



SHIVER  
ME  
TIMBERS

HOT & HAUNTED

CASSIE MINT

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Shiver Me Timbers

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One

Ellie



“**O**ne at a time, please. Form a line, folks! There’s plenty of room on board, no need to push.” Tapping my pen against the clipboard, I scan the list of names and check off people as they wobble past to the bench seats.

The deck rocks beneath me, teetering as tonight’s crowd files onboard. They’re all wide eyed and jittery, all out-of-towners who can’t decide whether they’re thrilled or petrified at the thought of finding ghosts. Overhead, stars twinkle against a lilac sky, and the sun bleeds red as it sinks below the horizon.

We’ve got a full boat tonight. We get full tours *most* nights, because Duncan and I don’t mess around. Our shipwreck tour is the best in Belladonna Bay, simple as that.

We know all the places to go. We know the ghostly spots, the patches of sea where the temperature drops and the surface churns for no apparent reason. We know the secret route through the jagged rocks to the haunted lighthouse, and we know when to cut the motor so you can hear invisible voices wail on the wind.

A five star average rating. That's us. And that experience starts now, with Duncan up front giving his captain's safety talk with that deep, gravelly voice, the wind tugging his dark hair.

Leaning back against the starboard railing, I let my clipboard dangle for a moment and enjoy the view. I'm only human, okay? And there are so few times when I can openly stare at this man.

And it's no wonder we're always fully booked. I mean, come on. Duncan Matlock is a walking work of art—by one of those maritime painters who always paints great big ships with billowing sails, and grizzled admirals. One of *those*.

Because Duncan is weathered and tanned, with silver threading his temples and a sun-bleached white flare in his dark beard. There are lines at the corners of his eyes from always squinting into the sun, and his strong hands are covered in nicks and calluses. When you get close, he smells like peppermint.

I love when we get close.

His shoulders are broad, his chest strong beneath that blue flannel shirt as it flaps in the wind. He's tall and sturdy, and he never says much at all—at least not to anyone but me. With everyone else, he's a grunter.

Duncan Matlock is a fine whiskey. That's what I'm saying.

Too bad he's my business partner... and my dead dad's best friend. I couldn't pick a more hopeless crush if I tried.

“Life jackets are in the boxes under your seats. There are lifeboats with plenty of room for everyone, and in the event of an emergency...”

I tune out the safety spiel, and watch Duncan's mouth move. Watch his chest rise and fall with every breath, so steady and confident. The wind roves all over him, ruffling his hair, tugging on his clothes, and I'm so freaking

jealous that it gets to touch him like that. I'd give anything to explore that man.

"Ready, Ellie?"

There's a long pause, and I jolt when I realize Duncan's talking to me. The crowd have all turned to face me, heads swiveling as one, and a warm blush crawls over my cheeks. All around us, boats clink and bob in the marina.

Caught ogling the captain. So embarrassing.

"Aye, sir," I call, hamming it up for the crowds, and they laugh and whisper together, turning back to face the front.

Only Duncan watches me for a beat longer, one dark eyebrow raised. Then he ducks inside to start the motor, and the *Ellie May* rumbles to life beneath us.

We're off.

And if I can keep my eyes off the captain, this tour will go just fine.

\* \* \*

I don't remember the first time I had tingly feelings around my dad's best friend. It feels eternal, like trying to remember the first time I experienced rain. But it must have been when I was a teenager, suddenly slapped in the face by hormones and all too aware of the *men* around me, with their deep voices and squared wrists and in-jokes.

I'd never noticed a person's forearms before, and there I was: suddenly surrounded by them. *Strong* forearms, too, corded with muscle and dusted with dark hair, because Dad had a fishing boat, and everyone in the marina wore rolled sleeves. They made me feel all squirmy. It was a lot to take in.

Back then, I barely knew which way was up. My own body was becoming alien, sprouting new curves and stubbly hairs in strange places, and my mood could rise and plummet without reason in the space of five minutes.

I hated my dad and loved him in equal measure, though I couldn't say why. God, I regret those teenage tantrums now. I'd give anything for five more minutes with my dad.

But back then, even as my teenage moods were running rampant, I knew instinctively that Duncan Matlock was a safe harbor. Of all my dad's friends, he's the one I liked best.

Sometimes, I'd turn up at the marina after school and Dad wouldn't be back for hours yet. It was just me, surrounded by all those forearms, dizzied by the hormonal cocktail swilling in my brain. I'd wander up and down the marina, scuffing my shoes against the wooden jetty boards, listening to the boats clink and ropes creak. Counting the minutes until my dad got back from sea.

But Duncan would call me over. He'd set me up with a folding chair on the jetty beside his boat—he had a different boat back then, though I forget what it was called—and give me a flask of hot chocolate and a blanket if it was cold, then order me to start my homework already.

If it rained, he put me under cover in the wheelhouse, though he always stayed out on deck getting wet.

If it was sunny, he'd set me up in the shade.

He was my knight in flannel shirts. Is it any wonder I imprinted on that man? Is it any wonder that my crush on him went deeper than any other, boring into my very bones?

And is it any wonder that years later, after my dad died, there was only one person I wanted to be around, and it was Duncan Matlock?



He took me in, even though I was nineteen—an adult by then, fully responsible for myself. But Duncan rented me a room in his house, and started this tour business with me on his boat, and gave me safety. Security. Love.

Not the kind of love I want from him, maybe, but love all the same.

There's a lot at risk if I push him too far. I need to remember that.

\* \* \*

“There's a pod of common dolphins on the left, folks.”

The crowd shoot to their feet at Duncan's words, trying to see over each other's heads, and the closest ones rush to press against the rail. Out in the water, sleek gray bodies zip back and forth, dancing in the current churned up by the boat. The dolphins keep pace easily, rolling over to show their paler bellies, their fins breaking the surface when they come up to breathe.

I don't rush over to see. These customers paid good money for this tour, and I won't go hogging a prime spot. Besides, I've got my own special view to contemplate as I chew on my thumbnail, staring at the back of the captain's dark head.

See, the problem with all this restraint is that I *know* Duncan likes me too. In *that* way, I mean. A romantic way. He's not half as subtle as he thinks he is, with those lingering glances he gives me sometimes when we're alone at his kitchen table, a muscle flexing in his strong jaw. Nor with the look of sheer longing he gets when he tucks my curly red hair behind my ear.

I've heard the way Duncan's breath catches when I brush past too close on the boat. I've watched him get all pissy when another man dares to flirt with me in the town bar.

And I can read, for god's sake. I see my own name splashed across the side of his boat every day, lapped by the waves: *Ellie May*. This man is as subtle as a rock.

“Good crowd tonight,” Duncan says when I wedge in the wheelhouse beside him. He squints out at the horizon, one hand resting on the wheel. We're cutting through the water, still as a mirror beneath the moon, and our tour group out there is buzzing with excitement, all whispers and gasps and tugged sleeves.

There's nothing ghostly to see yet. But there will be, soon enough.

We're gonna scare the pants off these mofos.

“Lighthouse?” I ask. “Or the pirate caves?”

There's only time for one showstopper destination on each tour, so we mix it up. Keep it fresh. For our own entertainment, if nothing else—plus I like to think the ghosts appreciate the spontaneity. God knows I wouldn't want people gawping at *me* every single night without a break.

“The northern wreck, then the caves. They'll echo well on a still night like this.” Navy blue eyes flick to me, then away. A scarred thumb drums on the steering wheel. “You alright, Ellie?”

Um. “Yeah?”

“Because earlier...” Duncan trails off, frowning at the controls. Yeah, earlier I made a tit out of myself in front of everyone, staring at this man like he's the second coming. What about it? It wasn't the first time, and it surely won't be the last.

I can't help it. He draws my eye. When Duncan's around, he's all I see.

And he may be okay with pretending there's nothing between us, that we're colleagues and friends, nothing more, but with every day that passes, I get more exhausted with all the pretense. I feel like I'm living a lie.

So the sigh that gusts out of me is practically dredged from the seabed. Duncan glances at me, alarmed.

And shoot, he's so tall and broad and *unavoidable* in this cramped space. Every breath I draw into my lungs is tinged with peppermint. Each rustle of his clothes makes the tiny hairs on my arms stand on end.

Those eyes on me... I can *feel* them, somehow. It's a physical caress.

The only one I'll ever have from this man.

"Your thingy is blinking," I say, pointing at the controls, because I can't stand this tension for another second longer. My throat is so tight, I can barely get the words out.

"Oh." Duncan turns back to his work, flipping switches and pressing buttons. The flashing stops. "Right."

Our elbows brush. We both hold our breath.

The stars glitter.

"Two minutes," Duncan says, right as I blurt, "Well, I'd better get back out there."

Yeah. I stumble out of the wheelhouse, my face on fire, so grateful for the cool wind on deck.

No point lingering in there, hoping for something that will never happen—and no point letting this sour mood get me down.

There's a lot to be thankful for. I'm very lucky, all in all.

And right now, I've got tourists to spook.

## Two

# Duncan



**E**llie is always a sight to behold when she leads these tours. On land, she's bright and funny and warm and sweet—a ball of sunshine wrapped in those knitted dresses she likes to wear. But on the tours, it's on another level. On the tours... Ellie is *theatrical*.

She flounces up and down the deck, telling the grisly tale of the northern shipwreck, the wind lifting her wild red hair. In her long green skirt and black top, draped with scarves and necklaces, Ellie looks like a fortune teller from a traveling fair.

The fingerless lace gloves are a nice touch, too. What would those feel like on my bare skin?

“Rumor has it,” Ellie says, her voice dropping low. Everyone on board leans close, staring at her with wide eyes. “Rumor has it that this ship carried two fleeing lovers, both desperate to marry. They couldn't be together if they stayed in Belladonna Bay, so they stowed on board this ship... and met their doom.”

Ellie's eyes flick to me, then away. Leaning against the wheelhouse door frame, I glower at her with shameless hunger.

These tours are the only real chance I get to stare at this young woman. If I watched her like this on land, the whole town would explode with gossip—and good thing, too.

Lord knows *something* needs to keep me in line—and I'm ashamed to say that Pete's memory only does half a job these days.

His daughter was always beautiful. But she was always a kid in my mind, you know? All scabby knees and then teenage moods. Someone to watch over, but that's all.

It never really occurred to me that Ellie would one day be something *more*; that she'd grow into an adult woman, and the mere sight of her would take me out at the knees.

Blowing out a long breath, I scrub a palm down my beard.

Shouldn't think this way. Shouldn't let myself.

Out beyond the boat, shards of salt-crusted shipwreck spear through the calm water. Most of the detail has gone, eaten away by sun and salt over the years, but the ship's skeleton is stark enough. Looming above us, it casts a jagged silhouette against the stars.

Back where no one can see, I tap my knuckles against the wheelhouse wall. The *Ellie May* will never meet such a fate, I swear.

"They searched for survivors for three days and three nights," Ellie says, the crowd glued to her every word. "Rescue boats came from all along the coastline, all volunteers with great big searchlights, scanning the water for any people left alive."

An adolescent boy near the railing groans and shudders. The elderly woman beside him smiles and pats his forearm with a gnarled hand.

“And now, late at night, when the stars come out... the shipwreck remembers.” Ellie glances at me, and that’s my cue. Reaching back, I kill the engine and everything with it—including the wheelhouse lights.

And the crowd shrieks, because—

*Darkness.*

It’s sudden. All-encompassing. There are a few yelps from the tourists, then storms of giggles, but Ellie and I wait patiently for everyone to settle back down. It’s not so bad after a minute or two—the moon is bright overhead, and there’s a silvery glow to see by. We wait in silence, rocking gently in the swell. People fidget.

Then—

“There!” A woman points, her cry echoing across the deck, but she needn’t yell, really. We all see it. It’s impossible to miss.

Ghostly searchlights trail across the shipwreck, shadows skittering in their wake, even though there are no lamps here to cast those beams.

Whispers start on the edge of hearing, then get louder and louder, until it’s like a hornet’s nest buzzing in my skull. Ellie winces, watching the light display, but *I watch her.*

I always watch her. Ghosts are interesting enough, but as far as I’m concerned... there’s nothing more miraculous than Ellie.

“There you have it,” she says when the angry whispers fade away. The tourists sit in stunned silence, their expressions awed in the light of the moon. “Now, who’s ready for some pirate caves?”

The whoops and cheers echo across the quiet waters. Grinning, I duck back into the wheelhouse and power up the engine.

\* \* \*

“Holy shit,” Ellie crows, flicking through the stack of cash tips, her fingers quick in their lacy gloves. “We made bank tonight. Thank you, pirate ghosts.”

Our footsteps echo on the cobblestones as we walk home from the harbor, the stone damp and shining from the ocean mist. The street lamps are hazy and golden, dotted along the path home, and the bars and pubs of Belladonna Bay are still thrumming with life at this hour, music bleeding out onto the street and punctuated by loud bursts of laughter.

We could go in somewhere. Could join the revelry. We do sometimes, when my will power feels good and strong and I’m sure I can trust myself around Ellie, even in dark corners and with booze loosening my tongue.

Tonight is not one of those nights. When Ellie glances at our favorite pub, The Albatross, then smiles hopefully at me... I shake my head.

“Better get back,” is all I say.

*Better get a grip* is more like it.

Belladonna Bay is all wet slate roofs and tangled alleyways; hanging wooden shop signs that creak in the damp, salty breeze, and the scent of roasted beef from the carvery.

But Christ, why can’t I stop staring at Ellie tonight? We’re walking through town, but I barely see any of it, my boots scuffing against the cobblestones. I’m lucky I don’t trip and hit the deck.

My eyes feel so dry, it’s like I haven’t blinked for hours. Too busy gazing at my beautiful young business partner, entranced. My fingers keep itching, desperate to touch her scarves or play with her curly hair, and there’s a sour knot of tension in my belly. This is awful.

But you know what it was? It was that moment earlier—when Ellie got caught staring at me. When she was frozen on the boat, heedless of the crowd, looking at me with such longing.

I swear, sometimes Ellie stares at me like she wants to eat me alive. But that's Stockholm Syndrome for you. I took her in when she was lost and vulnerable; I made her feel safe again. Of course she's got mixed up feelings about me, but it's not *real*.

I mean, look at us. I'm forty years old, and she's twenty two. I am—I *was*—her dad's best friend, and I'm old and tired and made hard by life. Meanwhile, she's a beam of sunshine.

This pairing does not make sense. *I* see that, even if Ellie's temporarily confused.

She'd regret me. And I couldn't bear that.

"The shipwreck ghosts were extra buzzy tonight," Ellie says.

I grunt.

"Kinda agitated. Maybe we should leave them alone for a few days?"

I grunt again. "Sure."

Makes sense. If I died with my star-crossed love, I'd hope that we'd at least get some damn privacy in the afterlife. I'd be hissing for everyone to go away, too.

Thoughts of an eternity with Ellie prod at my brain. I grit my teeth and shake them off.

"I'm hungry," she says idly, tucking our tips away in one of the many secret pockets of her flouncy skirt. The fabric swishes against her legs as we walk. "Are you hungry? We could order a pizza. Or stop at that falafel place on the corner?"

There's a long pause where Ellie waits for an answer, but I'm too busy



staring at the curve of her cheek to notice. She clears her throat. “Duncan. Do you want food?”

Ah, hell.

What I *want* is five minutes’ peace away from these feelings; these corrosive cravings that keep chewing me up from the inside. I want to look at Ellie and see *just* a business partner. *Just* Pete’s grown daughter. *Just* a lodger. Not my dream woman in a weird beaded shawl.

“Falafel sounds good,” I rasp.

Fat chance of that.

## Three

# Ellie



“**I**’ve got it. This is gonna blow your tiny minds.”

My friend Penny barges into the kitchen, her arms laden with folded maps and old leather bound books. Her face is flushed, and her brown hair is tied in a messy topknot.

Penny’s husband Arthur follows her inside, arms wrapped around a sleeping newborn baby in a sling, smiling apologetically. There’s nothing visible of the baby except a tuft of black hair.

Duncan pushes back his seat and strides to the coffee maker, wordlessly setting it up. Bless him, but he never complains when I stuff his house full of my friends—though by this point, they’re his friends too, despite his best surly efforts. How did he ever get close with my dad when all he ever does is grunt?

“What have you found?” I ask.

We met Penny and Arthur six months ago when they came on one of our tours—but they weren’t the usual wide-eyed type. Arthur’s a famous horror

author with gothic black hair and wire-framed glasses, used to doing field research in spooky locations. And Penny...

Well, Penny grew up in Belladonna Bay, but somehow made it into her twenties without ever seeing a ghost. By the time it happened for her, she was *desperate*. And by desperate, I mean she'd researched the paranormal phenomena in this area like a police detective. She's a freaking gold mine.

"Have you ever heard of the Wailing Woman?" Arthur asks.

"Ellie sings in the shower sometimes," Duncan mutters at the coffee cups.

"No." I roll my eyes at Duncan's back. His shoulder blades shift beneath his gray shirt as he makes the drinks, the coffee spoon clinking against china. "Who is that?"

"Nobody knows for sure." Penny unfolds a crumbly old paper map, spreading it over the kitchen table. It's the Belladonna Bay coastline, though the hand-drawn town is much smaller. "But there are stories."

Um. There are? I thought we'd heard of every single ghost within a five mile radius. "What stories?"

"Oh my god." Penny's glare could burn wood to ash. She plants both fists on the table and looms over it like a furious, bedraggled commander. "How many times do I have to tell you, Ellie May? Listen to the goddamn *Hot & Haunted* podcast. It's the best thing ever. The only paranormal podcast worth listening to. But besides that, she's doing a whole season on Belladonna Bay right now."

"She is?"

"Mhm."

"She's *here*? And she's a big deal?"

"Yes."

I ponder that for a moment, then turn to Duncan. He's already watching

me, even as he hands a coffee cup to Arthur. “Maybe we should send her free tickets to the tour.”

He nods. “Good idea.”

But Penny slaps her forehead. “Nooo! Stop ruining this, you two! Stop making it some boring businessy thing!”

“We’re boring businessy people,” Duncan says, handing me a mug.

Penny smacks the table. “You are *not*. I’ve been on your freaking tour. You two—you’re serious about it. Your tour is legit. You’re romantics, and you can’t hide it!”

Suddenly Duncan and I will look anywhere except at each other. I sip my coffee too fast, wincing as it burns my tongue, and stare around the kitchen. It’s neat and scrubbed clean, with takeout menus pinned to the refrigerator and a fresh bouquet of daisies on the island counter. The blinds are butter yellow.

“Just listen to the Wailing Woman episode,” Arthur tells me, keeping the peace. He looks like a history professor in his button-down red shirt and dark pants, slender and scholarly, but when he tugs Penny close, she melts into his side with a sigh and offers me an apologetic smile. Just a few words from her husband, and all that agitation is gone. They both stroke their baby’s back, murmuring sweet nothings.

It’s painful to witness. Because... I want that.

I want that so badly.

Not with *Arthur*, obviously, and not baby Poe in particular, though he is cute. He has a real mop of soft, black hair.

But... that kinship. The love and support. Someone who understands me better than I know myself, and who knows how to stop a meltdown with a few murmured words. Someone who loves me, flaws and all. A family.

I will not look at Duncan.

I will not look at Duncan.

*Romantics*. Did Penny really have to call us that?

“Fine.” I clear my throat, then nod at the map. “I’ll listen to it. So show us where to find her, then we’ll go see the Wailing Woman tomorrow. We’ve got a free night, right, Duncan?”

Finally, I risk a glimpse—then feel my heart sink. Because Duncan glowers at the kitchen tiles, completely unaffected by the raw display of love we just witnessed. If anything, he looks like he’d rather climb out the window than spend another ten minutes in this conversation.

You know, this man *does* things to my insides with his steady presence and his rumbly voice, and yet he’s always untouchable for me. Always out of reach.

“Yes.” Navy eyes flick toward me, then skate away. “We’ll go see the Wailing Woman tomorrow.”

Said like a man walking to the gallows. Jeez Louise. And maybe a boat trip alone isn’t such a good idea, not with everything so fraught between us, but—

“Then it’s settled,” Penny says, poring over the map. She smooths the creases tenderly, the paper crackling under her palms. “She’ll be worth it, I swear.”

She’d better be—or that ghost won’t be the only one yelling into the void.

\* \* \*

One day later, I could strangle Penny for her choice of ghost. The Wailing Woman? Seriously?

“Did you listen to that podcast?” Duncan asks as we shove away from the jetty, waves sloshing up the side of the boat. We move in unison, coiling ropes and dragging buoys back inside, our movements a well choreographed dance. We’re always quickest setting off when there’s no one else on board and we don’t have to pick our way around scattered handbags and backpacks.

“Yup.” Penny was right. The podcast is awesome, but I’m in no mood to appreciate that fact; in fact I’m sourer than a lemon as I follow Duncan to the steering wheel. Since there are no tourists to impress tonight, I’ve swapped out the shawls and maxi skirt for faded jeans and one of my dad’s old sweatshirts. It’s sage green with a tiny embroidered pink shrimp. “Did you?”

There’s a beat. A seagull cackles overhead.

“Yeah,” Duncan says.

Oh, I’ll murder that girl. She may be a friend, but she is criminally oblivious. And Duncan listened to the episode too? He noticed the parallels? Just perfect.

The silence is awkward as we leave the harbor, weaving around a kayaking group and a clump of floating crab pots. Gray seals yawn at us from a rocky outcrop, slumped over the seaweed piles like giant floppy sausages. As we pass, the air smells like stinky fish breath, and the seals huff and stare.

Honestly, I don’t mind the smell. Anything that screams “This is not romantic!” is just fine by me tonight.

The map Penny showed us yesterday was way too old to navigate by, but we’ve come up with rough coordinates—enough to start with, then we’ll coast around the area and see what we find. As Duncan sets our course, frowning between the pink horizon and his controls, I chew on the inside of my cheek and watch *him*.

He’s tense tonight. Tenser than usual, I mean, because there’s always

something rigid about Duncan Matlock. Something held in check. But tonight, his shoulders are rounded even though the breeze is unseasonably warm, and his forehead is etched with a frown. The air feels taut around us.

“Thanks for this,” I say, even though I know better than to fill Duncan’s silences with chatter.

He grunts, twitches the steering wheel, and squints out at the water.

Yup. I should know better, but I can’t seem to stop. “A new ghost would be good for the tour. Keep things from getting stale.”

Another grunt.

Right.

The waves are tinted bronze by the setting sun, and the breeze tastes like salt, but I can’t enjoy it. I suck on my teeth. Usually, I find Duncan’s long silences relaxing, but tonight... I’m too on edge. “And it’ll be good for *us*. We’re in a rut, don’t you think?”

Duncan glances at me, then looks away. His thumb drums on the wheel—his signature nervous twitch. “A rut?”

“Yes.”

It’s *my* turn to draw out an awkward silence, and I revel in it. Oh, the power. Pressing my lips together, I watch this unbearable grump out of the corner of my eye. How does he like it?

Duncan scrubs a palm down his beard. He tugs at his shirt collar and clears his throat, shifting weight from foot to foot. Flips a switch on his controls, then quickly flips it back when a tiny bulb flashes.

“What rut?” Duncan says at last, biting the words out. “You’re bored?”

Oh, I’m not bored. Bored is the last thing I feel around this man. It’s more like I’m constantly, *painfully* on edge.

It’s all the hoping and longing. Craving something that will never come.

Holding my breath and praying that today will be different; that Duncan will finally admit the feelings between us; that we'll do more than hover near each other and yearn.

I'm twenty three, for god's sake. We're both adults, both free and unclaimed. Why oh why am I living the life of a sexually frustrated nun?

My dad is long gone. He'll never be able to give us his blessing. But he'd want us to be happy, surely—even if he ranted and raged about it at first, eventually he'd have come around.

“Not bored,” I say sweetly, leaning against the wall. There's barely room in this glorified cubby for the two of us, but I always jam in here alongside Duncan. It's a law of nature, or something. If this man is close, I must get closer. “But I wouldn't mind shaking things up a bit.”

“Shaking things up,” Duncan repeats flatly. From the way he says it, you'd think I just suggested that we streak naked through the town.

The boat skims along the water, cutting through the warm September air.

And something about that dismissive tone, and the standoffish curve of his shoulders—something about his whole *vibe* tonight snaps the last thread of my control. Narrowing my eyes, I turn and glare at him head-on.

“Yes.” My voice is clipped; my jaw is tense. Oh god, what am I doing? “I want to shake things up. Is that so hard to imagine? Or have you been set in your ways for too long, Duncan Matlock?”

Set in his pattern of ignoring me. *Dismissing* me. Not overall—lord knows this man is a good business partner and friend—but ignoring what is so clearly between us.

It wouldn't be wrong. Why does he act like it's so wrong?

It *hurts* me. Can't he see that?

Duncan jolts at my tone, and the look he gives me is half irritation, half



fear. “Don’t go there, Ellie May. Don’t say things that can’t be unsaid.”

But what difference does it make whether we say them out loud or not? We both *feel* it. We both know there’s something more here. Are we supposed to pretend we’re just business partners forever?

And... what then? Grow old apart? Date different people; torture ourselves in that way? Or spend our lives together like this: in a pale imitation of what could have been?

Holy crap on a cracker, I am tired of this strain. I’m weary of bearing this weight. Can’t he meet me halfway?

“You know,” I say, and you wouldn’t know from my jokey voice that my insides are sloshing with despair, “words can’t hurt anyone. Not these words, anyway. Shall we try them? We can say them together.”

“Ellie,” Duncan warns.

And I know I should stop, but I’ve been swept up in the current of my own desperation. I can’t bear this going unsaid for another minute longer.

What’s that saying? *The truth will set you free.*

When I walk my fingertips up the outside of his arm, Duncan’s muscles are tense beneath his sleeve. He puffs out a breath, but he doesn’t move away. “Ellie.”

“I want you, Duncan Matlock.” Maybe if I hide behind this sing-songy voice, it won’t hurt as much if this goes wrong. “Even though you’re old and grumpy and you’re being a giant repressed weenie right now. I want you more than anything in the whole world.”

Duncan’s arm is rock hard, quivering with tension beneath my fingertips.

“Stop it,” he says.

My heart lurches, and bile fills my throat. *Stop it?* That’s it? That’s all he has to say?

“I’m not joking,” I whisper, in case that wasn’t clear.

“Neither am I.” Duncan’s knuckles are white where he grips the steering wheel. He glares straight ahead, like his head is fused on his neck. Like he can’t bear to look at me.

The floor drops away beneath me, and I sway on my feet, pained and dazed.

Well. There’s my answer, I guess. Sucking down a queasy breath, I stumble out of the wheelhouse.

## Four

# Duncan



**E**llie spends the rest of the journey sitting at the back of the boat. She looks so sad every time I glance back there, huddled against the wind, arms wrapped around herself like that makeshift hug is the only thing holding her together.

It kills me to see her like that—feels like a red hot spoon digging around my chest—but I use every last ounce of my self control to stay planted in the wheelhouse.

Someone has to steer this boat. And besides, I did the right thing.

Didn't I?

The moon looms overhead, waxy and accusing. It's getting dark now, with only a pale smudge of light along the horizon. The stars glitter between clumps of cloud.

The water is dark and choppy. No dancing pod of dolphins to escort us tonight—only this salty breeze, getting colder by the minute, and the terrible silence stretching between us. My jaw aches from gritting my teeth.

Ellie didn't mean it. As we approach our starting coordinates, the boat slowing to a crawl, I remind myself of that fact for the hundredth time. She didn't mean what she said.

Oh, she may *think* she meant it. She may believe it with all her heart, but like I said before: Stockholm Syndrome. Coming to live with me has messed with Ellie's mind.

There's no other possible explanation. I'm old enough to be her father, for Christ's sake, and besides, Ellie is... light. Goodness. All things warm and sweet and fun, while I'm... not.

I'm really not. I'm a sour old bastard.

And I may want her more than my next breath, I may choke out her name between gritted teeth every night, but I'll never do something she might come to regret.

Killing the engine, I leave the wheelhouse lights on and step out onto deck. Ellie's a huddled shadow at the stern.

The sudden quiet is deafening. There's only the slosh of water against the hull, the unsteady thump of my heart, and the ragged breaths I pull into my lungs.

*I want you more than anything in the whole world.* That's what she said. The words are seared onto my brain, playing over and over in a torturous loop, her sweet voice ragged with desperation.

And... I could've handled that better. *Should've* handled that better, because I didn't even say thank you, did I? And even if those feelings aren't real, they're still flattering; still more than I could ever hope for. Ellie and me? That'd be like Red Riding Hood shacking up with the grizzled old wolf.

Clearing my throat, I scrub my palms on my jeans and walk along the deck to join Ellie. She seems smaller than she did fifteen minutes ago—like a

deflated balloon. The life has gone out of her, and I hate that.

The wind toys with her red curls. She's retreated inside Pete's old sweatshirt, hands bunched in the sleeves and chin tucked in the neckline.

Throat tight, I sit on the bench at her side. It's colder than I expect, the chill seeping through my pants, and the air tastes like vinegar and brine.

"We're here," I say, stating the obvious.

Ellie is silent.

"I thought we'd wait in the quiet for a while, then if there are no signs here, we'll move along."

Ellie sniffs. I wait for more, but that's all.

Christ, but this is killing me. I see what she means whenever she teases that I don't carry my half of the conversation, because this silence is pressing on my chest.

"That podcast said that the first sign of the Wailing Woman is mostly, uh..."

"Wailing."

"Right," I say, so relieved that Ellie has said a single word. "So if we just sit and listen, hopefully we'll hear her. Then we'll see what else she does."

Ellie shrugs beside me, her sleeve brushing mine. Seeing her in Pete's old clothes earlier was a kick in the gut, but the pain of that shock has dulled now.

The sweatshirt looks good on her in the moonlight. Comfy. Right.

"I have snacks," I say, because apparently I can't stop fucking talking tonight. Can't stop filling the strained air. What is wrong with me? "So let me know if you get hungry. Brought you a flask of hot chocolate, too."

A sniff. "Thanks." The word is so quiet, I almost miss it.

"And blankets," I go on desperately, inwardly kicking myself for this

verbal diarrhea. “There are blankets if you get cold. And I think one of your old beanies is stuffed away in the wheelhouse somewhere—”

“I know,” Ellie says, a little louder now. Her words are clipped, and her shoulders are stiff beside mine. “I’ve been on this boat a million times, Duncan.”

True enough. But I can’t stand her pained silence; can’t just leave her here hunched over and sad and not *do* something, so apparently I’m a late blooming chatterbox after forty years of barely any practice. Who knew making conversation is such an art? I should’ve made more of an effort before now.

“We could let down a hydrophone,” I say.

The wind whispers through Ellie’s hair. Her soft, wild hair that dances on the breeze and tickles my shoulder.

“Hm?” She’s barely listening.

“In case you can hear her underwater. The ghost. We could let down a hydrophone.”

“Oh. Sure.”

My knee bounces nervously. I scratch my jaw, casting around for the magic combination of words that will take us back to the way things were before that conversation in the wheelhouse.

We can go back. Right?

“I met Arthur at the library this morning. We looked up the Wailing Woman in the town archives, and—”

“Duncan?”

My throat is thick. It takes effort to swallow. “Yeah, sweetheart?”

Ellie sighs. “I don’t care. I just... want to get this over with.”

Ah, shit. *No.*

Ellie always cares. She's one of those bright, shining people: one of those precious souls who cares too much about everything and everyone. I've teased her for that enthusiasm in the past, ribbed her for it, but I couldn't stand if that warmth was snuffed out.

"Of course you care." Maybe if I declare it, it will be so.

Ellie scoffs and folds her arms over her chest. "Try me."

And Ellie being angry isn't good, but it's better than two minutes ago when she wilted with sadness. So why not push my luck?

I nudge her with my shoulder. "You be careful, Ellie May. The Wailing Woman might hear you talking shit, and what then?"

Another loud huff, and Ellie throws up her hands. "Maybe then she'll give us an earful, and we can call it a night and I'll finally get off this boat, Duncan. Away from *you*."

The boat creaks as it rocks in the swell, and cold wind flaps my shirt against my chest.

Stunned, I sit with that for a moment. Let those bitter words sink in, sea water flecking our cheeks and stiffening my beard.

It *hurts*. Pain radiates through my chest, pulsing out in dark waves, throbbing all the way through my body to my fingertips. But I deserved that—what she said *and* the way she said it. After the way I handled things earlier, I deserved that and worse.

But... hell. She wants to get away from this boat? Away from *me*? Ellie may as well shove me overboard and be done with it.

"Listen." It's a battle, but I keep my voice steady. "About earlier, in the wheelhouse. About what you said. I know you're disappointed—"

"I'm *disappointed* when the falafel place is out of olives, Duncan. Hearing the love of my life doesn't want me back is a lot worse."

The love of her life? Stupid, obnoxious hope floods my chest, brimming and golden, but I stamp it down. Now is not the damn time to get off course.

Stockholm Syndrome.

Focus.

“You’re twenty three,” I say. “You can’t possibly declare me the love of your life when you’ve barely lived.”

Ellie inhales sharply through her nose, then lunges to her feet and starts pacing up and down, shaking out her sweatshirt sleeves. I blink up at her as she begins to rant.

“Oh, you are so patronizing, Duncan Matlock. Seriously, I might feed you to the sharks. As if you have any right to dictate how I feel! As if you even have the first clue! You might not like these feelings, you might think they’re silly and worthless, but that doesn’t make them any less true.”

Silly? *Worthless*? It’s my turn to lurch off the bench, my legs wobblier on the teetering deck than they have been in decades. Stars slide past overhead, and seawater sucks at the boat’s hull, and Ellie’s arm feels so small when I grip it, tugging her to a halt.

She’s warm. Soft and squishy and *right*. She glares up at me, her face pale and taut in the moonlight.

“Of course I fucking like it.” I squeeze her gently, anger prickling up my neck, and I shouldn’t loom over her like this, shouldn’t breathe so hard or get so close, but now that I’m here I can’t seem to step back. “That’s the problem, Ellie, because one of us needs to see sense. You know how wrong this looks: you and me. You know what folks will think. I’m nearly twice your age, and I’m bitter and harsh, and if your dad knew the sordid things I think about you sometimes—”

Ellie wrenches her arm free, and she’s panting now too. Twin spots of



color burn on her round cheeks. “Oh, don’t play that card with me. We have no idea how my dad would feel about this, and we never will. And since when did you care what anyone thinks, huh? There’s only one question that matters, Duncan: do you want me or not?”

Do I want her?

Do I *want* her?

Ellie is like air to me. Like the ocean.

Natural. Essential. *Home*.

“You know the answer to that.” I’m growling through my teeth, turning beastly beneath the stars. “You already fucking know. Don’t push me, sweetheart.”

“Then say it.” Ellie tilts her chin up, eyes sparking with challenge. “Say it, you stubborn ass.”

You know what? The hell with this.

I’ll do her one better. I’ll *show* her.

Ellie squeaks as I crowd her against the rail without warning, penning her in on both sides. And the water is dark and choppy out there, the gathering wind lashing angrily at our cheeks, but I barely notice it. Barely see anything beyond the startled face blinking up at me.

Blood simmering, I press our bodies together. Seal us tight, pinning her to the rail without mercy.

And I’ve thought of this so many times. Pictured it.

Longed for it.

She’s *soft*. Ellie’s squishy beneath that sweatshirt, she’s got so much give, and Christ knows I’ve caught a thousand glimpses of her shape, knew she’d sprouted some real curves, but I’ve never let myself *feel* them like this. Molded to my chest, her body warm and welcoming.

Ellie smells like soap and freshly baked cookies. Her heat soaks into my front.

She's heaven. I could die happy here.

Ducking my face to her throat, I breathe her in like a starving man—and I know things are slipping out of control, but I can't help myself.

“Are you happy?” I grit out, lips moving against her neck. Her throbbing pulse tickles my lower lip, and Christ, we can never go back from this. What have I done? “Is this what you wanted, Ellie?”

“Not yet.” Pale hands grip my shirt, tugging me even closer. Her heartbeat knocks against mine, rattling along extra fast. “So keep going.”

Screwing my eyes shut, I plunge into darkness. There's nothing to guide me now except her soft hair tickling my neck, and my mouth against her skin, and our bodies pressed so tightly together that we're merging into one. The raw hunger for her is a knife in my gut.

Pete would hate this if he saw. He'd kick my ass to kingdom come—or he'd try, at any rate. At a foot shorter than me, he'd struggle.

But Ellie's right. Pete's gone. And though I miss that bastard every day, miss my best friend like a hole in my chest... it's nothing compared to how I'd feel if I lost his daughter.

My gut swoops. Should I be ashamed of that thought? I don't even know. Everything's jumbled up and so messy, so wrong and so right, and now that I've tasted the salty-sweetness of Ellie's skin, now that I've felt her shudder and sigh against me, I can't go back.

Can never go back. I screw my eyes shut even tighter, until white spots float in the darkness.

Maybe I am weak—or maybe I've been stubborn for too long. Who knows? But maybe I'll let Ellie be the judge. She's the only one I care about,

really.

Snarling, I lick a stripe up her neck and wedge her legs apart with my thigh. She parts for me so easily, like the tide breaking over a rock.

“*Duncan.*” Ellie yanks on my shirt and arches her body against mine. Each whimper is music to my clamoring ears. “Oh my god. Oh, shit. This is happening. Don’t you dare stop, okay? If you stop, I’ll brain you with the anchor.”

She’s feverish and eager, babbling in my ear. We move together in the dark, rubbing and panting, all bared teeth and gripped hair, and my thoughts have spun clean out of my head.

I’m pure instinct. Pure body. Nothing but primal urges.

*Mine.*

This young woman is mine. Need to get inside her; need to rut.

Ellie makes a soft sound as I squeeze her hair in my fist. She lets me tug her head back, complying so sweetly; she tilts her chin to give me better access to her perfect throat. And Christ knows what I’d do to her, how rough I’d be, except lightning forks across the night sky. The air sizzles with static, and my ears pop as the boat lights die, plunging us into pitch darkness.

“Jesus!”

The wind builds and howls, wrenching at our clothes, and the *Ellie May* is tossed on sudden waves. The deck plummets beneath us, then tilts to one side, like we’re riding a roller coaster up and down the sea, clinging to the rail and to each other with white-knuckled hands.

All around us, high pitched and horribly out of tune, a ghostly woman wails.

## Five

# Ellie



I swear to god, if this ghost cock blocks me with Duncan Matlock, I'll exorcise the whole of Belladonna Bay. The town, the harbor, even the pirate caves—I'll burn through bushels of revenge sage. No spirit will escape my wrath.

“Ignore her.” Hooking one arm through the rail for balance, I cup the side of Duncan's face, reveling in the soft, wiry feel of his beard beneath my palm. He's never let me touch him like this before—but then again, I've never really tried. “She'll get bored and wail herself out. Continue with what you were doing, please.”

But Duncan's already plucking my hand away and turning to squint at the shadowed wheelhouse, one hand braced against the rail. His expression is impossible to read with nothing but the gloomy moonlight to see by, but it doesn't look good. His forehead is etched with a deep frown.

“Duncan,” I say, wetting my bottom lip. My heart's racing in my chest, and icy sea water sloshes over the rail and showers us in foamy spray. A dazed crab scuttles past my sneaker.

My dad's best friend just licked my bare skin. He panted all over me, so manly and primal and perfect.

But he didn't kiss my mouth yet. Surely it's not over already? What if Duncan changes his mind and never wants to touch me again? What if that was my only chance?

The ghost wails louder, changing key.

"Duncan," I say again.

"Mm?" His shadowed face glances back at me, then away. He sounds distracted—like we weren't just dry humping against the rail. "Sorry, Ellie. I need to fix those lights. If the power's gone completely, we're in trouble."

Embarrassingly late, I remember where we are: at sea in a sudden storm, with the deck tilting beneath our feet. Plunged into darkness, with a ghost throwing a tantrum all around us, and thunder rumbling loud enough to rattle my teeth.

Crap. See, this is why so many horny teenagers die in horror movies. The sex haze takes over, and common sense flies out the window, and then the ax murderer has an easy time of it.

But not tonight, Satan. We're going to live through this nonsense, and then Duncan Matlock is going to ravish me like nature intended.

"Go ahead." I pat the captain's shoulder and shoo him off. "Go on and save the day. I'll follow."

Though it's easier said than done with the boat rocking and rolling in the surf, icy cold waves crashing onto the deck. I grew up on boats, and yet I stagger into three different benches and bang up both hips as I trail after Duncan to the wheelhouse.

He pulls me inside as soon as I reach the doorway, wedging me next to the barely used captain's stool. The wailing sounds different in here, hollow

and further away, warped by the window pane.

“Stay there,” Duncan says. “Hold on to something.” Ten seconds later, after much rummaging and cursing, a life jacket is shoved against my chest. “And put that on.”

Okay, danger aside: I love when he’s bossy. And usually I’d have to hide the fluttery feelings it gives me, usually I’d have to pretend my toes weren’t curling in my sneakers, but tonight I can finally blush freely. I bite my lip against a grin and pull on the boxy red vest. “Yessir.”

With a wry glance at me in the moonlight, Duncan prods at his controls. They’re dead, all lights out. And usually there are back ups, and back ups for the back ups, so for them all to give out at once...

“She’s doing it,” I say.

Duncan grunts in agreement, scrubbing a hand down his face.

“Then there’s nothing to do except wait her out. I mean do ghosts have lungs? How long can she wail for, anyway?”

Duncan sighs, digging the heel of one palm into his eye. “Don’t tempt fate, Ellie May.”

\* \* \*

One hour later, I’ve finally discovered the meaning of the term ‘sea sickness’ firsthand.

Growing up, my dad took me out on his fishing boat as soon as I was old enough to doggy paddle in swim lessons. I’m used to rough waters and teetering decks, used to bad weather at sea, and my stomach is made from cast iron. So I knew people got queasy on boats—but in the same way that I

knew some people are scared of balloons or have a predilection for feet. I understood it rationally, but I couldn't relate.

Now I can. And god, if this ghost does not stop tossing us around soon, I'm going to vomit all over Duncan's shirt. Even he's looking green around the gills, seasoned sailor and all, with a clammy sheen to his forehead as he grips the wheel and glares out at the storm, trying to steer us away from danger without the help of an engine.

"Urghmff," I say, stifling a burp with my sleeve. I'm slumped over the dead panel of controls, wedged in place by the captain's stool, and the window has fogged over from my sickly panting. I have never been less sexy.

This is the worst—and best—night of my life. Will Duncan ever kiss me properly if he sees me vomit? Or will I be forever ruined for him, like a favorite meal that ended in food poisoning?

"Sorry," Duncan mutters, wrenching at the wheel with a curse. "Shit, Ellie, I'm sorry. But I'll get us out of this, I swear."

"We're never—" *burp* "—bringing a tour group to see this hag. Can you imagine the reviews?"

Duncan winces. Outside, the Wailing Woman screams loud enough to pop our ears. Jerk.

"That *Hot & Haunted* episode didn't say she was such a nightmare. She's supposed to be chill!" Swabbing my sweaty forehead with my sleeve, I glare out at the milky glow of the moon. "A heartbroken spirit wailing about her forbidden love. Not throwing a category five hissy fit."

"Fuck," Duncan says with feeling. He leans back against the wheelhouse wall, eyes heavy-lidded as he keeps watch out the window. The moonlight casts a silver pall over his craggy face, and his beard is thick with shadows. The lines at the corners of his eyes are deep.

And he's so handsome. Even now, my churning stomach gives a little somersault, because he *kissed* me out there. Kissed my neck, anyway, and kind of nibbled on my earlobe. You don't do that to a mere business partner.

"You'd think she'd root for us." Maybe I'd be smarter to let this lie, but I can't help it. Duncan ground me against that railing out there, and I'm still reeling. Still flushed and tingling under my clothes. "Didn't she spend her life tragically pining after an older man she couldn't have? A priest, or something? Where's the sisterhood, you know?"

The ghost screams loud enough to rattle the window. Duncan sighs where he's half slumped against the wall. "Don't rile her, Ellie May."

"No, I'm serious." The cramped space tilts as I lift my head, peering out at the soaked, rocking deck. White foam washes over the tourists' benches. "Wait here a second. I'm going to have a word."

"Don't you dare—"

Duncan reaches for me, but I slip through his fingers like an eel. My steps teeter out onto deck, and I shake out my soaked sweatshirt sleeves and peer up at the heavens.

The stars are piercing; the moon is cratered and wild. Cold wind whips my hair against my cheeks, and the deck lists to one side like it's trying to slide me overboard.

"Um," I say, planting my feet and bracing against the rocking. A glance over my shoulder shows Duncan hovering in the wheelhouse doorway, his handsome face taut with worry. His hands are half raised, like he's ready to lunge for me the second I wobble. "Hi, ghost."

Is it my imagination, or does the wailing drop in volume? I blink up at the stars, taken by surprise.

"Uh, okay. You're really listening? Wow."



Should've prepared a speech before I marched out here with nothing more than a life jacket to protect me. You know in the movies, when the main character pulls an amazing speech out of thin air, and saves the day with their eloquence? This won't be like that. I always sucked in English class.

"I, um. I've heard about you." I'm not yelling—barely raising my voice—but the wailing fades even quieter. "I know that you loved a man you couldn't have. I know he was older and forbidden, and you spent your whole life apart, longing for your true love. And I just want to say... man, that sucks."

The *Ellie May* groans as it rocks in the surf, but the swell is gentler now. The wind plays with my hair rather than yanks on it, and the waves have stopped crashing over the rail.

"I can't imagine it. Or I *can*, actually, because that was nearly me. And it still might be me, actually, if you give my guy too much time to overthink things."

Can Duncan hear me saying all this? I'm out in the middle of the deck, but the wailing is a background noise now, and the storm's dying away with each passing second.

Huh. Did the ghost only want to be acknowledged? Has she spent her whole afterlife wailing because no one would freaking listen?

How relatable.

"That's him." My thumb jabs over my shoulder, and a pocket of silence behind me says the captain is definitely listening. "Duncan Matlock. He was my dad's best friend, and now we're business partners. I rent a room in his house, and I've loved him for years. Not gonna lie, it's pretty messy."

The stars pulse and glitter overhead, so huge and mysterious and eternal. The wind swirls all around, like it's listening. Like *she's* listening.

And here I am, so tiny and unimportant to the universe at large, so irrelevant in the grand scheme of things—yet so important to the gruff man behind me.

As long as I'm important to him, I can bear being a temporary bundle of atoms. I can bear anything.

“He loves me too,” I tell her. “He has for a long time, but he’s been a chicken about it.”

Duncan lets out an irritated grunt, but I ignore him.

“And tonight, we finally tip-toed over that line, finally admitted there’s something between us... when you showed up.” I shrug at the moon, smiling weakly. “So you can see why there might have been some name calling. I’m sorry about that.”

The wailing has gone away, replaced by a gentle, harmonic hum. The crashing waves are now barely more than ripples, and the air is so still. Like the Wailing Woman is enthralled.

“The thing is...” I wet my lips and taste salt. From waves or tears? “I’m so close. *We’re* so close. And if we fumble it now... if we ruin this chance to work things out... I’m afraid you won’t be wailing alone in the afterlife. I’ll be right there with you when my time comes, belting out a harmony.”

My fingers twist in my soaked sweatshirt sleeves. Duncan huffs out a quiet laugh, and I bite my lip against a smile before I go on.

“So we’re not trying to be rude, I swear. We’re not trying to ignore the awfulness of your plight, and believe me, I wish things had been different for you, and you got your happy ending. Everyone deserves that. But tonight...”

I take a deep breath.

“Tonight, we’d really, really like to get home and screw each other’s brains out. Life is short, right? I’m sure you understand.”

There's a spluttering noise behind me. Beaming up at the stars, I feel lighter than air, even soaked through with seawater and with a lingering queasiness in my belly. The breeze is warm.

“What do you say?” I ask the stars. “Will you do a girl a favor?”

The hum holds for one final, melodic note... then fades away.

## Six

# Duncan



“**Y**ou are a miracle.” In the middle of the deck, Ellie whoops and punches the air as I watch from the doorway. Her clothes are soaked, clinging to her curves, and her wet curls are wild. “Ellie? Get over here.”

She turns and skips to me, bright-eyed and beaming. The green tinge has gone from her skin, and she’s flushed. Healthy.

Gorgeous. Always so gorgeous.

Without the storm raging around us, the ocean is calm and quiet. Starlight shines on the water’s surface, and puffs of lazy cloud drift across the moon.

Ellie trembles as I wrap her up in my arms. She really meant that speech? She’s really sure about this? About *me*?

It’s undeniable. I can’t fight this anymore, nor do I want to.

Ellie is mine, goddamn it.

“I’m taking this cuddle as a good sign,” she says against my chest, her voice muffled by my shirt. My beard bristles as I rub my chin against her hair. “Though if this is your way of letting me down nicely, my threats from earlier still stand.”

No, I won't let her down.

I'll never push this woman away again. What was I thinking?

I've tasted Ellie's skin on my tongue—and I'm hooked. Maybe it makes me a bad man, maybe I'm more selfish than I privately hoped, but I'm never going back.

Ellie sucks in a sharp breath when I grip her hair again. I tip her head back and tell her again, low and quiet: "Come. Here."

Probably shouldn't boss her around like this. Probably shouldn't take control, slipping into a command role as naturally as I take that helm each morning, but there's no one here to scorn us or say this is wrong.

"She's gone, right?" Hovering my lips an inch above Ellie's, this restraint pains me. It's a physical ache. "The Wailing Woman. Is she gone?"

Plush lips twist. "Well, she's invisible, Duncan. It's hard to tell. But the humming has stopped and the storm has died down, so I'm ninety nine percent sure—"

Good enough for me. Ducking down, I seal my mouth to Ellie's, pressing our bodies together with a groan. Heat spreads over my front, her softness molding to my hard planes.

It's so *right* when we're close like this. The world rocks back onto its axis, and my racing heart settles to a slow, powerful thump.

And if the Wailing Woman gets an eyeful of the two of us... so be it. It's not like she has Netflix up there to entertain her in the afterlife.

"Christ." My heart booms against my rib cage, and I tear my mouth away to kiss a path down Ellie's throat. Barely got to explore her here earlier; barely had any time at all. "I thought she'd never leave."

"Shh!" Ellie's breath hitches as my teeth scrape her earlobe, and small, greedy hands slip between us and trace down my front. They map my chest,

my stomach... my belt. She yanks on the leather, dragging our hips close. “Don’t be rude! You’ll set her off again.”

“Thought you said she’s gone, Ellie May.” She’d better be. I’m so hard I can’t see straight, and my blood is simmering in my veins. My scarred hands roam hungrily over my girl.

“I said she’s *probably* gone—oh, god. Do that again.”

No fear. Rubbing my cheek against her hair, I pinch her hard nipple through the layers of sodden sweatshirt. Her broken moan is the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard, and I’m gone for her. So gone.

Want to touch Ellie all over. Want to rub my scent on her skin.

Want to suck bruises on her throat and taste between her thighs and feel this angel shudder and moan as she comes on my shaft, over and over, milking me dry. Want her dripping onto the deck.

“So goddamn sweet,” I tell her, baring my teeth against Ellie’s hair as she fumbles my belt undone with a clink. My abs tremble with the effort of holding still and not pouncing on her already.

One lifetime won’t be long enough together. We’ll need an afterlife too. An eternity of making each other moan, as buildings rise and fall and generations come and go, and the town of Belladonna Bay makes its eerie way into the future.

“You deserve a bed,” I grit out, the words pained, as Ellie draws my length out into the cool night air. Her hand is so much smaller than mine, her grip delicate, and as she pumps me gently, I nearly topple forward like a felled tree. “We could wait and do this properly on a bed, Ellie May.”

She snorts, her thumb spreading a bead of moisture over the head of my shaft. Oh, Jesus H. Christ, that feels too good, and I can’t help rocking up

into her grip, hissing between my teeth. “Would you scatter rose petals for me, Duncan? You don’t seem like the type.”

That’s what she thinks. “I’d do anything for you.”

The words come too easily, my low confession spilled to the stars. And Ellie was teasing but I’m deadly serious; she’s smiling but I’m not.

I’d do anything for this girl. Anything.

That was already true before today, but now that she’s mine...

Well, I hope Ellie understands the power she holds, that’s all. Because I may boss her around, may grit out orders and manhandle her the way she likes, but the truth is: I’m wrapped around her pinkie finger. I’m tamed.

“Hold me tighter.” I cover her hand with my own and squeeze, demonstrating. “Yeah. Just like that, sweetheart.”

I will taste her soon. I’ll spread her out on a bed, and yeah, I’ll scatter rose petals if it’ll make her laugh, and I’ll lick my girl until she forgets her own name. We’ll spend the whole night making her howl; we’ll put on the big romantic show. But tonight...

Look, I never claimed to be Prince Charming. And tonight, I need *in*.

Ellie’s breath hitches as I steer her around and lift her onto the captain’s stool. Her waist is warm beneath the damp, clinging sweatshirt, and her feet hook around my legs, urging me close.

She’s panting already, tugging at my clothes.

Heart drumming, I dig through her baggy layers to find her jeans button.

“This okay?” I ask, pulse throbbing in my temples. Ellie nods and lifts her hips as I pop the button, helping me drag the soaked denim down her thighs. The fabric is stiff and clinging, sticking her to bare skin, and she laughs when I growl with frustration.

“Bad night to wear jeans,” she says.

“Bad night to wear *anything*. Fuck, I want you bare, Ellie May. Want you skin to skin, with these hard little nipples dragging over my chest. Bet you’re warmer and sweeter than a freshly baked cake.”

“Do you fuck many cakes?”

Ha. “Behave.” My hand cracks against her bare ass cheek before my brain kicks in, and I pause, palm hot and stinging. Did that cross a line?

But Ellie gasps and moans, squirming against my chest, and her breathy words don’t sound mad. No, they don’t sound mad at all. “Oh my god, Duncan. Do that again.”

If she insists.

My palm cracks against her ass a second time, though this time I linger to rub away the sting. Ellie groans, her pretty face buried in my throat.

Her hips roll where she’s perched on the stool, humping the air, and when I glance down, there’s a wet spot on her pale blue cotton panties.

Nope.

That’s me. I’m cooked.

One glance at that wet spot, and I stop thinking. Hell, I stop breathing. There’s nothing in my brain except white static, nothing driving my body except raw, gnawing hunger, and I barely register Ellie’s pleased hum when I yank her underwear down.

The stool creaks as I shove my way between her thighs, her jeans in a sodden heap on the floor. Ellie’s slick against the head of my shaft, and I rub up and down her slit, feeling her quiver and tremble.

“Do it.” She’s slurring, her cheeks flushed and eyes hazy as they stare between us, watching our bodies slide together. She’s drunk on this already, just like me. “Do it. *Please*. Oh, please, Duncan. I’ve wanted this for so long.”



Me too. Christ, me too. I've pictured this going down a thousand ways; I've lain awake every night trying to imagine how Ellie would taste. The little sounds she'd make as I sunk inside her. Always felt like the devil for thinking of my best friend's daughter this way, but if I *am* damned...

Well. Ellie's worth it.

And with one thumb on her clit, I don't have to wonder anymore. Don't have to conjure up fake sounds in my mind. I can stand here and soak her in: every tremble and whimper and gasp. As I rub her, she starts babbling, slumping forward against my chest.

"Oh, god. Oh, *please*. Keep touching me. Don't stop. If you stop, I'll go mad, Duncan. These *hands*."

I'm not going to stop. A maelstrom couldn't stop me now, nor a whole legion of ghosts.

When I press one finger past her entrance, Ellie's body sucks me deeper, swallowing me to the second knuckle. She's hot and slick, and I saw in and out with my breath held.

A second finger. A second round of babbling, where Ellie begs and squirms and bites down on my shoulder, her sharp little teeth digging through my shirt. She's perfect. My own private miracle.

Finally, I can't wait any longer. She's soft and swollen down there, ready and needy for me, and I'm so hard that it's giving me gut ache. I press forward, notching my shaft against her entrance.

"Ready, sweetheart?"

"Uh-huh."

And... I knew this was probably her first time. From the way Ellie never dated for all these years, never even looking at another man, I figured there was a good chance she was untouched.

Didn't let myself think about it before. It was none of my business, after all, and it's not like it would change how I felt either way. Felt like a pervert just for wondering.

Now, though... I'm sure as sure can be, because her body grips me tighter than a tailored glove as I sink inside her, and Ellie gasps and blinks up at me in pure, startled wonder.

There's so much trust in that look. So much love.

She waited for me. Waited for me to get my head out of my ass and claim my soulmate. I'll never deserve such a gift.

Jaw aching from gritting my teeth, I rock deeper, hands gripping her hips and holding her in place. The stool scrapes an inch over the floor, but the boat is mercifully still after that storm, the ocean flat as a mirror through the fogged up wheelhouse window.

Body thrumming with pent up longing, I thrust all the way inside.

## Seven

# Ellie



**D**uncan Matlock is inside me.

*Duncan Matlock is inside me.*

Splitting me open; stretching me to my seams. He's hard and thick and hot, the world's sweetest intrusion, and I can feel the blood pumping through his shaft. Can feel his every twitch and throb.

He's on edge. From the outside he looks as sternly controlled as ever, face stoic and shoulders tense... but Duncan can't hide the desperate throb of his length inside me. He can't hide the faint tremble of his muscles, his whole body jittery with the effort of holding still.

A sheen of sweat shines on his craggy forehead. Reaching up, I smooth away the line etched between his eyebrows.

“Don't scowl at me when you're popping my cherry, Mr Matlock. It's bad manners.”

He puffs out a strained laugh, eyes crinkling as he smiles. Woof, he's handsome when he smiles. No wonder he doesn't do it often: there would be

fainting fits all through the town. They'd have to pile the bodies at the edge of the sidewalk.

"I'm not scowling at you, Ellie May." His deep voice rumbles right down to my bones. "I'm trying not to blow inside you after a single thrust. Your body... the way you feel, sweetheart..."

I know. I feel it too.

Biting my lip, I rock my hips up.

"Christ," Duncan grits out, squeezing my hips hard enough to bruise. His eyes screw shut. "Wait a second. Just... wait a second. You feel too good when you do that."

Fighting a smile, I do it again. And I've never wielded power like this; have never made a powerful man beg, his strong muscles quivering beneath my palms.

It's heady. Addictive.

Leaning forward, I kiss Duncan's throat below his beard.

"You smell like peppermint," I say against his skin, tilting my hips up again. Humping against him in a slow rhythm, sparks skittering through my veins. My belly tightens, and the backs of my knees are sweaty. "You always smell like peppermint. It's my favorite smell now. I spray it on my pillow at night."

"Ellie," Duncan heaves, still holding my hips in a death grip. His thick length throbs inside me, and he shuffles forward an inch, pressing our needy bodies even closer. "Ellie. Have mercy, you beautiful little witch."

"Nope."

He's breathing harder now, chest rising and falling beneath his shirt, and I'm not the only one grinding us together. Duncan's doing it too, dragging me closer by the hips and stuffing me full, then rocking me back. Full, then back.

The moonlight casts dark shadows over his face, and a tendon stands out in his throat. He's so much bigger than me, filling the wheelhouse with his bulk.

He means this, right? It's not a one time thing?

"If you change your mind," I begin, my voice quavering, "I swear to god —"

"I won't." Duncan's hips snap against mine, like he's punctuating his words. His tone darkens, and a pleased shiver rolls down my spine. "This is final. You're *mine*, Ellie May."

Yes.

That's all I want. To claim this man, and be claimed in turn. 'Til death do us part... and maybe even after then.

"Prove it," I breathe, and Duncan's snarl fills the wheelhouse. He pounds harder between my legs, stool creaking, flesh slapping, and sweat trickles down my spine. My heartbeat thumps between my legs, hot and languid, and my insides twist tighter and tighter, coiling with every punishing stroke across my sensitive spots.

My dad's best friend scowls above me, thrusting into me like a man possessed, his movements rough and choppy. The man who kept me safe for all those years; the man who saved me when the whole world felt dark and cold.

It's raw, the way he fucks me. Primal.

Perfect.

"Mine," he grunts again, shoving one hand between us and rubbing at my clit. I cry out, back arching and toes curling in my soaked sneakers. His strong arms are the only thing keeping me from toppling back onto the floor.

And when I come...

It's like those storms that build for days and days, the air crackling with

electricity, warm and humid. And it drags on and on, everyone eyeing the gathering clouds, until finally, when it feels like the rain will never come—the heavens open, and the storm unleashes its fury.

My body shudders and quakes, lost to the throes. My ears pop for the third time tonight, and I let out a ragged wail.

I clamp down on Duncan's shaft, like I'm trying to keep him inside me forever, and he bellows... then fills me with a warm, sticky flood.

\* \* \*

*Ten months later*

The Belladonna Bay marina is lively at this time of evening, with music drifting from a few tethered boats and bursts of laughter floating up to the pink sky.

Seagulls circle and boats clink. The sun is a burning red ball of fire, sinking below the horizon, and the air smells like brine and sun tan lotion.

In the distance, Duncan weaves across the jetty, a stack of pizza boxes held above his head like the spoils of war. Penny spots him first, whooping and clapping, and little Poe joins in, cackling and flailing in his mama's lap. Beside them both, Arthur beams at his excitable little family, his wire frame glasses practically fogging up with adoration.

They're super cute. A year ago, the sight of that would have given me a pang, where I was happy for my friends but... kinda jealous. Secretly sad.

Not anymore. I've got a whole sexy sea captain to myself, and he is *devoted*. So worth the wait.

"Show off," I yell, though my husband is too far away to hear me yet.

Still, I can't hide the way my heart leaps at the sight of that man—and it's not just because of the pizza. Nor his broad shoulders, clad in a gray shirt, and the thick shadow of his beard.

No: my cheeks flush warm, already stained pink from a full day in the sun, and I wriggle on my bench, legs squeezing together.

Because Duncan joined me in the shower this morning—just slipped into the bathroom without warning, then freaking *dominated* me against those slippery tiles. I've been having flashbacks all day. Losing my train of thought without warning, my body clenching down on nothing, while the pleasant soreness down there makes my blood heat.

...Ahem.

“So how's the writing going?” I ask Arthur, because there's a famous horror author on our boat, damn it, and I *can* make conversation without picturing Duncan's delicious scowl as he shoved two fingers inside me this morning. I absolutely can.

“Ah... it's going well, thank you.” It seems to take Arthur just as much effort to drag his gaze away from his wife to focus on me. He blinks several times, like he's coming out of a trance. “This town comes with a lot of inspiration.”

True. Practically every street corner of Belladonna Bay has some mystery attached. Some eerie rumor or cold patch or mysterious buzzing sounds.

This town is not for the faint of heart, but for those bold enough to live here... well, it never gets dull.

“Pizzaaaaa,” Penny groans as Duncan nears the *Ellie May*, the breeze flapping his shirt against his strong chest. We can smell the hot, savory scent from here.

“You sound like a zombie,” I say.

“A cheese zombie,” Arthur agrees.

“Baby Poe!” I click my fingers at the sticky little angel, pretending like he’s my assistant. “Your dad should write that story. Make a note.”

A storm of wet toddler giggles welcomes Duncan onto the boat. His eyes find me first, roving over me greedily like it’s been days apart instead of minutes. When he winks at me, the corner of his mouth lifting, I die.

He’s *mine*.

So rugged and handsome. So protective and sweet. Rubbing one palm over the bump hidden by my clothes, I feel like I could float up to join the seagulls.

The sexy sea captain. Provider of pizzas and shower-based orgasms. The ultimate catch.

And soon to be the father of my child. Eep!

“Miss me?” Duncan asks under his breath after handing over the boxes. He settles beside me on the bench, his worn jeans clinging lovingly to his thighs.

Did I miss him? Always. Every minute of the day.

But I nudge his shoulder, smiling out at the sunset. “Don’t let it get to your head.”

\* \* \*

Thanks for reading Shiver Me Timbers! I hope you liked it. :)

For another forbidden crush, check out [Dear Diary](#). *It’s been three years since I confessed my love to my English teacher—but my heart still did somersaults today when I saw him at work.*



And for a bonus instalove story, grab your copy of [Ride or Die](#). *She's sweet and innocent—and that's like catnip in this strip club. It's okay, though. I won't let the pretty bartender out of my sight.*

Happy reading!

xxx

# Teaser: Dear Diary

It's him. Mr Finch is in the library—*my* library. Prowling across the lobby like Heathcliff across the moors. He looks exactly the same as he did three years ago, except the lines of his face are a little harder. There are more creases at the corner of his eyes, too, but he's dressed the same as always, with a gray button-down shirt tucked in at his trim waist, the sleeves rolled up his strong forearms.

When he glances at the help desk, Mr Finch jolts with surprise.

I crush the order form I'd been reading in my suddenly sweaty hands.

"...Emma?"

Should I be glad that he recognizes me? That the man who so callously broke my heart remembers my name? I suppose it's less humiliating than being completely forgotten, but right now all I want to do is run and hide.

"Mr Finch," I rasp, my throat so tight. "Um. Hi."

The Grumpy Grandmas are shooting us dirty looks for talking across the lobby, so I should be relieved when my old English teacher walks closer to the desk, dropping his voice. I *should* be.

Mostly, I just want a sinkhole to open up beneath the library and swallow me whole. Goodbye, cruel world.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, a deep scowl etched on his face. Like I'm stalking him or something. Asshole.

I mean, it's been *three freaking years*. And yes, I still think about him all the time. Yes, the mere sight of him has punched all the air from my lungs

and made my nerves tingle. Yes, my body is responding to his closeness even now, a flush crawling up my chest and a low ache settling below my belly button. But I haven't been trailing after him like some desperate weirdo, thank you very much.

Believe me, when my teacher turned me down like that, so cold and dismissive—I heard him. Message received, loud and clear.

Slamming a paperback down on the help desk, I scan it aggressively, drawing a loud beep. This one's already been checked back in, but I need to make a point. "I work here, Mr Finch."

He turns to stone, a dismayed statue in the library lobby, and a petty side of me enjoys it. Yeah, he wants to do his class project here? Well, I was here first, buddy, and I'm an adult now. He can't boss me around or make me feel small.

"Every Friday?"

Dread laces his words. Good.

"Yup." My smile is not warm. "Like clockwork."

Scrubbing a hand down his face, my old English teacher gusts out a sigh. Now that I'm seeing him up close, he looks kind of tired. Not sleepy, but more... worn down by life.

Jeez, he's not *that* old. Mr Finch needs to get a hobby.

"The school schedule is already set." He bites out each word like it pains him. "My class needs to come here. I already confirmed it with your boss."

"Brian," I supply helpfully.

"Yes." Another long breath. "Brian."

Silence stretches between us, heavy and strained. Once upon a time, I couldn't shut up around this man. I chatted his ear off, coming to class early every day so I could tell him all about the books I was reading. And though I

can see now in hindsight that he never returned the gesture—never gave me special treatment or told me anything personal about himself—for a while there I felt so, so comfortable around him.

“Are you going to give me trouble over this, Emma?”

Mr Finch aims his question over my shoulder, his scowl deeper than I’ve ever seen. And that old bruise on my heart, the one I’ve carried around for three years... god, it *aches*. The force of it sways me on my feet.

“No,” I grit out. I don’t trust myself to say anything else. If I do, I’m liable to yell at this massive jerk that I’m twenty one years old, and that *he* came *here*, and the only trouble he risks around me is library late fees. The Grumpy Grandmas would have a field day over such a meltdown.

Mr Finch thinks I still love him? Ha! As if.

I wrap my arms tight around myself, hugging my middle.

“We can reserve tables for you if you send us a headcount. And if you need specific books or other materials ready in advance, you can send us those details by email.”

Mr Finch looks relieved that we’re back on solid ground. When that scowl eases he looks so freaking handsome.

Though honestly, he looks delicious either way. I used to live for this man’s praise, but there’s something electric about his disapproval, too.

“Thank you, Emma.” He pauses. Glances to the side, then back at me. “And listen—”

“You’ll be sharing the space with our seniors’ book club,” I say, cutting him off. Whatever he was about to say, I’m one thousand percent sure I don’t want to hear it. Blame and recrimination? No, thank you. Awkward pity? I’d like that even less. “Your students will need to respect other library users while they’re here. All the usual rules apply.”

Mr Finch's mouth flattens into a line, but he nods. "Of course."

Is this weird for him? Having *me* be the one giving commands? I mean, I'm a library assistant, not an emperor, but still. *I* find this weird.

"It'll be fun." My forced brightness is too loud, too brash, and the book club shushes me. I ignore them, cheeks heating. "Your students will love it. And I'm sure you can handle most of the sessions on your own. I'll be around if you need anything, but you probably—probably won't. Right?"

He nods once, curt and crisp. "Right."

*God.* Some time over the last few years, I forgot the exact shade of those eyes. Deep, vivid green, like a mossy bank, or the depths of a forest glade. Eyes like you've never seen before.

They bore into me, and I'm held captive. Trapped.

Mr Finch opens his mouth, then closes it again. I wait, but he doesn't speak. Shit, what was he going to say? I'm right back where I was three years ago, and I hate it: hanging on this man's every word.

"Good to see you, Emma," he settles on at last, then turns on his heel and strides across the library lobby. A few gray heads from the book club table perk up, watching him go with blatant appreciation. If they keep staring like that, their reading glasses will fog over.

I drop into the help desk chair, my bruised heart hammering against my ribs. All around, the library is filled with the sound of turning pages and creaking chairs; soft footfalls and the *swish, thump* of books being put back on their shelves.

I need to re-shelve the books on the library cart. Need to dust and take down expired notices on the noticeboard. Need to make Brian his four-thirty coffee and check up on the grandmas and generally do my freaking job.

But my legs are wobbly. My temples throb.

Maybe I'll sit here for five minutes first.

\* \* \*

Check out [Dear Diary!](#)

xxx



*Cassie Mint*

# About the Author

Cassie writes outrageous, OTT instalove with tons of sugar and spice. She loves cookie dough, summer barbecues, and her gorgeous cat Missy.

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