

*You're the
One
That I
Want*

a
Christiansen Family
novel

SUSAN MAY
WARREN

Christy Award-winning author

Praise for the Christiansen Family Series

The Wonder of You

“Book five in the Christiansen Family series is as compelling and delightful as its predecessors. . . . Faith, family, and all the complexities of life’s roller-coaster ride can be found in this engaging romance.”

BOOKREPORTER.COM

“The contemporary romances in the Christiansen Family series are drool-worthy, but they have a subtle, edgy realness that adds depth, too. . . . This story was impossible to put down. . . . Get this book for yourself and see why!”

SERENA CHASE, *USA TODAY*

“Warren is truly gifted with her characterization and her ability to write a spiritual message that is organic to the story.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“This novel confronts the importance of honesty and trust in relationships, the devastation that secrets can wreak, and the hope that forgiveness brings. Readers will delight in the continued antics of the Christiansens and revel in the devotion to family, community, and faith that underpins this series.”

RELZ REVIEWZ

Always on My Mind

“The fourth book in Warren’s Christiansen Family series shows this writer’s gift for creating flawed yet redeemable characters. . . . As always, the spiritual message shines and is an integral, purposeful part of the story.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Readers will . . . delight in the romance that unfolds in spite of Casper’s and Raina’s intentions.”

BOOKLIST

“*Always on My Mind* is a beautiful story filled with hope and faith that is captivating and powerful from page 1 to the very end.”

FRESH FICTION

When I Fall in Love

“*When I Fall in Love* is] an exquisite romance. Profoundly touching on the topic of facing fears, this book is a true gem.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Readers who are already enamored of the sprawling Christiansen clan will feel even more connected, while those new to Warren will be brought right into the fold.”

BOOKLIST

“Warren has a knack for creating captivating and relatable characters that pull the reader deep into the story.”

RADIANT LIT

It Had to Be You

“*It Had to Be You* is a sigh-worthy, coming-into-her-own romance highlighting the importance of family, the necessity of faith, and how losing yourself for the right reasons can open your heart to something beautiful.”

SERENA CHASE, *USA TODAY*

“This character-driven tale with a beautiful love story . . . gives excellent spiritual insight and a gorgeously written look at what it means to surrender and let go.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Susan May Warren delivers another beautiful, hope-filled story of faith that makes the reader fall further in love with this captivating and intriguing family. . . . Powerful storytelling gripped me from beginning to end . . . [and] lovable characters ensure that the reader becomes invested in their lives.”

RADIANT LIT

“A gem of a story, threaded with truth and hope, laughter and romance. Susan May Warren brings the Christiansen family to life, as if they might be my family or yours, with her smooth writing and engaging storytelling.”

RACHEL HAUCK, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE WEDDING DRESS*

Take a Chance on Me

“Warren’s new series launch has it all: romance, suspense, and intrigue. It is sure to please her many fans and win her new readers, especially those who enjoy Terri Blackstock.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Warren . . . has crafted an engaging tale of romance, rivalry, and the power of forgiveness.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Warren once again creates a compelling community full of vivid individuals whose anguish and dreams are so real and relatable, readers will long for every character to attain the freedom their hearts desire.”

BOOKLIST

“A compelling story of forgiveness and redemption, *Take a Chance on Me* will have readers taking a chance on each beloved character!”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“Warren’s latest is a touching tale of love discovered and the meaning of family.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

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Finally, yes, the God of heaven, who, as I struggle through every scene, shows up to shower upon me truth and His words on the page. I am overwhelmed by the grace, responsibility, and joy of this calling. Thank You.



My dearest Owen,

From the moment I first held you in my arms, I knew you were destined to leave us and make your own mark on the world. Whether it was your curiosity, your desire to keep up with—and surpass—your brothers, or your insistence that you could do it “by myself,” I knew that the moment I let go of your hand, you would follow your heart into adventure.

Armed with your charming smile and your desire to confront and conquer your challenges, you can become anyone you want to be. You are so much like your older brother Darek—bearing his determination, his focus. And also like Casper, with your thirst to discover something beyond the borders of Evergreen Resort. But unlike them, you also have a zealous, no-holds-barred passion for life. It’s what will propel you into an amazing future, no matter what you do.

However, it will also litter mistakes in your wake. And, I fear, regret. Because a person doesn’t plunge himself into life without the occasional misstep. Without wanting to reel back time and rethink, redo, relive.

It is a normal, expected part of life to make mistakes. But in order to live without the haunting voice of regret, you must learn to forgive yourself. To embrace mercy. To open your eyes and see God in your past and His grace in your future.

Your mistakes don’t define you. Your past doesn’t define

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you. You are not the sum of your bad decisions. You are the decision you make right now. You are the decisions you will make tomorrow.

Most of all, you are an impulsive, valiant, giant-hearted child of God, deeply loved, created to be exactly the person you are.

God has a special place in His heart for messy, passionate, live-out-loud people. The young. The inexperienced. The blindly brave. The ones who dive in, not looking back, believing they can slay giants with a stone.

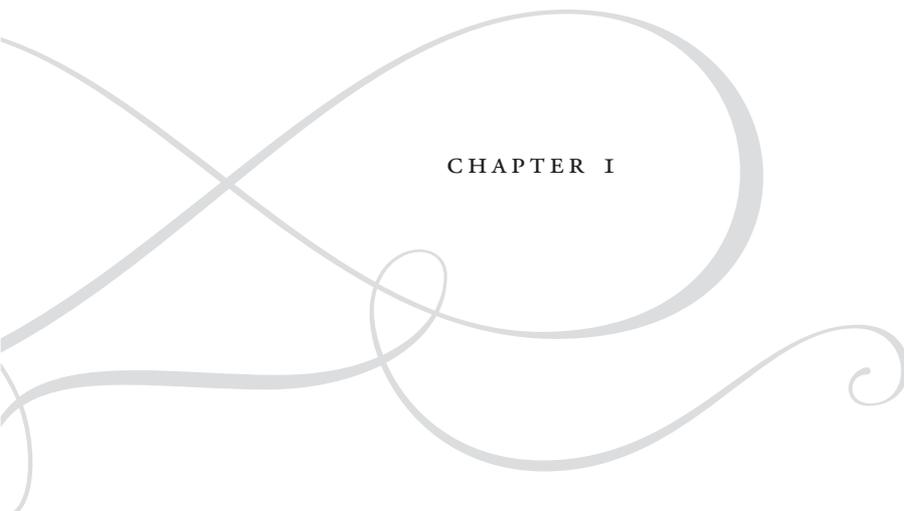
Because God loves faith. The wild belief that yes, everything will work out for our good, according to God's plan, if we simply remember we are safe in His hands.

And this, perhaps, is the gift you bring to us. A life of faith. Of believing big, hoping long, and swan diving into life.

Do not feel guilty for wanting to fly from the nest. You were created to soar.

And I, for one, can't wait to watch.

Your loving mother



CHAPTER I

NO ONE DIED TONIGHT, not if she could help it.

Except Scotty McFlynn could feel tragedy in her bones, just like she could feel the shift in the wind. Instincts—like the kind that directed her to a crab-filled pot o’ gold on the bed of the Bering Sea. Or the kind that told her a storm hedged against the darkening horizon, the sky bruised and bloody as the sun surrendered to the gloomy, fractious night.

Yes, she could taste the doom hovering behind the sleet that hammered the deck of the F/V *Wilhelmina*, now crashing through the rising swells. Freezing waves soaked the 108-foot vessel, tossing frozen boulders across the deck like bowling balls and glazing the surface into a rink of black ice.

She couldn’t shake the pervasive feeling in her gut that tonight someone was going overboard.

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Pellets of ice pinged her face as the boat turned windward. She'd long ago lost the ability to close her fist in her rubberized gloves—a condition fishermen called the claw—and her feet clunked along like granite in her boots. But they had four more pots to drag from the sea, empty, sort, and reset before she could grab a minute of shut-eye, then relieve her father at the helm for the evening watch.

Old Red's last run, and she intended to make it his best. Forty-eight hours until their delivery deadline, and for the first time since his heart attack, they just might meet their quota.

"Where's my bait?" deck boss Juke Hansen bellowed, over the thunder of the waves and the clanging of the crab pot against the hydraulic lift, to the eighteen-year-old greenhorn hauling the bait from the chopper.

Greenie—she'd forgotten his real name—dragged the herring bag and two fat cod on a bait line over to the open pot, climbed inside, and hooked the line to the middle.

Once he climbed out, two more deckhands, Carpie and Owen, closed the trap door, and the lift levered the pot up and over the edge of the boat, dropping it into the sea with an epic splash.

Juke threw in the shot line, the rope uncoiling into the frothy darkness as the trap descended six hundred feet to the seabed. Carpie followed with the toss of a buoy, marking the pot set.

The crew sank back, hiding against the wheelhouse, holding on as Old Red motored the boat into a trough and up the next wave, toward the next buoy along this seven-mile line of pots.

Scotty shot a glance at Owen, the other greenhorn, although he'd run "opies," opilio snow crab, with her father back in January, while she'd been stuck in Homer. He'd stayed at the rail, ready to catch the next pot they reeled in, his bearded face hard against the brutal spray.

If she had a say, she might have kicked him off the boat on day one, when he'd assumed she was their cook.

"A crab boat's no place for a girl." Yeah, she'd walked into that comment dropped to the ship's engineer, Ned Carpenter—Carpie—while they repaired pots on the loading dock.

"First mate, relief skipper, or 'Yes, sir,' will do," Scotty had snapped at Owen.

She'd caught snippets of Carpie's explanation as she stalked toward the wheelhouse. *Part owner. Captain's daughter. Tough as nails.*

You betcha.

But after three weeks of working side by side, watching Owen clean the deck every morning, going at the accumulated ice with a sledge to clear off the ropes as the lethal ocean splintered around him, she'd decided maybe he could stick around.

He worked like a man with something to prove.

And prove himself he had. He looked every inch the crusty crabber with his thick beard, rich with russet highlights to match his curly golden locks that hung nearly to his shoulders, usually tamed by a hand-knit stocking cap. Despite the eye patch that earned him an occasional "Aye, aye, matey," she could admit he didn't exactly send her running when he peeled off his cold-weather gear down to sweatpants, suspenders, and a T-shirt that did just fine outlining all the hard work he put in hauling in eight-hundred-pound pots.

However, hiding behind his yes-sir attitude and that reserved sort of chuckle that held him a step back from the rest of the crew, she recognized a lingering darkness.

She'd bet her badge that he had a story to tell. But she had no desire to resume her detective role quite yet. She'd live and let live, as long as he didn't stir up any trouble.

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Like the kind that ignited, deep inside, when she caught his dark-blue gaze trailing her. In all her years working the crab seasons with her father, never once had she found herself wishing she didn't garb herself as one of the guys. Wearing orange bib overalls, a stained Homer PD gimme cap, no makeup, her dark hair pulled back and unwashed for days, she could pass for a wiry but tough eighteen-year-old boy.

But Old Red wouldn't allow it any other way. Which meant that as one of the guys, she couldn't in the least smile back at Owen, linger in the galley as he read one of her father's worn novels, or even play a game of rummy as the boat pitched around them, weathering a gale.

And after their scheduled delivery only forty-eight hours from now, Owen would walk off the pier, thirty grand in his pocket, and out of her life.

Not that she cared.

Caring only meant she'd eventually get hurt.

"Pot comin' in!" Owen threw out the grappling hook, snagged the buoy line, and dragged it in, water washing over the deck. She guessed the swells were at twenty-plus feet now and hazarded a glance at the wheelhouse, where she knew her father would be fighting to keep the boat righted and directed into the waves.

Owen affixed the shot line to the winch, and Juke began to hoist the pot from the depths. Trailing seagulls cried in the darkness—an omen, maybe—and Scotty shivered as the spray hit her face. Heavy yellow sodium lights from the wheelhouse sent puddles into the inky ocean.

The winch groaned as Carpie and Owen lined up to grab the swinging pot and direct it onto the hydraulic bed.

To survive out here, you gotta have instincts. You gotta know where

the crane is, anticipate which way the pot's going to swing. It's gotta come from inside, in your bones, if you wanna be a crab fisherman.

Old Red's words rang in her ears, remembered from nearly ten years ago when he'd agreed to let her work her first season. She'd broken two fingers, nearly washed overboard, frostbitten her fingertips, and collapsed with fatigue, while Old Red had just stood by, a gleam of challenge in his weathered eyes.

Now she knew why.

Because accidents happened after a long grind, when exhaustion blurred vision, froze reflexes, and she had to hone her instincts if she wanted, someday, to captain her own fishing vessel.

The pot came up dripping, snow crab hanging from the webbing, jammed half-full with pancakes—flat, huge male crab.

Owen grabbed one edge of the pot, guiding it in.

“Yee-haw!” This from Greenie, who had been counting his fortunes like he'd never heard of Kenny Rogers. “Must be more than two hundred crab in there!” He edged the table toward the hydraulic lift as the pot swung in.

“Greenie! Watch out!” Scotty screamed above the roar of the sea, lunging at the kid.

Owen was faster. He kicked the kid hard enough to send him sprawling into Scotty's arms, just as the pot slammed against the table.

An inch from the ghost of Greenie's head.

The kid swore at Owen, untangling himself from Scotty on the icy deck.

Owen ignored him, fighting the pot, the choppy sea, the pitch of the boat. The swell lifted them, slammed them hard into the trough, and the pot unseated, jerked by the winch.

“Owen!”

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“I got it!”

Only he didn't, not with the wave forming behind him, the foamy sea gathering to knock them over. Owen couldn't see it— not with his patched eye. It took instinct and peripheral vision to spot the wave breaking.

The green water would wash him overboard. Four minutes, tops, and he'd perish.

Scotty kicked Greenie away, scrambled to her feet. “Owen, look out!”

He was built like a tree, but she tackled him like a linebacker, breaking his hold on the pot as it jerked up with the swell of the wave.

The pot swung up, then out over the ocean.

Owen slammed against the railing, one arm around Scotty as the freezing water crashed over them. She closed her eyes and hung on. To Owen, to the railing. Anything to get purchase as the boat shuddered, water streaming off the deck. It stole her breath, left her numb, weak. Shaking.

Too aware of Owen's arm tightening around her.

She blinked the water from her eyes as his voice rose over the rush of the waves.

“You okay?”

“I think so. Are you hurt?”

“That pot would have knocked me overboard.”

“Maybe,” she said, pushing away from him.

He grabbed at the pot, now swinging back over the boat, snagged it, and set it on the lift, working fast to secure it, to unhook it from the winch.

Scotty gestured to Greenie, and he shoved the sorting table under the pot as the trap door opened. Fat, flat crab poured onto

the table, writhing, pincers snapping. Greenie and Carpie leaned over, began sorting the larger from the smaller, ineligible crab.

She moved to help but felt a hand on her arm.

“Scotty—” Owen turned her to face him. “Not *maybe*. I *would* be dead right now.”

His blue-eyed gaze had the power to steal her words out from under her. Yes, the man screamed trouble, right here, on the high seas.

She managed a cool shrug. “That’s what shipmates do. Watch each other’s back.”

And she meant it. Because no one died tonight.



That’s what shipmates do.

Scotty’s voice ticked through Owen’s head, a background rhythm as he replayed every second of the way she’d jerked him away from the swinging pot. Saved his miserable life.

And it all funneled down to one raw, unedited truth.

He didn’t want to be just her shipmate. No way, nohow. Because *she* might see herself as one of the crew—or rather the relief skipper, “yes, sir”—but he’d been watching.

Scotty McFlynn had a smile that could light up the darkest Arctic night and a laugh that, rare though it might be, could find his raw places and make him forget his sins, believe in a better tomorrow. She stood just below his chin but somehow seemed taller when she slid into the captain’s chair or emerged on deck to fill in as a deckhand.

He’d probably fallen in love with her that first day, when she’d put him to rights and he realized that he’d finally met a girl who didn’t

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see him for his past or for the magnetic, trouble-on-a-motorcycle aura he'd worn since fleeing the world of professional hockey.

She only saw a drifter, a hard worker, a guy trying to make sense of the cards life dealt him.

For the first time since losing everything, he felt the old ignition inside him, the adrenaline he'd taste before a game, the challenge of going one-on-one against a goalie, and the sense that victory might be right there for the taking, if he reached.

If he named it, he'd call it hope.

But he didn't exactly know what that hope would look like after they got off the ship. A date? Right, he'd ask Scotty McFlynn out for what—dinner? Dancing?

More like big-game hunting.

Or perhaps that's just what she wanted Carpie, Greenie, and Juke to think. Maybe she wore her tough-girl attitude as armor. After all, it couldn't be easy to spend a month with grimy sea dogs desperate for the company of the ladies they left behind.

As if he'd conjured her up, Scotty made her way down the stairs from the wheelhouse into the galley, where the guys sat around the table, tucked onto benches, nursing a bracing sludge Carpie called coffee.

"We've got roughly two hours of sack time before we round back up to the head of the line. We have some weather coming in, and no time to spare, so I suggest you each crawl into your bunk and find your happy place."

She'd probably been up with the skipper—her old man, Red—charting the lines, reading the weather.

Owen watched as Greenie flexed his hands. "I can't close them all the way," the kid said, looking wan and ragged.

An old memory surfaced about practicing so long he could no

longer hold his hockey stick. But Owen took a sip of coffee, shaking the story away. No one knew about his life before he signed on to the F/V *Wilhelmina*, and he meant to keep it that way.

Scotty had shucked off her jacket, wore a sweatshirt and a baseball hat, her long black ponytail trailing out the back. Now she opened the fridge, stared long into it, then finally closed it and headed into her private bunk area, the one concession to having a female on board.

“I can’t wait to get home,” Carpie said, getting up. A polar bear of a man, he wore his white hair long, his beard in a thick white goatee.

Home. The word settled over the crew, and an ache swept through Owen.

“My mom’s already ordered my ticket. Eight hundred bucks, straight from Anchorage to Des Moines,” Greenie said, sounding puny, not at all like the cocky redneck he pretended to be.

Des Moines, just a few hours south of Minnesota. Where Owen should probably go after they docked.

Or maybe he should keep moving. It wasn’t like anyone really missed him after what he’d done.

Juke and Greenie got up, headed to their bunks. Owen dumped the coffee sludge into the sink, then rinsed his cup and set it on the sideboard.

He had turned toward the bunk area when he heard a moan behind him, coming from beyond Scotty’s curtain.

Owen paused, his heart thumping. But he heard it again, short, low, but enough that, without thinking, he swept open the curtain.

Scotty looked up, her eyes wide, frozen in the act of taking off her sweatshirt. She’d pulled her hat off, freeing her thick sable hair to cascade over her shoulder. “What are you doing here?”

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“You’re . . . moaning.” That sounded awkward, and now he wanted to back away before anyone got hurt.

Or maybe not, because he saw the tiniest hint of pain around her eyes. He’d been an athlete long enough to know when someone was hiding an injury.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine.” He stepped into the room. “Shut up and let me help.”

Her mouth tightened into a knot of annoyance, but she let him take the arm of her sweatshirt and pull as she eased out of it.

One of her eyes closed in a wince and she cradled her arm to her body.

Dropping the sweatshirt on the bunk behind her, Owen was aware suddenly of how her T-shirt clung to the curves she hid beneath her bulky layers. “Let me see.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine, so quit saying that and let me see.” He gave the overhead light a tug and illumination splashed over them. He gently took her arm, seeing now where an ugly bruise knotted in her upper arm.

“This happened when we slammed against the rail, didn’t it?”

“It’s no biggie.” She made to pull her arm away, but he pressed his hand over the injury. Her arm radiated heat; his cool hand acted like an ice pack.

“You probably bruised the muscle, maybe even the bone the way the blood is pooling here. You could use some ice and some rest.”

“We have work to do. My father is exhausted, and I told him I’d spell him.” But she didn’t pull her arm away, just let his hand cradle it, cooling the muscle.

She had such soft, smooth skin. And the way she caught her bottom lip in her teeth . . .

Yeah, maybe he should leave because her bunk room seemed to have shrunk around them. In fact, if the boat lurched the wrong direction—

A creak and Owen found himself off-balance as the *Wilhelmina* betrayed him, keeling over with the chop of the ocean. He braced himself on her upper bunk before he pitched into Scotty.

But she'd grabbed ahold of his shirt to keep herself from falling back. His hand left her arm, curled around her waist, caught her up to him.

And in that second, he caught a whiff of her skin, some sweet scent that slammed into him like a sharp check into the boards. Good grief, how long had it been since he'd held a woman in his arms?

He knew exactly how long. Remembered every sordid, regrettable detail. But this was different. *He* was different—or trying to be.

Then the boat rocked back and Scotty fell against him. Owen caught her wrist, helping her right herself. The pulse there thundered, matching his own.

A smile slid up his face. Well, well. So perhaps he should plan dinner . . . maybe even dancing?

Clearly his thoughts showed on his face because she yanked her wrist away. "Get out."

"Scotty—"

"'Yes, sir,' is the right answer."

He didn't know what to name the emotion that shot through him. Frustration? Tenderness? Maybe a combination of both as he tamped down the hot flare of desire. "C'mon, Scotty . . ."

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She untangled herself from his grasp, not looking at him. “Go. Before anyone starts getting ideas.”

His lips tightened. “Yes, *sir*.”

She shot him a look, and he instantly regretted his tone. Owen softened his voice. “At least go easy on that arm. Get some ice on it.”

He might need some himself, actually.

“I’m fine. You just take care of yourself.”

He knew how to do that real well and, frankly, was tired of it.

Owen let the curtain fall behind him, his heart still hammering, pretty sure he should turn around, barge his way back in, and figure out what might be out there for them, if either of them had the guts to reach for it.

But the memory of being that guy before, cajoling his way into a woman’s life, leaving her heart in shambles, tasted raw and sour.

So he stumbled back to his bunk, climbed in, and fought the ever-lingering memory of his brother, his best friend, connecting with a right hook to his face.

A right hook he’d deserved, even if it had taken him nearly a year to admit it.

Owen pulled his sleeping bag over him and huddled in the chill, praying for sleep. Because there, in his dreams, he could make everything right.

He could go home.



“Red, it’s my watch. Give me the helm before you land in the hospital again.”

Scotty stood in the doorway to the wheelhouse, thick with smoke from her father’s flattened pack of Winstons, fatigue a blurry memory after tossing in her bunk for an hour.

Thank you oh so much, Owen Christiansen, for stirring up feelings forbidden on a crab boat, feelings she'd spent a decade learning how to avoid.

Mr. Eye Patch wasn't the first good-looking, muscle-built drifter they'd hired aboard the *Wilhelmina*. Just the first one with manners. And a smile that did crazy things to her pulse.

The way he'd held her arm, soft, like a caress . . . "Pop, really—"

"Not *Pop*, not here." Red tamped out the cigarette in his ash-tray, overflowing now. Evidence of the weather rolling in. Two computer screens lit up the room with Doppler, and over the radio, other crab boats called in positions and updates.

Right. Not *Pop*. She knew better. "You haven't slept in thirty-six hours. Let me skipper, just for an hour."

It felt like arguing with a grizzly, and she treaded around the edges, not wanting to provoke him. He possessed the ability to take her—and any of his crew—down with a string of salty words that could curdle a pirate's blood. And in a raspy, deep-throated voice that sounded like the motor on his low-riding Harley Fat Bob.

"We're heading into a mess. Everything changes when you get weather—I need to stay put. You get some shut-eye—"

"I'm fine, and I've skippered this boat through worse, if you remember."

He shot her a look, and she didn't care that she'd dredged up the past, made him take a look at his pride, his fears. Someone had to keep them both alive. Still, even in that glance, the old man looked haggard, lines drawn down his face, his brown eyes bagged with fatigue. He'd gained weight despite the doctor's orders, a result of Scotty taking over his hands-on duties, maybe, or his onshore diet that consisted too often of the special down at the Moosehead Tavern—wings, chips, and the double-decker jalapeño burger.

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But what did she expect? Red McFlynn had the skin of an old snow crab, tough and impenetrable. He ran his boat with a steel hand, demanding as much from himself as he did his crew.

In fact, he spent more time on deck, hauling in pots, throwing in line, chopping bait, than any skipper she knew, an old-school captain who abided by his rule to know every inch of his boat, the shortcuts of his crew.

Scotty had learned everything she knew about fishing from Old Red. Everything about life, really.

Shoot straight. Pay your debts. Expect no compromise.

Trust few.

And most importantly, no crying.

She had, however, also learned how to wrestle the helm away from his steel-clawed grip.

“We’ll need you later, when the wind’s blowing forty-five and we have thirty-five-foot swells. I can’t hold the boat in that weather.”

A lie because she knew exactly how to sail the *Willie*. Knew exactly how to pilot the single-screw into four-story swells, the delicate dance of throttle and jog stick that feathered a fishing boat into a wave. Knew how to judge the weight, whether the boat was heavy with crab or corky in the water. Knew how to make the waves work for her, instead of fighting them.

She knew not to take a wave on the starboard side, where her guys worked the pots and the lower rail meant a wave could wash them right over. But take too many waves on the port side and it would jerk them off course.

And she knew how to recognize “slack tank,” or partially filled crab tanks, and the dangerous rhythm of water sloshing inside the boat that could roll it over, send it to the bottom.

In short, she understood the delicate physics it took to keep

them alive, swell after swell, in fifty-knot winds, blinding sleet, and the unpredictable roll of the icy black water that had entombed so many of their friends.

She picked up his crumpled pack of Winstons, handed it to him. "I can't sleep anyway, and they'll need me down there if you're right about the weather, so get in your rack and get some sleep. Just an hour. Please."

She added a softness at the end of her sentence, let it linger long enough for Red to sigh.

"Just an hour. Wake me when we reach the tip of the string." He slid off the chair, lumbered into the nearby captain's room, and shut the door. She heard a groan, followed by the creak of the bunk as he settled into it.

One hour to make sure they stayed on course, to batten down the ship in case the gale turned lethal. Scotty took the captain's chair, already checking the weather, the maps. They were moving at 10.3 knots, 1600 RPM, and the radar showed three other ships in their vicinity and moving south, toward port.

Which maybe they should be doing.

She throttled back as the *Wilhelmina* dipped into a trough, not wanting to ram the bow into the crest of the next wave. Or bury the bow in the trough, raising the propeller out of the water.

In her worst nightmares, the boat yawed to one side and breached or even pitchpoled, flipping end over end.

She'd seen it happen once, or rather, been on the rescue end of trying to locate survivors.

She throttled back even more, glancing at Red's cabin. Right now, they'd be safer slowing down to bare steerage and cutting through the waves at forty-five degrees, riding the swells as they tacked their way north. Sure, it might slow their trip, but they'd live.

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Red had already set their course, plugged it into the VMS, and she kept her eyes on the radar, the navigation, a green hue washing the wooden cabin.

"I figured you were at the helm." Carpie edged into the wheelhouse. "The ship slowed, and I don't feel quite so ill."

"I thought you were sleeping."

"Naw. Praying, mostly."

Carpie, always the religious one. Maybe that's why Red kept him on, twenty years now, a fixture on the *Willie*. The connection to whoever might be up there.

"Whatever floats your boat, Carp."

A wave splashed over the bow, jarring the boat, and Scotty wrestled to slow their speed into the trough.

"It's what keeps us all afloat, Scotty. God's with us, always."

"Right. Why don't you get some sleep—"

"Not yet. I got this itch, honey, that says something's going to happen tonight, and I can't let it go down without talking to you."

Ah, no. Their yearly "Jesus loves you" talk. "I'm too old, seen too much to believe in the great Santa Claus in the sky. Save your breath, Carp. Better yet, go preach to Greenie. Or maybe Owen. He seems like he might be carrying around some baggage."

"Something in his eyes, isn't it? Like he's looking over his shoulder." Carpie reached over to grab the ashtray, emptied it in the trash. "There's something okay about that boy, though. I feel it."

The swells seemed to be speeding up, and Scotty checked her instruments. "Waves are at thirty feet."

"I wish we hadn't thrown that last line."

She blew out a breath. "I know Red hasn't said anything, but it's his last run. We need to reach our limit."

Carpie stilled, and she felt his old eyes on her as she continued, “The boat’s in hock after Red’s heart attack. If he doesn’t pull in a decent catch, he’ll never climb out of debt.”

“And you—you’re taking over the *Willie*, right?”

She adjusted the throttle, her gaze on the gauge. “No. I . . . I don’t know.” What could she say, really? She didn’t have the cash to buy the old man out but—

“Please tell me you’re not going back on the job.”

“I know you don’t believe this, but I actually like being a cop.”

“No, you don’t. Not anymore. The shooting changed you.”

“It didn’t change me. Just flushed the glamour from my eyes. Besides, being a cop is all I got. The job and this boat, and I can’t have the boat, so . . .”

“Being a cop nearly killed you, Scotty!”

She glanced at him, past him, toward the galley, where his voice surely echoed. “Take it down a notch, Carp. I just didn’t handle it well.”

“And how could you? You saw your best friend killed in front of your eyes. You had to shoot a family member.”

“Distant cousin. I hardly knew Evan.”

“You knew him well enough to let it shake you. And I get it. Nobody heals from seeing their best friend murdered. Not without God.”

“Again with the religion. I know you mean well, Carp, but I don’t need God’s help. Yeah, I will admit it was rough, that I went down some dark places, but I’m okay. And I don’t need help from a God who hasn’t bothered to show up in my life, like . . . *ever*. So thanks. I’m just fine without God’s help.”

He sighed and she knew it was coming. Braced herself as his low words began.

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“Remind me, but that was you I hauled out of the Moosehead six months ago, hiding the fact that you could barely walk, right?”

“It was just that one time—”

“I know. But in Alaska, once can get you dead. Listen, I know you think you’re fine alone, and yes, you’ve picked yourself up, been cleared to go back to work. But I can’t help but worry, Scotty. You can’t live holding people at arm’s length. We need people.”

“Alone seemed to work okay for Red.”

“Really? You think it’s okay that he can count the sum total of his friends on his closed fist?”

“Enough. You know what being Red’s daughter has taught me? That there is no room for crying. Life happens. People die. There’re no fairy tales or happy endings. It’s the way it is, and if I want to survive, I can’t let people get close enough to hurt me. So yeah, I have a job waiting for me in Anchorage after this run, and I plan on taking it. Now if you’ll excuse me, my job tonight is keeping you and everyone else on this ship alive.”

The boat crested another wave, and this time she throttled down across the back side to beat the next crest.

By the time she topped it, turned the boat to tack her way across the next wave, Carpie had disappeared.

Probably to go pray for her lost soul.



The nudge broke Owen free of the darkness, and he blinked awake.

“Time to work,” Juke said.

Owen glanced at the clock: 8 p.m. It felt like he’d dropped off seconds ago; how had two hours passed? Kicking out of his sleeping bag, he ran his hands over his face, scrubbing away the exhaustion.

He'd been on this ride before—a thirty-six-hour grind hauling in the last of the pots before heading back to Dutch Harbor.

Nothing compared to it—not hours of practice in the juniors, not a heavy workout in the weight room, not even the grimy, sweaty hours he'd spent fighting wildland fires with the Jude County Hotshots.

Carpie handed him a cup of coffee as Owen leaned against the galley doorframe, trying to hold his eyes open.

"I know," Carpie said. "I just got to the good part in my dream. Going home, seeing the wife. One last stretch and I'm kissing dry land."

The waves unseated Owen, and he grabbed the doorframe as his coffee spilled onto his shirt. He bit back a word, made a face. Setting the coffee down, he dragged his T-shirt over his head and unfortunately stood bare-chested as Scotty came down the stairs.

She glanced at him, lingering a moment before she addressed the crew, still wiping sleep from their eyes.

Owen grabbed another shirt from the tangle of clothes in his duffel, this one cold and a little smelly, and pulled it on as she spoke.

"Okay, guys, it's blowing forty-five, sleeting, and getting gnarly out there. The swells are really starting to stack up, and I've decided we're not taking any chances." She carried what looked like a modified survival suit and tossed it at Juke. "Happy birthday, everyone gets a pretty orange suit."

"I'm not wearing this," Juke said. "It's too thick and hard to work in. Can't we just wear our life jackets?"

"It's made to work in. It's just like a dry suit the military wears. Made of neoprene, and it'll keep you dry and warm if you should go in. And it acts as a flotation device. It should keep you above water long enough to be rescued. Red special ordered them—"

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“No, *you* special ordered them,” Carpie said. “And we thank you for it.”

“Speak for yourself,” Juke said.

“I promise you can work in this. Maybe not as fast, but better safe than sorry.”

“I’m already sorry,” Juke said.

“Stuff it, Juke. You go over, you have about thirty seconds before the waves take you out of reach of the boat. Another four minutes and you’re dead. This suit could save your life—at least long enough for us to find you and pull you in. So the right answer is ‘Yes, sir.’”

Owen raised an eyebrow as Scotty picked up another suit and tossed it at him. He caught it. “Yes, sir.”

She didn’t spare him a look. “Listen, we’ve only had two overboards on the *Wilhelmina* in twenty years. Both were from rough weather and deckhands taking chances. Not today.”

Greenie took his suit without argument. Carpie had already begun to work his on.

“Let’s not kid ourselves. No one is getting rescued if they go in the drink,” Juke said. “You go in, you die.”

Greenie looked up, eyes wide.

“No one is going over,” Owen said and glanced at Scotty with a frown.

She drew in a breath. “No one is going over.”

“I have kids at home, and I plan on not only living through this, but getting paid,” Carpie said as he zipped up the suit. He shoved his feet into his boots, pulled the hood over his gimme cap. “It’s time to fish.”

Owen zipped his suit and headed outside, noticing how Scotty had vanished into her bunk to squeeze into her suit. Probably so

he wouldn't hear her moan in pain, which only fueled a small knot of frustration inside him.

Two hours of sleep hadn't erased the memory of her fitting, ever so perfectly, in his arms.

If only she weren't so stubborn. Impossible. Bossy.

He emerged to a world of chaos on the deck, the boat tossed in a frothy sea with forty-foot waves. The sorting table jerked against its lashings, the riggings white with ice. The boat pitched into a trough, then crested to the top and splashed down again, the water sheeting over the bow onto them.

"We're supposed to fish in this?" Greenie yelled above the gale wind.

"Let's just get it done!" Juke said and climbed up to man the crane as they pulled the pots in.

Scotty joined them topside, dressed in head-to-toe orange. She signaled to the wheelhouse, and Old Red's voice boomed from the speaker. "Last string. Let's get these pots in and go home!"

As Owen grabbed the grappling hook and swung it out to snag the buoy line, the word hung in his mind.

Home.

He caught the rope, hauled in the line, and attached it to the winch, his face against the spitting ocean spray, a surge of adrenaline firing through him.

Yeah, home. To see if he could face his mistakes, repair the damage of his impulsive actions.

The pot emerged, dripping, bulging with crab. The winch lifted it and Owen reached out with Carpie to pull it in.

They worked it onto the lift, and Owen unhooked the winch as Carpie opened the trap.

A hundred opies, as big as Frisbees, spilled onto the sorting

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table. “Woo-hoo!” Greenie shouted just as the boat dipped into another trough.

Owen grabbed the rail to keep from ramming into it.

“Let’s get these in the well!” Scotty said, the wind taking her voice. She leaned over the table.

The next wave hit the boat like a hammer, crashing down, the vessel shuddering as icy water engulfed the deck. Shards of foamy ice fell like an avalanche, the wave scooping up everything in its path.

The force of this one slammed Owen against the railing, raking pain across his chest. Then the crest sucked him under, dragging him across the deck, rolling him like the ice chunks spilling over the edge.

He flailed, fighting for purchase, and found it on the edge of the lift, one hand on the pot. He worked his hand into the netting and held on against the surge.

Then, suddenly, the pot broke free and started sliding back toward the ocean.

Dragging Owen over the lift, his hand entangled in the netting.

No! Not like this! He writhed, bracing his legs on the lift, shaking his hand, straining to stop the rush—

His hand broke free and he tumbled back hard as the pot slid into the sea. He gulped icy breaths, hearing only the thunder of his heartbeat, the roar of the waves.

The bitter edge of regret cut through him. He shouldn’t be here. Not anymore. Time to think about his life, his future.

“Help!”

The voice jerked Owen up. He rolled over, and his gaze landed on Greenie, wedged against the hopper and the live well.

Carpie lay on his back under the table, blood dripping from his chin.

“Juke!” Owen yelled.

“Over here!” He clung to the drag anchor.

Owen pulled himself up, began to scramble toward Greenie. That’s when he heard the words, riding the wind—from Juke or Carpie, he didn’t know, but they turned him cold.

“I think I saw Scotty go over!”

No. A quick scan of the deck—Carp, Greenie, Juke. No Scotty.

“Scotty!” Owen ran to the rail and held on, shaking away the spray in his face.

He scanned the turbulent water, the frothy darkness, and then—“There!” He made out her neoprene orange suit bobbing just inside the puddle of light. “Scotty! Hang on!”

“Is everyone all right?” Red called from the wheelhouse through the PA system.

“Alarm! Man overboard!” Juke’s voice. “Throw out a life raft!”

Owen didn’t wait. He had a leg over the edge when Carpie shouted, “Owen!”

But he didn’t listen, launching himself overboard and into the sea.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

HAVE YOU EVER MADE A TERRIBLE MISTAKE? Or worse, sinned big, deliberately or not? I have. There are moments in my life that I look back on with a terrific shudder and think . . . *Who was I, and how could I have done that?*

Our first response—at least mine—is to run. Maybe not physically, like Owen, but definitely to flee from the pain of our failures. Of disappointing those we love. Of seeing ourselves in the mirror and wondering who we are.

We run from the guilt. From the truth. From God . . . and especially from forgiveness. Because we look at ourselves honestly and, like Peter in Luke 5:8, say, “Oh, Lord, please leave me—I’m too much of a sinner to be around you.”

Faced with such truth, we see only that. A sinner. Unredeemable. Unable to accept anything but condemnation.

But God will not allow us to stay in that place. He is a pursuer, and even as we push Him away, He says, “*You are not alone. If you will allow Me, I will fix this.*”

The words are beautiful—and yet brutal because even the touch of grace is a living ember, and we are reluctant to grasp

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hold, to bring it to ourselves, to bear the fiery cleansing. Easier to endure is the self-flogging, the shame, the guilt. Because that, we know we deserve.

It was from this place that I launched out on Owen's journey. From the first, Owen knows he is wretched. He is fully aware of his sins and the destruction in his wake but is unable to face it or fix it. Even after he realizes his folly and begins the crawl back to faith, it is more words and hope than reality.

Owen sees grace but hasn't accepted it.

In his estimation, he owed God everything. And yes, he could agree that in the face of his sins, grace felt a bit too overwhelming. It almost seemed easier to live like Scotty—alone, un beholden to God.

Because a God who dispensed grace was a God a person couldn't bargain with.

Except perhaps that was the point. God didn't want to bargain.

See, grace is free, but without our ability to bargain for our freedom, we are left wondering exactly what we have to give. More, even when we step under the mantle of grace, it feels too heavy upon our shoulders.

Like Owen, it could be that we've been prodigals so long, we can't see any other visage in the mirror. The question becomes *Who am I beyond the prodigal?*

We are the redeemed. The forgiven. The sons and daughters of the King.

Suddenly we can rise, look forward into a new dawn, glorious and rose gold, full of promise. And it is this view that changes

everything. Because what are we to do with the unblemished future? As Pastor Dan says:

“I warn you, once you embrace Christ, you too become a rule breaker. Because a life committed to God requires us to live uncomfortably. Inconveniently. Accountably. Bravely. Transparently. Vulnerably.”

We are the bold, the fishermen, the warriors of Christ, going forth to tell the world the truth of grace. Of redemption. Of second chances and fresh starts and happy endings.

As John Christiansen would say, “Some of God’s best players were His imperfect, broken prodigals.”

When I conceived this series, I wanted a story about real people dealing with real issues of faith and family. I didn’t want to shy away from the mistakes but to tell a story about a family that faces its share of darkness . . . and discovers a God who is standing at the doorway—even more, launching out in relentless pursuit with the goal of bringing us home.

Thank you for reading the Christiansen Family series. I pray that you, too, have heard the call of grace, let it into your heart, and found your way home.

Grace to you!

Susan May Warren