

I'm not afraid of storms, for I'm learning how to sail my ship.

- Louisa May Alcott

Chapter 1: Eye of the Storm

Colton took his hands off the wheel and killed the boat's engine. He didn't have to look behind him to know the storm would hit any moment; he could feel it coming, like a remnant from a bad dream. His ears rang with its heart-stopping roar; the hair on his arms raised, skin tingling; a metallic taste in his molars. Reluctantly, he turned to watch the wall of advancing rain battering Navajo Lake, slapping and pounding the surface as if it were miraculously solid enough to walk upon.

With little time to act, he raced to the edge of the boat, searching the starboard side for the stranded woman in the water. Peering down, he found her, wide-eyed and pale-faced, fighting wildly to right an overturned kayak which was still buoyed by trapped air. Seeing him, her grim look of raw desperation was replaced by a bright light, as if the sun shone inside of her.

For a brief moment, Colton thought he'd seen the face of an angel.

In the east, lightning exploded, crackling with foreboding energy.

The mist thickened into a fog, obscuring his vision, before changing into a merciless pelting like a faucet turned on high. Reflexively, he gasped as he was instantly chilled and soaked to the bone by the unexpected and unwelcome baptism.

Struggling to see, he reached down into the dark and difficult waves, his fingers momentarily brushing against hers. The yellow kayak lost its battle and transformed into a yellow submarine, plummeting into the depths of the lake. Suddenly, her strong hand grasped his own, and under the torrential downpour, he helped her climb onto the deck.

Above, thunder cracked like a god with an urgent message.

The storm surged ahead, its clouds swirling in an arc, high in the sky, up and over them in a downdraft, its forceful tailwind driving the rain parallel to the lake.

To Colton, it felt like a perverse tidal wave descending from above as a high-pressured firehose assaulted him simultaneously.

With no other option for escape, they hid under the small roof of the center console, huddling together for shelter, but the wind and rain came at them from all directions, seeming to defy the law of gravity. Heads down and bodies entwined, they curled on the floor as the boat lurched and swayed with a stomach-churning recklessness.

Colton felt the young woman shaking in his arms, then realized the sensation was coming from himself. His breathing was hitched, ragged with adrenaline as unwanted memories of a past hurricane hijacked his mind; the raging wind and turbulent water were overwhelmingly familiar.

Please God, he thought and prayed, I don't want to die!

Fighting his escalating panic, he looked up with half-closed eyes through the gloom to gauge their position.

His boat had been driven like a child's toy towards the steep walled portion of the Pine River Pass. Sandstone cliffs enveloped them on both sides as they swiftly drifted towards the rain-slicked rocks.

"I have to stop the boat!" he yelled over the tumultuous noise.

The young woman released her arms which had been clutching him tightly around his waist.

The two untangled clumsily and stood up together to face the next challenge.

"Oh, shit," she said, cursing as the cliff face sped towards them.

Clambering to the front of the craft, she searched the bench seats for padding and quickly attached them to the sides of the boat as a cushion against the shock of impact.

Colton turned towards the steering console. He tried starting the engine, but it remained stalled. Irrevocably, the rocks drew closer. Bending down, he grabbed a rope, making sure the knot was secure, then wrestled the anchor overboard, the line unfurling rapidly at his feet.

The boat snapped to a halt, jarring both passengers, a mere four feet away from the canyon wall.

Time stretched and held its breath, the way Time sometimes does. Three minutes passed in slow motion before the apocalyptic rain dialed down to a typical summer thunderstorm, still intense but no longer of biblical proportions.

"That was close," the young woman said, looking up at the sky.

Her voice was direct, like she was making a calculated observation, but there was a slightly

haunted look in her blue eyes as she contemplated the receding storm. Her lips were a cherry red and her hair was an amber glow of wet tendrils down her shoulders. She was petite and curvy, what cleavage dared to show from the top of her dark green t-shirt was wet with rain and sun-kissed with light freckles.

On her shirt was a picture of the planet Earth with the words, 'Save Me'.

How ironic, he thought.

He watched her take a deep breath and stretch her body, raising her arms above her head, her feet up on tiptoe. Holding the pose, she balanced upon the waves and gazed appreciatively around her as if it was the most beautiful view she'd ever seen.

When her eyes finally settled on his, her smile broadened.

Colton's heart clichéd and skipped a beat.

"Hi," she said, reaching for his hand. "I'm Saffron."