue

Astoria, Oregon, late winter, evening

Century-old clapboard buildings huddled together on the narrow triangle of land between Marine Drive and the raging waters of the Columbia River. Sixty-knot gusts of wind rattled loose windowpanes; sheets of rain flayed peeling siding. A rusty streetlight groaned, its pool of light dancing on the darkened sidewalk.

The door of the Redemption Tavern swung open, and a man staggered out. Propping himself against the brick alcove, he peered into the night, eyes slitted against the wet. A Pineapple Express, damn their luck, straight out of the South Pacific. Someone'd probably die on the river bar tonight. Someone they all knew.

Shivering, he shoved throbbing hands into his pockets. Goddamn ratfish. Their fins cut like razors. In the last week, he'd flung enough of 'em off the port bow to last a lifetime.

He closed his eyes, swaying. Someone from inside the tavern yelled at him to close the door, but he paid no attention. All he had to do was make it six miserable blocks, then he'd be home with Julie and the kids. He'd take a hot shower, eat a home-cooked meal. Get some sleep.

They wouldn't come for him at the house. Too many witnesses.

His hands fisted, the right one closing around the small snow globe he'd forgotten he'd put in his pocket. Scowling, he held it up to the dim glow of the lamp above the door. A miniature white fishing trawler floated on a pretty blue sea, glittery bits of snow

falling all around it. The skipper's sister had given it to him for Bobby.

"Since Bobby's too sick to go out with you right now," Kaz had explained.

His jaw clenched. She had no clue about the kind of trouble he was in, the kind of trouble they were all in. Pretty little bobbles couldn't fix anything, and there weren't going to be any happy endings. With the snow globe still clutched in his hand, he pushed himself onto the sidewalk.

Rain iced his face and ran inside his collar, soaking the front of his wool shirt. A car passed him, splashing greasy water over his boots. He shook a fist at it, but it never even slowed, its taillights disappearing into the swirling darkness.

What a fool he'd been! But he never thought they'd find out, not really. And he'd been desperate.

At least the Skipper should've understood. After all, Gary was his friend—the two of them went way back. A bitter laugh escaped, its sound swept away by the wind. In all the years he and Gary had been together, he'd never seen Gary so angry, so...disappointed.

What have I done?

In the lull between wind gusts, he caught a sound, a faint scrape on the concrete. Spinning around, he peered into the rain-drenched night.

The street was empty, the only movement the quaking shadows of wind-whipped vegetation.

Increasing his pace, he ducked around the corner of a coffee house, and then from under its creaking sign, crossed a patch of grass to stand in the deep shadow cast by the concrete bridge abutment.

He stared into the darkness, fear chasing each breath, then shuddered.

He was so damn tired. Tired of running. Tired of trying to make things right again.

His head fell back and he looked up, letting the rain batter his face. High overhead,

the steel deck of the bridge loomed, its tiny lights winking against the turbulent black sky. Steady streams of water poured off the structure, flooding the grass and soaking his boots.

Sensing movement behind him, he started to turn. Something heavy crashed down on his head, driving him to his knees. Pain exploded, radiating down his spine. Dazed, he shook his head.

Hands grabbed his coat, slamming him against the concrete. Breath soured by beer washed over his face. “Where is it?”

He immediately recognized the low, gravelly voice.

Can't tell.

His shoulder rammed against the concrete, his collarbone snapping with a hot, grating pop. “*What did you do with it?*”

He choked and sucked in air. “I’ll give it back...just give me a chance.” The hands tightened like a vise, and he clawed at his throat. “Wait! *I’m begging you.*”

The pressure on his collarbone increased, and he screamed.

“You’ll never find it,” he got out, but his words were swallowed by the howling wind. He struggled. “I made sure,” he whispered.

The hands loosened, and he fell, facedown.

Was that the ocean roaring? Didn’t make sense....He was by the river, wasn’t he? He chuckled, but the sound only echoed inside his head. Funny. He’d always figured he’d die crossing the river bar, but never like this. It shouldn’t have been like this.

The storm was easing. Calm settled over him as night closed in.

Julie will understand.

The fingers of his right hand loosened, and the snow globe dropped into the mud. He never even felt the last blow.

Chapter 1

Kaz Jorgensen opened the cedar plank door of the Redemption and stepped into its dimly lit interior. A gust of wind caught the door, and she had to use all of her strength to drag it shut.

Hanging her dripping sou'wester on a peg in the entry, she paused long enough to roll the tension out of her shoulders. By the time she'd crossed the river bar, the seas had been running at seventeen feet. Waves two stories high had battered the trawler, making it shudder beneath her feet. It was her first rough crossing since coming home, and she'd nearly been paralyzed by the sense of *déjà vu*.

Rubbing icy hands on her jeans, she glanced around the smoky, cavernous room, taking a quick headcount. And breathed a quick sigh of relief. As far as she could tell, no fishing crews were MIA from the storm. Her twin brother Gary caught her gaze, frowning and glancing deliberately at his watch. Shrugging, she held out both hands, then started threading her way through the crowded tables.

"You're late," Lucy McGuire said as she approached. "That's the second time this week."

"Hi to you, too." Kaz dropped into the captain's chair across from Lucy, propping salt-encrusted, wet sneakers on the extra chair. "I would've been here an hour ago if some *idiot* hadn't run through my lines." Catching the bartender's eye, she mimicked a drinking motion.

Steve's brow arched, and he nodded.

While she waited, Kaz watched her best friend take a bite out of her Reuben, miraculously managing to avoid dribbling sauce on her designer jeans and expensive charcoal wool blazer. “How do you *do* that?”

Lucy raised a brow. “Do what?” Her detective’s shield was discreetly clipped to her waistband, her Beretta semi-automatic barely distinguishable under the perfect cut of her jacket. An intricately designed antique silver clip tamed thick, curly black hair into a discreet French braid.

Kaz just shook her head. The tavern’s only waitress appeared at her elbow with her usual—a frosty pint of microbrew and a tablet of ibuprofen. Kaz shot Sandra a grateful smile, then realized she’d gotten distracted from finishing her rant. “I lost a half dozen pots, dammit. Remind me to hunt down the jerk and give him a piece of my mind.”

Lucy snorted. “Like you have a prayer of discovering who it was. So how many crabs did you catch?”

“You don’t *count* them, Luce. You *weigh* them.” When Lucy raised a brow, Kaz sighed. “Okay, the catch was light—a few dozen.”

Lucy choked on a sip of beer, waving a hand in the air. “Wow. Big ones or little ones?”

“Oh, shut up.” Kaz slumped more comfortably in her chair, raising her mug. “To safe passages.”

“Safe passages,” Lucy repeated, clinking glasses. “So tell me you didn’t just come into port—that you aren’t that crazy.”

“I’m not that crazy,” Kaz replied obediently, swallowing the ibuprofen with another gulp.

Lucy glared. “Dammit, Kaz—”

“I’m handling it.”

“Yeah, right.”

Time for a change of subject. “So who’s the new guy?” Kaz nodded toward the booths along the back wall.

She’d noticed him right away, of course—they didn’t get many tourists this far into Uniontown. The Redemption was a working-class tavern in a working-class neighborhood, a little too rough for most with its worn, scarred tables and harsh, mingled odors of fish, grease, and creosote. Then again, the guy didn’t strike her as a tourist.

He sat in a booth by himself, eating a hamburger while he read *The Daily Astorian*. Obviously, no one had told him not to order the grilled food. Few locals except Lucy, who had a cop’s cast iron stomach, were that foolish. For the first time, Kaz noticed the black German shepherd asleep at the guy’s feet. Stretched out on the floor, the dog looked about the size of a full-grown deer.

Lucy followed the direction of her gaze. “That’s the new fire chief, guy by the name of Michael Chapman. He made the rounds to introduce himself a couple of days ago—comes from back East. When Richardson decided to retire, this guy applied for the job. The Mayor took one look at his resume and snapped him up.”

Kaz frowned. “That good?”

“Yeah.” Lucy abandoned the rest of her sandwich and leaned forward, lowering her voice. “He’s some kind of a big-time, washed-up arson investigator. The way I hear it, he and that dog of his brought down one of Boston’s worst arsonists in decades, some guy who’d set dozens of fires and killed several people.” Her expression turned grim. “I *hate* arsonists. They’re sick little creeps.”

Intrigued, Kaz sneaked a second glance. The guy definitely looked tough enough to bring down a serial arsonist. Dark hair, cut military-short, barely touched his high forehead, and hard features telegraphed a quiet grimness. He had a rangy, muscular build

and shoulders wide enough to make any woman's heart skip a few beats.

Definitely good-looking. Rough-edged, like he'd lived hard. "So why do people think he's washed up?" Kaz asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"The torch burned down Chapman's apartment, killing his fiancée." Lucy straightened and tossed her crumpled napkin on top of the remains of her sandwich. "Rumor is that Chapman wiggled."

"Sounds like he had good reason." Kaz knew all too well what that kind of loss did to a person.

Without warning, he glanced up, his gaze locking with hers.

He had light-colored eyes, maybe blue—she couldn't tell from this distance. But she had a sneaking hunch they'd chill her right down to the bone. His jaw was rock-hard, that much she *could* tell.

She returned his look without blinking, a shiver dancing across her skin. This guy wouldn't welcome her sympathy.

He nodded, the slightest inclination of his head, then turned back to his meal.

"Kind of cute for a burnout, huh?" Lucy's voice cut into her thoughts.

Kaz made a noncommittal noise, disguising her reaction by drinking more beer. "Maybe he wanted to downshift, live with a little less stress," she murmured, not believing it for one minute.

Lucy harrumphed. "If that's true, he'll go stark raving mad the first winter. Guys like him come out here to kick back, to live the supposedly idyllic, small-town life. After the first hundred inches of rain and thousand dollars of counseling to help them cope with all the peace and quiet, they de-web their feet and head back home."

Kaz smiled, her tension easing a little. Living on the north coast of Oregon *did* require a certain kind of fortitude. "Still, if he's got the kind of experience you say he

does, maybe Astoria is lucky to have him,” she pointed out.

Raised voices forestalled Lucy’s reply. Kaz turned in time to see her brother Gary shove his friend Chuck hard against the bar. The room fell silent.

She jumped to her feet, shaking her head at Lucy, who was already half out of her chair, then headed toward them.

“I need your help, damn you,” she heard Gary say in a low tone as she neared. His large hands fisted in Chuck’s shirt.

She ducked under Gary’s arm and placed a hand on his chest. “Hey.” Pasting a smile on her face, she glanced over her shoulder at Chuck. “What’s going on, guys? You’re starting to draw attention.”

Beneath her hand, Gary’s muscles were rigid with suppressed violence. Their genetic propensity for height had blessed him even more than Kaz—he towered a good six inches over her five foot ten. And whereas she tended toward a willowy frame, a stint as an Army Ranger and grueling years of drag fishing had given Gary a solid, powerful build.

“Yo, guys? You’re turning me into a candidate for high blood pressure, here. What d’you say we—”

“Stay out of it, Sis,” Gary muttered, not looking her way.

She risked a quick glance at Chuck, whose expression was calm. But then, Chuck *always* looked calm.

“Bad move, what you’re thinking, man,” he murmured to Gary, his lips barely moving.

A frisson of unease slithered through her. “What’s this all about?”

Chuck spared her a chiding look. “Not your business.”

“You’re making it my business,” Kaz shot back softly, “as well as everyone else’s.” She angled her head toward the room. People’s gazes were lowered, but they hung on

every word.

“Problem?” The resonant baritone came from behind Kaz. She swung around, her shoulder connecting with Gary’s chest, which served to force the two men slightly apart.

The new fire chief stood a few feet away, boots planted, arms hanging loosely at his sides. He was taller than she’d realized, and if the crow’s feet around his eyes were any indication, older than she would’ve originally guessed—maybe around forty. *Formidable* was the first word that leapt to mind. If any more tough men showed up, she’d asphyxiate from the ambient testosterone.

“I’m handling it,” she insisted.

Chapman’s gaze flicked over her, then he turned back to the men. “You two might want to continue this outside.”

“Who the hell are you?” Gary demanded, causing Kaz to wince. He had an almost preternatural gift for irritating the authorities.

“Just a guy who wants to finish his dinner in peace,” Chapman said, crossing his arms. The soft wool of his cable-knit sweater glided smoothly over hard muscle. “And I’d prefer that the lady not get hurt.”

Kaz frowned. “I won’t—”

Gary overrode her. “No one asked you to butt in, pal.”

Chapman shrugged and nodded toward his booth. “Zeke—over there—tends to get real stressed out.” The dog let out a snore. “I do what I can for him.”

“You’re a regular comic.”

Steve chose that moment to walk up on the other side of the bar. “Take it outside, Jorgensen. I don’t want another fight in my bar.”

Gary rounded on him, his expression lethal. “You’ve got no room to complain, *no room*. For all I know—”

Steve's normally pleasant expression hardened, his eyes going flat. "I *said*, leave. Now."

Kaz reached out and gripped his arm. "Gary. Please."

He glared at her for a moment, then jerked away. "Hell, I'm out of here." He tossed some money on the bar. When she reached out again, he glanced down at her, his expression momentarily softening. "Leave me be, Kaz." Then he shot a hard look at Chuck—a look, she realized, that was tinged with fear. "You think about what I said." He snagged his coat off the back of the bar stool and shouldered his way between them.

Chuck slanted a quiet look at her while he paid his bill. "Stick to the sidelines on this one, kiddo." Then he followed Gary out the door.

She stood for a moment in the spot they'd vacated, then huffed out a breath. Turning back to Chapman, she forced another smile. "You know, I really could've handled that."

He studied her without comment. She'd been right—his eyes were light blue, so light they were almost silver. But his gaze wasn't so much unfriendly as simply world-weary.

"Most women would hesitate before getting between two rough-looking men spoiling for a fight," he said finally.

She shook her head. "One of those 'rough-looking' men was my brother."

"Ah." He nodded and held out a hand. "Michael Chapman."

"Yes, I know." His grip was firm, warm, and slightly rough. He held her hand a moment longer than was called for, and she pulled away, taking an involuntary step backward and crossing her arms.

One corner of his mouth lifted at the movement. "Small town—word travels fast, I imagine." He waited.

"Oh, sorry." She introduced herself.

"Kaz." He cocked his head. "Unusual name."

“It’s short for Kasmira, a family name—my grandmother’s,” she explained, then gestured vaguely toward the center of the room. “Well. I should be getting back—”

“I’m not keen on women getting shoved around in bar fights. In the future, you’d be wise to be more careful.”

She curbed her impatience. He was new; she probably should cut him some slack. “Gary and Chuck can disagree on something as minor as whether the Cubs have a chance to win this year’s pennant race,” she explained. “They’re *friends*. It wouldn’t have gotten out of hand.”

“Obviously you didn’t think so, or you wouldn’t have raced over to break it up.”

Her irritation notched a peg or two higher, her voice chilling. “This is a small town, Mr. Chapman. You’ll find folks around here won’t appreciate you butting into their business.”

A flicker of something, possibly humor, came and went in his eyes so quickly she might have imagined it. “Folks rarely appreciate my butting in, as you put it, no matter where they live,” he replied, his tone dry as dust. “Ma’am.”

She watched him walk back to his booth, annoyed that she’d let him push her buttons. Protective males made her crazy, and Astoria had an overabundance of them. There had to be something in the water—this guy had been indoctrinated in less than a week.

“Well?” Lucy asked when she returned.

“Not a clue.”

“What did Chapman want?”

Kaz jerked her shoulders, still unsettled by him. She was good at handling aggressive men—it’d been part of her job description for the last ten years. But Chapman had gotten her defenses up in less than thirty seconds.

She noticed Lucy was scanning the room, her “cop” expression on. “*What?*”

Lucy hesitated, then shook her head. “You’d better have that talk with Gary, and soon,” she said, referring to the discussion they’d had when she’d called Kaz early one morning a month ago and suggested she come home on extended leave from her consulting gig in San Francisco.

Hearing the uncharacteristic worry in her friend’s voice, Kaz hadn’t even hesitated. She’d packed her laptop, told her business partner she’d handle whatever she could from Astoria, then booked the first flight to Portland. Once home, she’d made excuses to a disgruntled Gary about how she could use the break from her high-stress job, about how she figured she could use the downtime to help him get the family fishing business back on its feet. About how getting back out on the water would be good for her.

He hadn’t bought her last argument any more than she had. She’d known coming home would cause old memories to resurface, keeping her awake late into the night. But she’d deal with them—she didn’t have a choice. And though she hadn’t been able to ferret out yet what was bothering Gary, she was working on it.

“I don’t want Sykes back on his case,” Lucy said, bringing Kaz out of her thoughts. Jim Sykes, the chief of police and Lucy’s direct superior, had never been able to stand Gary, even when they were kids growing up. “And I *really* don’t want to be the one to haul your brother in on another assault charge on the chief’s orders.”

Kaz frowned. “Come on. That’s stretching it, don’t you think?”

“Two fights in one night? I don’t think so. And you *know* this gives Sykes the excuse he needs to yank Gary off his parole.”

“Whoa. Earth to Luce. *Two* fights?”

The light dawned. “Right—you weren’t here yet, were you? Gary and Ken got into it earlier.” Lucy paused. “Now that I think about it, it was the same kind of thing—a serious

row that looked like something I might have to break up. But Ken split before it could go anywhere.”

Kaz rubbed at an aching muscle in the back of her neck, the uneasiness she’d been feeling off and on returning full force. Ken was usually already home with Julie and the kids by the time she made port, so she didn’t see him all that much. Particularly now that his son was so sick.

But he and Gary had always been tight, ever since they’d served together in Iraq. They had a lot of shared history—both from the war and from being out on the water together. Their friendship had had its share of rough patches, but their disagreements had always been short-lived. Gary had always stuck by Ken, no matter what. In fact, both she and Lucy suspected that it had been Gary’s loyalty to Ken that had landed him in jail six months back. Which made the fight Lucy was talking about incomprehensible. Kaz sighed. Just like the rest of Gary’s behavior lately.

Lucy was waiting for an explanation, and Kaz dearly wished she had one. “Gary’s been having nightmares—at least, I think he has,” she admitted. “I can hear him pacing in the living room at night.”

“Nightmares about what? The war?”

Kaz shook her head. “I don’t know. He’s hard to read under the best of circumstances. But still, bar-fighting has never been his style.”

“Yeah, well, could’ve fooled me.” Lucy’s expression was grim. “And Sykes was here earlier—he saw what went down with Ken.”

That wasn’t good news. If Sykes thought Gary was a danger to the community, he wouldn’t hesitate to throw him back in a cell.

Kaz mentally reviewed what Gary had said to Chuck and Steve at the bar. Or not said, to be more accurate. She gnawed on her lip. “Look, you know those guys’ll argue

about just about anything..." Her voice trailed away as she took in Lucy's stubborn expression. "Okay, okay. If it'll make you happy, I'll go hunt Gary up and ask him some extremely pointed questions."

Lucy looked relieved, far more than Kaz would've thought was warranted. Which made her even twitchier. "Of course," she added, trying to inject a lighter note, "I'll have to take a rain check on the pool game."

"Yeah." Lucy sighed. "I should get back to the station anyway."

Kaz glanced around the room, schooling her expression so that she didn't show the worry that was gnawing at her gut. None of the fishermen would make eye contact with her. And now that she thought about it, they'd been unusually silent out on the water earlier that afternoon. The typical radio chatter had been missing—along with the camaraderie. "Hmmm?" She realized Lucy had been talking to her.

"I *said*, you just don't want to get trounced again at eight-ball and owe me double or nothing on last night's bet."

"Like hell." Kaz kept her tone light as she found a few crumpled bills to drop onto the table for her beer.

Lucy snagged her wrist as she walked past, her expression uneasy. "Just watch your back, okay?"

Michael Chapman leaned back in his booth and watched the Jorgensen woman leave. Thick, waist-length, blond hair, a slim, athletic body, and soft, chocolate brown eyes. And attitude—tons of it.

He grimaced. He hadn't paid much attention to women the last couple of years—a sad fact his friends in the Boston Fire Department had pointed out repeatedly—but Kaz Jorgensen had caught his attention and held it. And after talking to her, he could

sympathize with the reactions he'd seen on the faces of the other men when she'd arrived. A few had watched her with wistful expressions, a few with barely concealed irritation. But the rest had looked relieved, perhaps even exasperated—probably fishing buddies who'd been worried about her. He'd bet she drove them crazy on a good day, taking chances they privately labeled foolish. She'd certainly caused *him* a qualm or two when she'd waded into the middle of a brewing bar fight—one that looked as if it might get real ugly, real fast.

Most of the patrons were typical of any waterfront tavern—hard-working, decent people. He'd been looking for just that kind of place when he'd come through the door, and he hadn't been disappointed. He'd looked forward to relaxing, getting a handle on the locals.

The atmosphere in this place, though, was beyond tense. He'd already been sizing up a few hard-looking locals and monitoring the brewing fight when the blonde had jumped in. She was damn lucky, even if one of them *was* her brother—she easily could've gotten roughed up.

He grimaced, reaching down to rub Zeke's stomach. The dog moaned appreciatively in his sleep. Christ. He'd learned his lesson, hadn't he? He had no business wondering what secrets these people were hiding.

He'd moved out west to find some measure of peace in his life, not to take on someone else's troubles. All he had planned for the next few days was to move his belongings, which had finally shown up several days late, into the Victorian fixer-upper he'd purchased for Zeke and himself on the east side of town. To renew his acquaintance with a few carpentry tools.

Shoving aside his half-eaten burger, he pulled out his wallet, adding an extra five for tip. As he did, he glanced around the bar, noting the closed expressions. Felt the

undercurrents. And, in spite of himself, was intrigued.

Those guys hadn't been fighting about anything as minor as Kaz Jorgensen had wanted him to believe. This town had secrets.

Too many secrets.

Chapter 2

Kaz arrived at the family's vintage 1900's bungalow above town to find the house dark, the driveway empty. After a moment's thought, she reversed onto the street and headed back in the direction she'd come. When Gary needed space, he sometimes slept on the *Anna Marie*.

She drove down steep hills, skirting the historic downtown district, then turned east on Marine Drive, passing shadowed, abandoned warehouses that were remnants of a more prosperous era. Even though the rain had let up, the clouds were moving low and fast, and she had to hold the wheel firmly against the gusting wind. Gary was nuts to be sleeping on board—even moored, the boat would be pitching hard.

But then lately, Gary *had* been acting nuts.

When Lucy had called sounding worried last month, Kaz had assumed she'd spend her annual two-week vacation the way she always did—hanging around the waterfront and working on the never-ending list of boat repairs. And while home, she might try to feel out what was bothering Gary. But immediately upon her arrival, she discovered a family business on the verge of bankruptcy, and a stranger inside the skin of her brother.

If anything since she'd been back, Gary had become even more reclusive, more prickly. Admittedly, since she'd had to spend so much of her time out on the *Kasmira B*, she hadn't had that many opportunities to sit him down for a real talk. But he hadn't

made himself available, either. She'd even begun to wonder if he was actually avoiding her.

Gary had a tendency to hole up like a wounded animal when he was hurting—he'd taken "time-outs", as he called them, more than once since he'd returned from Iraq. His recent behavior was out of character—he typically wouldn't avoid her, and he wouldn't pick fights in bars. He'd withdraw instead—heading for the hills where he could be by himself.

And she was certain the fight six months ago had been an aberration. But if Jim Sykes used the fights tonight to revoke Gary's parole, she *would* be concerned about his state of mind. He'd never be able to handle more jail time, not after what he'd been through in the war.

Spying his truck on the wharf of the East Mooring Basin, she heaved a sigh of relief and turned in, pulling in behind it. It was locked up tight, so she headed toward the docks. Using the palm of her hand, she slapped the chain-link gate that opened onto the docks, running into it when it refused to budge.

She took a step back, perplexed. Someone had chained it from the inside. What idiot would do *that*?

Then she heard an odd, percussive, whooshing sound, and the wheelhouse of the *Anna Marie* exploded into flames.

#

Lucy drove to the new police headquarters located on the east side of Astoria, having second, third, and even twentieth thoughts about having encouraged Kaz to come home. She'd hoped Kaz would be able to ferret out what was going on with Gary. Instead, the persistent prickling on the back of her neck was telling her she'd put Kaz in danger.

Astoria had changed—it wasn't the same town they'd all known from their time

growing up here. In recent years, they'd experienced an influx of rich vacationers who had bought up many of the old Victorian homes, using them as weekend getaways. The newcomers brought with them too much disposable income, as well as a thirst for parties where the flow of controlled substances went unchecked. In reaction, "We Ain't Quaint" bumper stickers had quietly shown up on many of the locals' trucks, and not-so-quiet clashes between the old and the new had become more commonplace.

From the looks of it, Gary had landed right in the thick of those culture wars. Lately, his behavior had given Lucy some really bad moments late at night. And though she'd be the first to admit he'd been giving her bad moments ever since high school, this was different. Whatever he'd gotten himself into, she now realized she didn't want him involving Kaz. Which was why she dearly wished she'd minded her own business and never placed that call.

Gary was a big boy, and he could take care of himself. In fact, it was about damn time he handled his problems on his own. He needed to be shaken out of the rut he'd been in ever since the war—needed to acknowledge that the aftereffects of being a POW *hadn't* made him unfit company, for the fishermen *or* for the right woman. Lucy snorted and pulled into the left-turn lane, hitting her blinker. Yeah, right. He'd admit to *that* the day pigs flew over the Columbia.

Lucy pulled into the brightly lit parking lot, suppressing a pang of homesickness for their old headquarters in the heart of Astoria's historic downtown district. Progress, she reminded herself, was good. Smiling hello to Joanne, she used her keycard to open the secure door to the squad room.

"Everything quiet?"

"Yep," Joanne replied, with no hesitation in the rapid clicking of her computer keys. A single mom with three young boys, Joanne was fond of telling anyone who'd listen that

her job of police dispatcher was merely relief duty.

The door closed behind Lucy with a hollow click. The place was empty except for her partner, Ivar, who sat at his desk, studiously working his way through a stack of files. A mug steamed gently at his elbow, and soft classical music played on a boom box confiscated from the evidence room.

Lucy dropped into the desk chair facing his, sniffing at the pale green liquid. "I hope that vile-smelling crap is for poisoning some perp, or else I'll have to request a transfer to the state police."

"Green oolong tea," Ivar rumbled in his soft, deep voice without looking up. "Full of antioxidants. You should try some."

"Over my dead body."

He nodded while he calmly made a note in the margin of the page. "A real possibility, since you insist on eating red meat." Setting his pen down, he leaned back, lacing his hands behind his head and stretching his legs out so far that his feet crowded hers. He eyed her with his typical air of quiet aplomb.

Her partner was tall, thin, pensive, and when he bothered to speak at all, laconic. In the five years Lucy had been teamed up with him, she'd never once seen him lose his cool. Which actually made him the perfect foil for her, because she lost her cool as often as possible. In fact, she considered a well-honed rant a work of art.

"Chief would like to talk," he informed her now.

"Any idea what he wants?"

"Nope."

"Any chance I can delay this and go home for a good soak in the tub?"

Ivar shifted his gaze over her head in warning, and she glanced around to find Jim Sykes approaching her desk. He'd changed out of the tux he'd had on earlier for some

kind of political fund-raiser. His “day” suit was baggy and rumpled, and he looked as if he’d been living in it for too long.

Sykes was an okay boss, mostly staying out of their way and letting them do their jobs but providing support when they needed it. She might not agree with how he’d handled Gary’s prosecution, but to be fair, Gary had set himself up for a fall when he’d landed that punch. With Sykes standing no more than ten feet away that night, Gary might as well have handed him an engraved invitation to arrest him. The hotheaded idiot.

Sykes settled his large frame heavily against the edge of her desk. “I’m hearing rumors about the fishermen,” he said without preamble. “That whole community is tense—they’re hiding something.”

Lucy sneaked a peek at Ivar, who wore a surprised frown. She’d heard hints of something big going down, but she hadn’t heard about any connection to the fishermen. And she had yet to discover anything concrete. So far, the only people talking were a couple of small-time junkies who were trying to bargain their way into their next fix.

What surprised her was that the rumors had made it up to Sykes’ level—few locals felt comfortable confiding in him.

“I’m making you the primary on the investigation,” Sykes informed her. “See what you can dig up.”

She hesitated, taken aback. She was the rookie detective on the force, so surely, this assignment should go to Clint Jackson or one of the other, more experienced detectives. Besides, this didn’t feel like a solid investigation—at least, not yet. “I don’t know if that’s warranted, Chief. Why don’t I do some unofficial poking around and—”

“What I’m hearing indicates otherwise,” Sykes interrupted. “You may not want to believe that your friends might be involved in anything illegal, McGuire, but my sources say they are.”

“They’re decent folks, just trying to make a living,” she said quietly.

“Yeah, and until the government makes good on its buyout promise, that living is damn poor. I need you to use your contacts within the community to find out what they’re up to. We don’t want this thing exploding in our faces.”

She glanced at Ivar again, to see his reaction. He was still frowning. So maybe that was what this was all about—the fact that her contacts with the fishermen were better than Sykes’.

Before she could frame a suitable response, Joanne poked her head into the room. “Chief—”

“Not now, Joanne,” Sykes said over his shoulder, then stood. “Something’s going down, I can feel it. Take Ivar with you, question the fishermen. Get results.”

“*Chief!*”

“Dammit, Joanne! *What?*”

Michael Chapman was driving east on Irving Avenue, only a block from his new home, when the two-way radio crackled to life. He eased his foot off the accelerator and listened intently.

Swearing, he cranked the steering wheel hard, pulling a U-turn in the middle of the street and throwing Zeke across the back seat. He stomped on the gas, searching for a through street that would take him down to the waterfront.

For one stunned moment, Kaz simply stared at the roaring inferno. Then she threw herself at the gate, jerking it back and forth. “*Gary!*”

The flames leapt higher.

Backing up, she vaulted, hitting the top half of the gate with enough momentum to

drag herself over, then ran down the ramp.

“*Gary!*” She glanced around for someone, anyone. The docks were deserted.

“*Fire!*”

The entire deck of the trawler was burning now, flames roaring off the bow and around the winch, aft of the wheelhouse. She strained to catch a glimpse of her brother, but all she could see silhouetted against the orange glow were the boat’s mast and boom. A gust of wind shifted the flames toward her, and she fell back from the searing heat, flinging an arm up to protect her eyes.

“Gary!” she tried again.

The wind switched again, propelling the flames toward their other trawler, the *Kasmira B*. Kaz took advantage, leaping onto the *Anna Marie*’s deck. Flipping open the nearest seat cover, she reached for the fire extinguisher.

Gone.

The flames whipped toward her again, and she dove behind the wall of the wheelhouse.

She pulled herself into a crouch, coughing, then tried to look through the open door to see if the passage to the engine room and galley was clear. Twice she had to pull back.

The boat’s aged timbers crackled. The wall beside her, when she touched it, singed her fingers. She pounded on it with her fist. “*Gary!*”

No answer.

Edging around the corner, she assessed the stairs. Flames were burning down one side of the risers, but they were still partially clear. Pulling the hood of her coat over her head, she dove into the darkness below.

Landing hard on the engine room floor, she rolled onto her stomach, the scabbled on all fours away from the flames that were burning next to the equipment. Inside, the roar

was muted, but the heat was stifling. The timbers overhead hissed in the relative silence. Varnish from the ceiling plopped onto her coat, and thick, black smoke hung in the air.

Sweat poured off her, and a strong metallic flavor coated the inside of her mouth, making her gag. Her face and hands were unbearably hot, and her skin felt as if it was melting. She couldn't see more than a few inches into the smoky gloom.

In desperate need of air, she took a cautious breath. The bitter, chemical odor of hot carpet assaulted her. She crawled through the galley door. More flames, though smaller, ran in a line across the floor and were hungrily eating at the galley wall. With one hand stretched out in front of her, she crawled toward the forecastle where the berths were.

“Gary!”

The timbers overhead hissed and groaned in the silence.

Kaz stood hunched over, then felt blindly along the berths. She tripped over something, landing hard on her hands and knees, then got back up.

Dizzy.

She shook her head. She had to keep going.

There.

Her hand touched a boot, then clung to a jeans-clad leg. Sobbing, she shook him.

He didn't move.

Yanking hard on his jacket, she managed to roll him. He fell heavily onto the floor, wedged on his side against the storage locker. She couldn't budge him, and she seemed to be moving in slow motion.

No. Can't black out.

Gripping the heels of his boots, she threw her weight backward. He slid a few inches toward the stairs. She sank onto her knees beside him, head hanging, ears roaring.

Hands grabbed her from behind and yanked her to her feet. He floated out of the

haze above her, an apparition in a black oxygen mask, black coat with yellow stripes, and boots. When he pulled off his facemask, she saw that it was the new guy.

...Chapman, that was his name.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” he yelled.

No.

She heard a roar and looked up. Blue flames streamed across the ceiling from the engine room, reaching for her. Chapman dropped beside her, dragging her down, and covered her face with his arms. “Hang tight, they’ll hose it down.” He brought his face close to hers, pushing his mask over her mouth, and she gulped the oxygen greedily. Water rained down, scalding her scalp. She heard someone whimper and realized that it must be her.

Water began to fill the cabin—she was lying in several inches of it. *Gary’s facedown in this.* She shoved at Chapman, hard.

He grunted and shifted sideways, and then rolled her with him, pulling her out of the stream of the hose. She pointed toward Gary. “My brother,” she managed, but her voice broke.

“...cave-in! Move it!” He pulled her to her feet and dragged her toward the stairs.

Kaz fought him, but he simply wrapped an arm around her middle and walked backwards, hauling her with him. She rammed her elbow into his solar plexus, and he slumped forward, his grip loosening.

Staggering toward the berths, she fell over Gary’s body. She heard Chapman swear, but then he seemed to catch on. He ran a hand along both berths next to her, then knelt and hauled Gary up over his shoulder. Above him, the ceiling sagged with a splintering *crack.*

Taking hold of her arm, he threw her toward the stairs. “Dammit, *move.*”

He propelled her up the stairs and through the door as burning timbers fell behind them, showering them in roiling sparks.

He didn't let go of her until they were off the boat and several yards away. She dropped to her knees on the dock, coughing and retching. Firemen raced past them, dragging hoses.

Chapman laid her brother down several feet away, ripped off one of his gloves, and felt for a pulse. Then pulled back an eyelid.

She crawled toward Gary. *No, no, no.*

Behind her, the rest of the deck collapsed. Sparks flew on the night wind, and from the adjacent dock, the sea lions barked excitedly.

Before she could reach Gary, Chapman pushed up his mask and threw out an arm to block her. She shoved it aside.

He turned then and gripped her shoulders, hard. His face was grim. "I'm sorry. He didn't make it."

She sobbed, pushing at him with both hands. "I have to go to him—" She froze, staring over his shoulder.

The man lying on the dock wasn't her brother. It was Ken Lundquist, their crewman.