

Healing Stones, Chapter One

CHAPTER ONE

I sneaked down to the boat that night to say this couldn't happen anymore.

Mind you, I didn't *want* to. Ripping a man's heart out wasn't up there with things I relished. I don't know what I thought would come of things in the end, but I never envisioned this. "This" fell into the *have to* column. When you've made a mess so major you can't hope anymore that somehow things will turn out all right on their own, you have to fix them.

I made my usual way through the shadows, glancing back out of habit to be sure no one saw me. No one frequented the Port Orchard Yacht Club on late February evenings, and even I wouldn't have to anymore after tonight.

I sucked in damp Washington air and breathed out my urge to run from the pain. Then I slid my hand into the pocket of my P-coat, felt the key card waiting in its satin hiding place, and curled in on myself, plastic card digging into my palm.

Would everything that reminded me of Zach torture me from now on? This was just the key to the ramp. What was going to happen when I saw his face?

I managed to get the gate unlocked and then closed behind me, clanging like a prison door. Yes, I waxed dramatic, but everything inside seemed to hold a piece of him. Zach always had a field day with the curled-up ad on the bulletin board asking for a stud for a Yorkshire terrier. Every time I picked my way in the dark down the puzzle grating on the gangplank, I anticipated his arms around me.

I started down narrow Dock C, the open-ceilinged hallway lined with cheerful doors that led to covered, inside boat slips, and I could hear Zach chuckling over the limp

Valentine's Day wreath that hung over a faux porthole, reds and pinks oozing damply into each other. I belonged on this slender path to Zach's door. It always seemed to close behind me—holding me in that one safe place.

How, then, would I get out after I'd said what I came to say? My, my, Demitria. You sure know how to arrange things.

My hand was barely on the knob when the door to his slip came open and Zach filled the doorway, and me.

"Hey, Prof," he said.

Standing there with him so close I ached, I fought to remember how I'd steeled myself for this. I was doing it for Rich and our kids—because it was the right thing—because I couldn't do the wrong thing anymore.

Zach stood silhouetted with the boat rocking behind him until he pulled me through the doorway onto the enclosed dock—and into the intoxicating musky smell of his neck. Then he was too real.

"Okay, what's wrong?"

I couldn't answer, not with my face pushed into the black wool of the sweater stretching across his chest.

"You sounded stressed on the phone. I can feel it in you." He held me tighter and pressed his chin on top of my head. I didn't have to look at him yet, but I could see him all the same.

His dark thicket of brows drawn together. Blue eyes closed, I knew, squeezing the worry lines into fans at their corners. I tried to push myself away, but he cupped my face in his hands and soaked me in. I'd been right about his expression. The only thing I'd

missed was the rumple in his wiry, almost-gray hair, where he'd apparently raked his fingers.

"You're scaring me, Prof." He tilted his head to kiss me, but I peeled his hands away and stepped back.

"Can we get on the boat?" I said.

I didn't wait for an answer but maneuvered around him and hurried down the dock to *The Testament's* stern. Every squishy step of my rubber soles echoed like a taunt. *This is the last time. This is the last time.*

I stepped aboard and stopped to stare into the cabin. Candles dotted every horizontal plane, flames casting haloes on the polished teak. I was walking into a sanctuary.

"You sounded like you could use a little candlelight." Zach eased the cabin door shut behind us. "What else do you need?"

What I needed was for him not to use that voice right now—the clear, bottomless voice that asked the right questions and gave me my nickname and always said if I wanted him to stop I should tell him before he wouldn't be able to.

"I need to talk," I said. "And I need you to listen."

"Always." Zach pulled me toward the pillow-piled seat that banked the corner, but I wriggled my hand free.

"I can't sit next to you for this."

"Okay, Prof." He ran a finger under my chin. "This is your meeting."

He swiveled the captain's chair to face me and perched on its edge. His long legs, clad in jeans that followed the commands of his thighs and calves, draped to either side.

“Rich?” he said. “Does he know?”

“Zach, let me—”

“If he does, so be it. You know I’ve got your back.” He shrugged his squared-off shoulders. “I’ve been saying you should tell him.”

I couldn’t help smiling. I could never help smiling at him. “Am I going to have to duct-tape your lips?”

The lips in question eased into a grin. “I’m listening. Talk to me.”

Of course I could talk to Zach. He would even understand this, which, ironically, had put me in this impossible situation in the first place: because I could talk to him like I could talk to no one else. There was never a need for caveats—and the undivided attention was as addictive as everything else about us.

Yet I had to say it.

“We have to end this. I mean us—we have to stop being us.”

He didn’t move.

“I love you—you know that. You’re the rest of me that I could never find until you, and this place.” I swept my gaze over the walls. The candle flames flickered frantically as if they registered what Zach didn’t seem to. “I want to be with you. I want the life I know we could have, only I can’t have it all tangled in secrets and lies. I don’t want anything about us to be wrong, and this is, and I can’t anymore. . . . Zach—say something.”

“You told me not to.”

“Do you always have to do what I ask you to?”

His face went soft. “One of the things I love about you is that you’re the kind of woman who’ll go back to her husband. I can’t argue with your integrity, Demi.”

I actually laughed. “What integrity, Zach? I’m a married woman and I’ve been having an affair with you for five months.”

“Five months, three weeks, four days.”

“That’s not integrity—that’s adultery.”

“So you’ve said at least one thousand and three times.” He cocked his head at me. “But if you could see yourself. This is tearing you apart and has all along. A woman without integrity wouldn’t care about right or wrong, especially after the way Rich has treated you—”

“He’s still my husband.”

“Exactly my point.”

I pushed my hands through my hair. “I wish you would stop turning me into a saint. I’m trying to do the right thing here.”

“I know. And I hate it and I love it at the same time.” He leaned toward me, touching me without touching me. “It makes you even more beautiful.”

I pulled my knees into my chest, the soles of my boots divoting the corduroy. This must be what withdrawal felt like.

“Prof, I can see into your soul. It’s hurting.”

“I don’t care if I’m wonderful or scum—I still have to end this.” I unfolded my legs. “I’m going to walk out of here, okay? And I’m not coming back.”

He watched me. The liquid-blue eyes, the color of Puget Sound, swam, until I realized I was the one on the verge of tears. He made a move to come toward me, but I put my hand up.

“This is breaking your heart,” he said. “I don’t know if I can stand that—I want to help.”

“We’ll have to stay away from each other.”

“How do you see us doing that? We’ll be tripping over each other in the hall.” He pulled his brows together. “No matter. I can’t go anywhere on that campus without seeing you, even if you aren’t there.”

I watched him swallow.

“Our lives are too enmeshed for us to walk away from this,” he said. “What about the Faith and Doubt project? That’s a baby you and I brought into this world.” His face worked. “We have students who would have completely turned their backs on Christianity if we weren’t working with them. We have a responsibility—”

“We won’t let that go,” I said. “We’re grown-ups, Zach—we can hold together for the kids.”

“I don’t know if I can. A man in love isn’t a grown-up.” Zach leaned back. “At least not this man. He’s a spoiled-rotten little boy who knows what he wants, and he won’t be without it.”

“You have to be without me.”

“Forever?”

“I have to know if my marriage to Rich can work—”

“Haven’t you tried hard enough?”

“Not enough to walk away from twenty-one years.”

Zach pressed his palms on his thighs and wiped at his jeans. Zach Archer didn't do desperate, and I could hardly bear it. “A relationship needs two people to work,” he said. “Do you think Rich is going to—”

“Zach, stop.”

He did, just short of the line he'd promised never to cross.

“I'm sorry. I've never put him down.”

“No, you haven't, Doc, and please don't start now.”

Pain shot across his face, and I wanted to bite my tongue. I'd told myself I wouldn't use his nickname.

“You love me,” he said. “I know you do.”

“That isn't—”

“Then do what you have to do. I have to set you free for that.”

I closed my eyes.

“But I have to say this one thing, and I want you to hear me.” He hesitated, as if he were waiting for my permission. “This—what we have—this is true love, which will win out if we let it.”

“But we can't let it *this* way.” I opened my eyes. “If we put us before God, then that can't be true.”

We both stared at the space between us, as if a third party had entered the cabin and spoken. The thought had curled in my brain like a wisp of smoke for—five months, three weeks, and four days. Longer than that if I counted the weeks watching him at faculty meetings, the days dreaming up reasons to drop by his office, the stolen moments

I collected like seashells to hold later. Now that the thought was between us, it cut a chasm I couldn't walk around.

Zach leaped across and came to me. I straight-armed him before he could touch me and make God disappear.

"Please don't make it any harder," I said.

"Can't happen. I'm already in shreds."

"Then let me go—please—and we can both start to heal."

He brushed the hair off my forehead with one finger. "I'll never get over this, Prof."

And then he gave me the look. Our look. The look that destroyed me and threw me right into his arms—to the place where I didn't care what I was doing, as long as it felt like this.

Our clothes were halfway off within seconds. We had that part down to a passionate science. I was once more ripped from in-control to out-of-my-mind, lost again on the wave I wanted to ride all the way, no matter where it took me. I'd thought in every guilty-afterwards that this must be what a drug addict felt like.

I clung to his chest and let his mouth search for mine. He found it just as the cabin erupted into light. Over my heartbeat, I heard the unmistakable click and whir of a camera.