

# Harbour

First Response #3

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# Dedication

To all Marine Rescue volunteers.

## Chapter 1

Alyse Wilson laid the candle wick on the beeswax sheet she'd made earlier in the week and carefully rolled it up, loving the sweet scent drifting to her nose, and the soft waxy surface which moisturised her fingertips. Using all the products her bees produced made her feel responsible, like she was doing her bit to reduce waste—plus she loved using the candles she made.

“Alyse, where the hell are you?” Mark’s bellow sent a shiver down Alyse’s spine and her muscles tensed.

Her gaze swept the small work room. Nowhere to hide. The shelves along the walls were filled with her latest products, and Mark would easily see her underneath the large table in the middle.

His footsteps pounded closer, and she jammed the headphones into her ears so she could pretend she hadn’t heard his call. Her hands shook as she added the candle to the shelf, waiting for him to arrive. What had she done? These days he only sought her out while she was working if he needed something or was angry.

A hand on her shoulder yanked her back and she stumbled into Mark’s hard chest. She grunted and removed the

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headphones, using the time to calm herself and make sure her tone wasn't accusatory. "Mark, you startled me."

"I've been calling you for the last ten minutes," he growled, towering over her like a behemoth. He filled the whole doorway. Broad chest, broad arms and legs, built to play rugby but Blackbridge was an Aussie Rules town. His dark eyes glared at her and she froze. Many years ago she'd thought his eyes warm and sweet like the chocolate he used to buy her regularly for no reason other than he loved her and had been thinking about her. Now all she saw were the eyes of her jailer. How had she ever found him attractive?

Alyse stepped back, giving herself space to move. "Sorry, I was listening to music." She pasted on a smile, trying for super helpful. "What do you need?"

"Don can't go out on the boat with me. You have to come."

Terror crashed through her and her skin turned to ice. She retreated until her back slammed against the shelves on the opposite side of the room, shaking her head. "You want me to go on a boat?"

His eyes were pits of derision. "That's what I said. Time to get over your stupid fear." He dragged her out of the work room and through her large metal shed towards the door.

She was halfway across before her brain pushed her fear aside and she dug her heels in to resist. Mark tugged harder and her arm nearly came out of its socket. She winced at the pain. "I can't go." She hated the tremor in her voice. "I have work to do."

"This is more important."

Alyse grabbed onto the edge of the doorway. "I won't."

Mark whirled around. "You'll do as I say." He paused, his jaw tightening, before it relaxed again and he caressed her cheek, sympathy on his face. "Princess, I know you're scared, but I need you. I'm not as mobile with my broken leg. You don't want to disappoint me, do you?"

Her stomach clenched, and she fought not to show her revulsion. If only the compassion was real, but this side of Mark only came out when he wanted something these days. She shook her head as his fingers travelled down her arm to the hand still clinging to the doorway.

With a jerk, he pried her fingers off and growled, "Get in the car." He flung her towards the black ute parked outside the shed, the silver dinghy already hitched to it.

Alyse's throat closed over. The boat was tiny, maybe three metres long, with sides that didn't sit far out of the water. Wind buffeted her towards the car and she opened the door almost automatically, her obedience well beaten into her. She had to get out of this. There had to be someone else.

Impossible. Mark would have chosen anyone else before he put up with her hysterics.

Across the property the trees shook like a boogie-monster warning her to stay inside. The ocean would be far worse. "Mark, it's too rough. Please, can't this wait until a calmer day?"

"No. They won't wait."

No wonder he needed her. His options were limited to those people in town privy to the illegal things he did and there were fewer of them as the police found and arrested them. She'd kept her head down, not asking questions, not going near the shed he'd deemed his man cave. What she didn't know couldn't hurt her. What she didn't see, he couldn't beat her about.

She strapped herself in as Mark drove out of her property. Her hands clenched together and her chest tightened.

Nausea rose so fast she wrapped her arms around her stomach hoping to keep it at bay. The weather was far worse than it had been that day...

They arrived at the deserted boat ramp far too quickly. Waves pummelled the shore and the salty smell made her

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throat close over, cutting off her breath. Beyond the break, the ocean rose and fell in a swell far too big for the little dinghy. Mark backed expertly down the ramp and then climbed out, pulling a plastic bin bag over his moon boot and tying it off. When he'd fallen off the roof a couple of weeks ago, Alyse had hoped the broken leg would slow him down, but it hadn't.

He slammed the door and prepared the boat for launching. For a split second Alyse considered getting behind the wheel and taking off, driving anywhere else, somewhere far from here. The thought vanished almost as quickly as it arrived. She had nowhere to run, no money, no one she could call to help her. And no matter where she went, he'd find her. He always knew where she was and what she did.

She'd got herself into this no way out situation. The small voice with a little fight left declared she wasn't leaving her apiary, wasn't letting Mark have her family home.

"Alyse!"

Mark's bellow made her flinch again and she didn't dare ignore him this time. He'd be keeping count. She leapt out of the car and hurried down the damp ramp to where he held the rope of the dinghy. He thrust it at her and returned to the car.

Alyse shivered and hugged her arms around her, glad the shed had been cold enough to warrant wearing her thickest jacket. The dinghy bobbed up and down like a manic merry-go-round horse and the waves washed over Alyse's feet, soaking her work boots and the bottom of her jeans. Her breath caught. No sane person would go out on a day like today. Not in such a tiny boat, not without at least logging the trip with Marine Rescue.

If the boat capsized, no one would know. Where were the life jackets? Mark's father had bought them for Mark for Christmas, along with an EPIRB and flare gun. Without a jacket she'd be left struggling to stay above the waves, swallowing gallons of sea water, fighting to survive as she had

that evening three years ago.

She couldn't do it.

Alyse dropped the rope, turned and ran smack into Mark's chest.

He grabbed her arm, bruising fingers digging into her skin. "Get in."

She shook her head. "I can't," she squeaked, hating the fear battering her. "Mark, please. Don't make me. I can't do it." She'd promised herself she would never beg him for anything again, but this was different. She physically couldn't move towards the rocking death trap.

He swore and lifted her as if she weighed nothing, pinning her arms against her sides, and carried her to the boat. She kicked and shrieked, "No, no, no."

Her vision blurred with tears, terror trapping the air in her lungs. He dumped her at the front, on the cold metal seat and shoved the bow around so she faced out to sea.

Alyse froze, eyes on the sandy brown swirling, rough water waiting to drag her under.

Behind her the engine roared to life and the boat made its way through the choppy seas, the salt water splashing over the bow and soaking her. The smell, the salt, the damp, took her straight back to that day. Except the sun had been shining that morning.

Her parents had been eager to leave the apiary behind and go deep sea fishing. They all needed a break and it had been fun until Marine Rescue reported a change in conditions. A summer storm was coming in.

Even now Alyse couldn't believe how fast the weather had turned. The clouds appeared on the horizon and only minutes later they were right above them, turning the bright day dull and bringing a wind that morphed the gentle waves into giant towers.

Her father had handed out the life jackets and radioed

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Marine Rescue to let them know they were heading in but caught in the storm.

That one call had saved Alyse's life.

The next thing she knew, a wave had swamped the boat, turning it over and she'd been flung into the heaving ocean, fighting desperately to reach the surface, but not sure which way was up. Her life jacket had grown firm under her arms, buoying her in the right direction and when she finally breached the water, gasping for breath, she'd frantically searched the ocean for her parents.

Water slapped Alyse in the face and she blinked, coming back to the present and the sea swirling in front of her. She slid off the seat into the hull and huddled, shaking, tears streaming down her face. She couldn't do this. Fear vomited from her, running into the bottom of the boat. The smell turned her stomach further and she retched and retched until nothing else would come. Mark swore. Her brain screamed at her to go back, to run, to get off the waves, but she was frozen. She squeezed her eyes shut before the claws of hysteria ripped her skin.

She wasn't on a boat, she was on a bucking bull ride in the middle of a showground and if she fell, she'd land on soft pillows below.

Another spray of water coated her face, soaking her jacket, and she tasted the salt. No amount of pretending would alter the truth.

She would die out here. The ocean hadn't claimed her last time, but it was coming for her now.

Maybe it was for the best. Dying was the only way she would ever be free of Mark. Perhaps she should give in to the call and throw herself overboard. She opened her eyes a crack. The dark water mocked, called to her, threatened. She remembered the pull of the water, the way the weight of the boat dragged her under, and she retched again, her stomach

and throat straining.

No. If she had to die, there were better ways to go. She wouldn't let the ocean take her as well.

Mark shouted something but she didn't turn. Couldn't move.

Seconds later he grabbed her, twisting her around, almost unbalancing the boat. Her heart leapt to her throat.

"Get a grip," Mark snarled. "When we reach the yacht, you help me lift the package on board, got it?"

She nodded though she didn't think she'd be able to stand, let alone have the strength in her arms to lift anything. He released her and sat by the engine.

Alyse huddled back into a ball. Mark's interruption had been enough to cut through some of her fear, to switch gears. What was Mark smuggling—drugs, guns, people? No, he'd said *package* so not people, and the boat wasn't big enough for more than a couple anyway. Her hand slid to the mobile phone in her jacket pocket. Now wasn't the time to be brave and film his activities. Plenty of better opportunities at home that wouldn't make her an accomplice. She was already far more involved than she wanted to be. If Mark went to jail, she'd be going as well. He'd made sure of it.

A huge wave crested in front of them and Alyse's heart stopped. The engine roared as Mark accelerated, but he was too slow. He cut through the middle of the wave and water flooded the boat.

No. Not again.

This couldn't be happening.

The boat was low, close to the surface, full of water, barely able to make it over the oncoming waves.

Mark shoved a plastic bucket at her. "Bail it out."

Her hands shook as she threw bucket after bucket of water out of the boat. Mark continued to steer at the helm, taking them further and further out to sea. He was insane.

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The dinghy laboured in the waves and Alyse kept bailing, moving as fast as she could, her arms aching, her breath coming in pants from the effort and the fear. She didn't want to die like this. Why didn't Mark have life jackets? This time nothing would make her take it off.

Not like last time.

Last time she'd had to remove the jacket to dive under the overturned hull to find her parents. Her father was caught on something around the steering wheel and her mother was trying to free him. She'd looked for a knife, but all their gear was at the bottom of the ocean.

Then the boat shifted, tilted down and began to sink in earnest. Terror had gripped her and they'd all fought to free her father, but it wasn't possible. She'd taken a deep breath just before the last air pocket disappeared and struggled to get away from the hull. When she'd reached the surface, she was alone. She'd waited and waited for her mother to appear, but she never did. And the life jacket Alyse had removed had long since vanished in the waves. She was alone in the middle of the ocean, uncertain which way was land.

Mark's yell made her blink. He pointed to a large yacht. Their destination. At least they could soon go home.

She stayed huddled on the seat until they were close enough for the person on board to throw them a rope. She wrapped it around the cleat at the front of the dinghy to help hold the boat in place, fighting with the waves that tossed them about.

Mark and the man spoke, but the wind whisked their words away and then two men brought a big black crate to the edge of the yacht. It looked heavy and too wide to fit on the dinghy.

"Alyse." Mark prodded her. He stood, ready to receive the cargo.

It meant she had to stand too. Stand in this little metal boat that was rocking like crazy. And somehow they had to lift the huge box on board without overbalancing and falling

overboard.

“Get up,” Mark growled.

She knew that tone. If she didn’t move now, she would regret it when they got home. If she made it home.

Slowly she stood, her legs shaking. She wanted to vomit all over Mark. It would serve him right. Instead she reached for one side of the black plastic case and prepared herself. When the two men on the yacht let go, the true weight hit her and it was more a controlled fall to the bottom of the boat. Whatever was inside weighed a tonne.

The dinghy rocked and dipped lower in the water. Going back would be far more dangerous than coming out. She wanted to push the case overboard right now so they would get back to shore alive.

She sat as Mark concluded his business and then she unhitched the rope and they drew away from the yacht. The boat was more sluggish, but the waves pushed them now. Her hands stung in the cold and she tucked them under her arms as the wind blew through her wet jeans. She stamped her soaked feet to get some warmth into them.

The hills near the boat ramp appeared on the horizon, but still so far away.

Then the engine stuttered and stopped.

Alyse whirled around, eyes wide as Mark pulled the rip cord and nothing happened. He checked the petrol tank, tried again. Still nothing. They were adrift. It was getting darker and in only an hour it would be night. Fear bubbled inside her.

“Mark, why isn’t it working?” Her voice was shrill.

“Give me a minute. I’ll fix it.”

No, he wouldn’t. He liked to think he was good with anything mechanical, but he wasn’t, and she’d long since stopped asking him for help. But it would take him a couple of hours before he’d admit defeat—if he admitted it at all. And she had no intention of still being in this boat after dark.

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She slipped off her seat onto the hull and made herself as small as possible. Mark was busy looking at the engine so she retrieved her phone. She hesitated. He'd hear her if she dialled Marine Rescue. She flicked her phone to silent and texted them instead. *Our boat has broken down near the Southpoint boat ramp. About a kilometre from shore.*

The response was instant. *Alyse?*

Her heart beat faster. Only one guy at Marine Rescue knew her phone number. Kim On. *Yes.* He knew about her fear. *Please hurry.*

*Mobilising now. How many on board?*

*Two. Don't tell Mark I contacted you.*

*Be there soon. Hold tight, Aly.*

Her heart squeezed at the nickname she hadn't heard in three years. Kim had been the one person she could turn to before her life went to shit. Her one confidante before her parents died. But then they'd fought about Mark and she'd pushed him away.

So stupid.

She stuck her phone back in her pocket. Hope warmed her. Kim would come, he would save her.

Mark swore at the engine. He would be furious if he discovered she'd contacted Marine Rescue, especially with the cargo on board.

The boat rocked, dipping low in the water, and she clenched the sides, her heart in her throat. No life jackets and, although land was in sight, she wasn't certain she was fit enough to swim to shore. She slid back up to the seat. It was more exposed, but at least there was little chance of getting caught on something and drowning if they capsized.

A wave splashed over the boat and she shrieked, squeezing her eyes closed, praying they wouldn't sink.

"Shut up," Mark growled. "It's just a bit of water."

She gritted her teeth. He knew it wasn't the water. He'd met

her at the hospital on the day her parents had drowned, when Marine Rescue had finally found her struggling to stay afloat, and she'd told him everything. Those days he'd still pretended to care and was attentive and lovely. He'd soothed her and let her cry.

She'd avoided even looking at the ocean for ages afterwards. But eventually he'd manipulated her into going fishing with him. She'd climbed into the boat and sat still while he'd cast off, and before they'd been more than ten metres from the boat ramp, she'd broken down in hysterics, begging to go back.

He'd hit her.

Slapped her right across the face, telling her to pull herself together. Not even the pain had been enough to cut through her fear and eventually he'd headed back to shore. She'd vowed never to go on a boat again.

Her hands shaking, she picked up the bucket and bailed out the water sloshing in the bottom of the dinghy. The movement helped distract her, made her feel she was preventing a catastrophe. When she was done, she scoured the shore. Where were Marine Rescue? Shouldn't she see their bright yellow boat by now? It was growing darker by the minute and they had no lights on board. None that Mark would light at least.

Her teeth chattered and she shook. "What's wrong with it?"

Mark had the engine casing off and had some engine part in his hand. "Filter's gummed up."

Probably because he hadn't done a second of maintenance on the boat since he'd bought it. Anger stirred in her, but it dissipated as a huge wave crested right behind them.

They were going to drown.

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