

SAILING AT SUNSET

CINDI MADSEN

DANAЕ STOPPED JUST SHORT OF the wooden planks and pivoted to face him. The clouds behind her had turned more purple than pink, their rippled reflections gleaming across the surface of the water, until the entire place glittered as much as Danae's dress, earrings, shoes, and purse. "Tonight was fun. Thank you for being my escort."

"I agree, and you're welcome," Josh said. He stepped closer, eradicating the foot or so of space between them. "I just realized I never told you how beautiful you look, and that's completely unacceptable, because *wow*."

In the dim light, he could barely make out the pink that rose to her cheeks, but the slight smile and way she shyly dipped her chin was a dead giveaway. "Thank you. As I told you when we left the ship, you also look very nice. I'd go so far as to say handsome."

She sunk her teeth into her lower lip, and just like that, his nerves calmed, like the sea before the storm. If he held up a microphone to his heart, however, it'd sound like thunder, one clap after another, nothing placid about it. The entire walk along the shore had felt like a dream, as if he had one foot in the real world and one foot in fairyland.

With Danae standing in front of him, her hand still

curled inside his, there was no doubt in his mind that luck existed. Tonight, he was feeling extremely lucky.

“Talking about my dad and his superstitions brought back a lot of good memories.” Danae tipped back her head and blinked at the enormous sky overhead. There were certain places in the world where the sky seemed bigger, and near the ocean was one of them. Partially because away from populous cities, there weren’t as many lights and skyscrapers to interrupt the view. “One of the other things that always stuck with me were his lessons on the stars. Whenever we sailed at night, or even walking or driving somewhere, my dad would ask me to find Polaris.

“When I was two or three, I’d tell him I found it, only to point at a plane. Or a streetlight.” A soft laugh escaped, the exquisite sound hanging the air between them. “He’d always kindly correct me and turn me in the right direction. He often warned me that if I set my sights on the wrong star, I’d find myself going in the wrong direction.”

The first time she’d mentioned her father, she’d used a different, slightly disappointed tone. Tonight there was a fondness and a bit of that childlike wonder that people lost far too early, thanks to the bumps that came along with life.

Josh tightened his grip on her hand, affection and attraction melding and strengthening her elemental pull. “Even before my sailing days, I always had a fascination with finding the North Star, too.”

Danae’s grin widened, and speaking of stars, it felt as if he’d been suffused with stardust. “I guess I just exchanged the actual stars for stickers.”

“Hey, a gold star’s a gold star as far as I’m concerned.”

With a sigh, she tilted her head toward the wooden planked walkway. “I suppose we should make our way back to the ship.” From the sound of it, she was as reluctant to end the evening as he was.

As they stepped onto the wharf, Danae nudged him toward the middle. “I’m always wary of piers that don’t have fences or rails. I feel like I’ll suddenly trip and fall into the water.”

“Some of us like a little danger,” he teased. “Or perhaps it just makes it easier to fish off the sides.”

“Big surprise, Mr. Improviser doesn’t want guidelines or rails, even if they make him safer. Let me guess, getting knocked off and ending up going for a lovely swim would only feed your spontaneous nature.”

He burst out laughing. “Not quite. When it comes to swimming, I’m all for planning—at a minimum, five minutes in advance. Enough time to shed my shoes at the very least. But if anyone knocked you in, rest assured, I’d jump in, shoes, jacket, and all.”

“You’d better,” she said with a smile, and he tugged her to a stop. She swallowed, and her eyes widened as they met his. “What are you doing? I’m warning you, if you even think of pushing me i—”

Josh cupped her cheek, and the rest of her sentence died on her parted lips. He took a couple of seconds to soak in the way the harbor lights lit up her profile, her sharp intake of breath, and the endless stretch of water behind her.

Sometimes life gave you perfect moments.

It was up to you whether or not you did something with them.

“I’m improvising,” he whispered, using his thumb to tip up her chin. Time slowed, and his entire body hummed with emotions he thought he’d rid himself of long ago.

He dipped his head, and then there was a mere inch of space between his lips and hers.

She gripped his elbows, her fingers wrapping around them as she angled closer, and Josh closed his eyes as he lowered his mouth to—

“Danae. Hey, I’ve been looking for you. I even called your phone, but...”

Of course it was Mark.