



You're the One that I want

Christiansen Family Book 6: OWEN



FOR PREVIEW ONLY
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Chapter 1

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 flurries that hammered the deck of the F/V *Wilhelmina*, now crashing through the rising swells. Icy waves soaked the 108-foot vessel, tossing frozen boulders across the deck like bowling balls and glazing the deck into a rink of black ice.

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

Sleet pinged her face as the boat turned windward. She'd long ago lost the ability to close her fist under 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.

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 the buoy, marking the pot set.

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

Scottie 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 stood 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 the tail end 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 clean 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.

Except, 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-knitted stocking cap. And, 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 step back into her detective role quite yet. She’d live and let live, as long as he didn’t stir up any trouble.

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 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, frostbit her fingertips, and collapsed with fatigue, and 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!” Scottie screamed above the roar of the sea, lunging at the kid.

Owen was faster. He kicked the kid away, hard enough to send him sprawling into Scottie’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!”

“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, pinchers snapping. Greenie and Carpie leaned over, began sorting the males from the females, the larger from the smaller, ineligible crab.

She turned 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 right 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.