

HARBORED SECRETS
BOOK ONE

LIVING LIES

NATALIE
WALTERS



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Natalie Walters, *Living Lies*
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To my Gigipa, the greatest storyteller I'll ever know.

To CeCe, you knew this day would come and I wish you were on this side of heaven to celebrate. I miss you, friend.

ONE

JUST LET GO.

The breeze lifted Lane Kent's auburn hair from the back of her neck. Her heels edged closer to the side of the bridge, sending loose rocks and dust spiraling into the Ogeechee River below. The dilapidated structure had long since rusted and was no longer up to code for vehicle use, but the litter of broken bottles thirty feet below meant its condition hadn't scared off bored teenagers. Or Lane.

Her fingers strained against the metal railing behind her as she leaned forward. A leaf rushed along with the current, careening through the water with no control over its destination. Like her.

Twenty-eight and a widow. Lane closed her eyes and thought of Noah. It wasn't fair that she'd stolen his daddy away from him. He deserved better. They both did.

Just let go. Lane fought to regain control over the darkness invading her mind. Noah. She had to live for Noah—even if it was all a lie. Pretending to be alright was part of the deal she had made when she had returned to Walton. But people who were alright didn't stand at the edge of a bridge wondering if relief waited for them among the jagged rocks.

A throat cleared behind her. "Excuse me, is everything okay?"

Lane's heart vaulted inside her chest. Her grip slipped, but strong hands clamped on to her wrists, securing her.

"Easy. You don't want to fall."

Lane's eyes met the deep blue ones of the man steadying her. A mountain bike lay on its side next to him. "Uh, you scared me."

"Did you drop something?"

Lane started to move, but the man's grip tightened. Pulse

pounding, she looked down at his white knuckles and then back up at him. “You can let go.”

A muscle in his jaw popped. His eyes searched her face, and Lane swallowed under the scrutiny. She wriggled her wrists free, swung her leg between the railing, and pulled herself through so she was standing next to him. *Think of something, Lane.*

Letting a loose strand of hair fall across her face, Lane pretended to adjust her backpack. “Uh, no—”

“So, you just enjoy death-defying gravity tests?”

Lane’s head jerked up. Their eyes met again and though it sounded like he was being humorous, the sentiment wasn’t reflected in his gaze. There she saw—what was it? Concern? Fear? Did he think—

A drop of rain hit Lane’s cheek. Dark storm clouds had rolled in, blanketing the blue sky in darkness. She waved a hand. “I was just getting ready to leave.”

“Are you sure everything’s okay?” His voice was deep, masculine. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t. I mean, you did.” She didn’t recognize the man and lots of people used the trails around the Ogeechee, but if he recognized her—knew who her father was—and thought she was going to jump . . . “I really need to go.”

“Ma’am—”

But Lane didn’t wait to hear what the stranger had to say. A crack of thunder echoed in the distance like a warning and Lane headed for the protection of the copse of live oaks guarding one side of the river. It wasn’t the way she had come, but she knew the Coastal Highway ran parallel to the river. If she could get to the highway, she could follow it back to where her car was parked and avoid any further questions. Questions she couldn’t answer.

Wasn’t allowed to answer.

The dense woods grew darker the deeper she went, making the path difficult to see—if she was even on a path. Too dark to tell. Large roots climbed out of the ground and forced her to slow to

avoid tripping over them. Humidity thickened the air and Lane's chest squeezed with each breath. As she passed beneath a low branch, a vile odor washed over her. She jolted to a stop.

What is that? The odorous assault made Lane's head swim and her stomach rebel. Was it a dead animal? She didn't want to find out. Forcing herself to breathe through her mouth, Lane searched for a way out of the overgrown brush surrounding her.

Where was she? She pressed forward, guessing the direction of escape. What if she was heading back to the river or deeper into the trees? A noise spooked her and she spun around. Her eyes searched the darkness for the source of the sound. A squirrel? A twig snapped and Lane's gaze swung to the right. Was the man from the bridge following her? *You're being paranoid.*

Rain began to penetrate the canopy of branches overhead and run into rivulets, churning the ground into sticky mud. Lane covered her mouth and nose with both hands and backed up, but something grabbed her foot and pitched her backward onto the ground.

Ouch. She scowled at the tangle of thick roots stretching from the massive tree next to her and adjusted the straps of her backpack, thankful she hadn't landed on it. Trying hard not to breathe in the toxic air, Lane used the tree to steady herself and free her foot but stopped when her hand landed on—a shoe? Lane froze. It was a tennis shoe. Laces untied. Attached to a foot and then a leg and then a body.

“Aghhhh!”

Blank eyes on a bluish-green face stared up at her. Lane scrambled, digging her fingers into the mud to get away from the body. A swarm of black flies buzzed around her head. Angry. Like she had interrupted their morbid feast. Bile choked Lane's ability to scream again.

Run. Move.

Lane clawed at the tree next to her, ignoring the way the bark cut into her palms as she yanked herself up. Finding her footing,

she backed away from the lifeless body and ran. Branches slapped at her arms and face as fear chased her into the darkness.



The scream stopped Charlie Lynch in his tracks even as his pulse jackhammered in his ears. It came from his left. He dropped his bike and surged forward, ignoring the twigs catching on his skin.

That was distress. It didn't take six weeks at the police academy or six years as a Marine MP to recognize it. It was her—the woman from the bridge. Charlie had no problem recalling the features of her face, even as she tried to hide it behind a curtain of auburn hair. Green eyes awash with emotion so deep they revealed the answer to his question that she did not answer—what had brought her to the edge of that bridge?

Sad hazel eyes and a lopsided smile flashed in Charlie's mind. Tate Roberts. How many conversations had he shared with him in Afghanistan? And how many times had Tate stared at death as the only answer until he'd allowed it to swallow him? Was that what he saw in the woman's gaze? Defeat? The kind that stole life? Or was he jumping to conclusions? Charlie ground his molars and raced in the direction he thought he had heard the scream come from. He had to find her. Make sure she was okay.

He wouldn't fail. Not this time.

A movement to his left captured his attention and he instinctively reached for the weapon he no longer carried. Biting back a curse, he forced himself to take a breath. This wasn't a war zone. It was Walton, Georgia, and about as idyllic as a Norman Rockwell painting. And the peaceful charm was exactly why Charlie had chosen the small town to call home. This was not Afghanistan.

Charlie searched the thicket of trees for the source of the movement. Could be an animal. He hadn't even been in Walton a day before he saw his first alligator sunning near the bike trail. He'd avoided that route this time, which led him to the bridge—to her.

From the corner of his eye, a branch swayed, and before he could turn a force slammed into him.



“Aghhhh!” Lane struggled to break free from—it was him. The guy from the bridge. “What are you doing? Let go.”

“Wait.” He looked down at her anxiously. “I heard you scream. What’s wrong? Are you alright?”

“I . . . I . . .” *No.* Lane swallowed, but the odor still clung to her—the eyes still staring. “I’m going to be sick.”

The man released her arms just in time for her to turn and expel the contents of her stomach.

“Ma’am, what’s wrong?” A warm hand covered the skin on her bare shoulder in a gesture he probably thought was comforting but only made her feel worse as she continued to retch. “How can I help?”

“9-1-1,” she gasped, wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand. “There’s . . . a . . . g-girl.”

“A girl? Where? Is she hurt?”

“D-dead.” Nothing was left in Lane’s stomach, but it didn’t stop her body from purging again. She couldn’t shake the glassy stare of the girl. Young. Too young.

“A dead girl?” Disbelief colored his words as his hand slipped from her back.

Lane fought through the retching long enough to peek up. The man rocked back on his heels and was scanning the area as his gaze darkened. Where was his bike? How did he get here? Why was he here? Pulse pounding in her ears, Lane took a step back. “Were you following me?”

The man’s eyes rounded. His hands flew up in surrender like he knew what she was thinking. “No. I mean, yes, but only to be sure you were okay. I heard you scream. My name’s Charlie Lynch. I’m a deputy for Walton—”

“Walton’s not that big and I’ve never seen you before.”

“I’m new. Start on Monday.” His gaze held hers. Keeping one hand up, he reached into the pocket of his shorts and withdrew a cell phone. “I need to call Sheriff Huggins now and report this.”

He knew the sheriff’s name. That was reassuring, right? Lane eyed the wet shirt clinging to a physique that, at the very least, proved he was physically fit enough to be a cop.

“Here,” the man said as he held the phone out to Lane. “The sheriff wants to talk to you.”

“H-hello?”

A second of silence filled the phone. “Lane, is that you?”

The sound of Sheriff Huggins’s voice eased Lane’s worry almost as quickly as it caused her knees to feel like they were going to buckle. “Y-yes,” she answered, her voice cracking.

“I’m on my way, honey.” Sheriff Huggins’s voice was tight. “You stay with Charlie, but I’m on my way.”

Lane couldn’t reply because of the lump in her throat. Sheriff Huggins was Ms. Byrdie’s husband, and together they were the main reason Lane had had the courage to return to Walton. Lane passed the phone back to the deputy while her mind drifted back to the girl’s body. Lifeless blue eyes staring.

A crack of thunder made Lane jump, bringing her back to the present. She wrapped her hands around her waist to stop the tremors that were wracking her body beneath the pelting rain.

“The sheriff is on his way.” The deputy glanced up from his phone. “My GPS says the Coastal Highway is just over—hey, are you okay?”

Lane wanted to tell him she was, but as an angry strike of lightning lit up the sky, she could feel her legs begin to shake and all at once his arms were wrapped around her body.

“You’re in shock.”

“N-no. I’m f-fine,” she said, pulling herself out of his hold. “Just wet and cold.”

“There’ll be blankets in the squad car. Do you think you can walk? I can carry your backpack.”

“I’ve got it,” she said through clenched teeth and took a step in the direction he pointed to prove she did.

By the time they reached the side of the Coastal Highway, sirens echoed in the distance and Lane could see flashing red and blue lights barreling toward them. The deputy led her to the sheriff’s car but paused. He turned so their eyes met.

“Death is never easy.” Rain trailed over the features of his face. Chiseled jaw with a day or two’s growth. Deep blue eyes mining, it seemed, for information. “I’m really sorry you had to see that.”

Lane swallowed and pushed her gaze over the deputy’s shoulder to the squad car that pulled up, followed by two more that parked along the side of the road. “Y-yeah. Me too.”

A tall, burly man with a shock of white hair emerged from the first car and rushed over. The deputy stood back as Sheriff Huggins wrapped his big arms around her, swallowing her in a hug. “Honey, are you okay?”

That question. Again. Lane understood why they were asking, but it didn’t stop her eyes from cutting to the deputy hanging back. His comment about death not being easy seemed to come from a place of understanding—maybe even experience—but it was the look in his eyes that scared her more. The one that suggested he understood why she was at the bridge today.

“Lane?” The lines deepened around the sheriff’s gray eyes.

“Y-yes. I’ll be fine.” Lane rubbed her arms. “Just need to warm up and dry off.”

“Let’s get you into the car.” Sheriff Huggins walked her to his car with the deputy close on their heels. “There’s a blanket in the trunk, Charlie.”

Lane sat in the passenger seat of the squad car as Sheriff Huggins turned on the heat. A second later, the deputy returned with a blanket and the two men exchanged a glance before Sheriff Huggins tucked the fabric around her shoulders.

“Honey, can you tell me where you found the body?”

“I-I don’t know exactly. I got scared and ran—”

“Sir, I can take you to where I found her”—the deputy tilted his head in Lane’s direction—“it’s not far from here. Maybe thirty or forty feet in.”

“Let me grab Deputies Wilson and Hodges. They’ll go with you.” Sheriff Huggins gave Lane’s knee a quick pat before he jogged over to the other squad cars, leaving Lane alone with the deputy.

“Are you warm enough?”

Lane glanced up at the deputy. His T-shirt and shorts clung, soggy, to his body. He wiped at the wet hair covering his forehead. “Yes. But it looks like you need a blanket too.”

“I’m alright.”

“Charlie, take them to where you found Lane,” Sheriff Huggins said as he walked back with the other two deputies. “Spread out and search the area. Be mindful not to disturb too much.”

“Yes, sir.” He straightened and took a step toward Sheriff Huggins and the waiting deputies but hesitated. He turned to Lane, his eyes asking her if she would be alright.

Adrenaline or something else stole Lane’s voice. She nodded and watched as Charlie led the deputies into the woods. She should go with them. Help them find the girl’s body. The thought sent her pulse pounding in her ears and her stomach churning.

“I’ve got a paramedic coming to check you out—”

“No.” Her adamant tone stopped Sheriff Huggins. “I mean, I’m fine.”

“You’re in shock, honey.” Sheriff Huggins’s thick, silver eyebrows drew in close. His serious expression said he wouldn’t be satisfied until she was checked out. “The ambulance is already on its way.”

Lane pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders and tried to smile, but her face wasn’t cooperating. She’d experienced shock before and this wasn’t it. And the last thing she needed was someone asking a bunch of questions about her medical history. “Really, I’m okay. Just a bit startled.”

Another set of sirens echoed behind her, growing louder with each passing second. The ambulance.

Sheriff Huggins's radio crackled. He gave Lane's hand a squeeze before excusing himself to step away.

“. . . female . . . possible suicide . . .”

Suicide? Lane's breath quickened, sending her pulse pounding in her ears. She curled her fingers into tight fists, letting her nails dig into her palms to stop her hands from shaking.

Lane blew out a frustrated breath as the ambulance pulled up and the medics hopped out and hustled over to her. They took her vitals while Sheriff Huggins lingered nearby, watching. It took the medics several minutes to convince the sheriff she was okay.

At that moment a thickset deputy with smooth, dark skin and a muscular build emerged from the tree line, along with a much smaller deputy. Lane recognized them but couldn't remember their names. It didn't matter. Her gaze was drawn to Deputy Charlie Lynch.

Square jaw, straight nose. Even soaking wet he exuded that rugged look all the girls seemed to fall for. He wore the same concerned expression as the sheriff and it reached an ache she held deep inside. One she thought she'd long since tucked away.

Lane rubbed her arms to cut the chill seeping in despite the muggy temperature as the deputies walked toward her.

“Lane, I'm going to have Deputy Lynch take you home.”

“Oh, no. I can drive myself, Sheriff.” She glanced down at herself, feeling entirely too aware of her muddied clothes and limp hair hanging over her shoulders. “EMTs said I'm good.”

Sheriff Huggins looked like he was trying to decide if she was telling him the truth. “You have my number. You call me or Byrdie if you need *anything*.”

“I will.” She grabbed her backpack from the back of the ambulance. “I promise.”

Lane could read the hesitation in the sheriff's face, but after a minute he let out a breath. “Okay, but I want Deputy Lynch to take one of the squad cars and drive you to your car.”

Even without the finality in Sheriff Huggins's tone, Lane wasn't going to argue. She was wet, cold, and not about to walk through the trees to get to her car. "Deal."

Sheriff Huggins pulled her into another one of his hugs and kissed her forehead. "I'll check on you tomorrow."

Blinking back the emotion, Lane gave a tight-lipped smile and followed Deputy Lynch to a squad car.

"Where are you parked?" he asked after she had climbed into the passenger seat.

"The Ogeechee Park lot. West side of the river."

"I know it." He nodded as he started the car. "I usually park down the river, but today I parked farther up. Found the trail that led me to the bridge."

Lane's insides cringed. *Change the subject.* "Storm's passing."

"That's the thing about storms, right? Come in quick and then leave just as quickly."

"Not all storms." Lane watched a drop of rain trickle down the window. "Sometimes they stick around and make life miserable."

"I'm sorry I scared you."

Lane turned in her seat. The deputy's eyes were focused on the road. "What?"

"Back in the woods. I didn't mean to scare you." His hands tightened around the steering wheel. "Or at the bridge."

It was like a weight had settled over the car and silent seconds filled the space between them. Lane unbuckled her seat belt and opened the door as soon as Deputy Lynch pulled into the parking lot. "Thanks for the ride." She picked up her backpack and started to climb out but stopped. She held her bag up. "I take pictures. That's why I was out there today."

Deputy Lynch's jaw flinched before his lips pulled into an easy smile. "Sure."

She closed the door and walked to her car. Did he believe her? If he did, it didn't show. It wasn't a complete lie. Lane didn't go to the bridge very often. Just when she needed to think. To breathe.

From the corner of her eye, she caught the deputy still watching her. *Just smile*, the voice in her head reminded her. *Pretend everything is fine. That you're fine.*

What were the odds that Deputy Charlie Lynch would catch her at a moment of weakness? And what if he told Sheriff Huggins? The sheriff was like a father to her, but what if the truth of why she was out there got back to her actual father?

Lane pressed her lips together, her fists tightening over the straps of her backpack. No. That couldn't happen. Wouldn't. Whatever opinion the new deputy formed about her she'd prove wrong. She had to—she had *everything* to lose.