



MIDNIGHT WATERS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ROSIE WYLOR-OWEN

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*Dedicated to my wonderful Patreon
supporters*

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CHAPTER 1

When someone is born into my family, another will die.

The phone call from my dad telling me that my cousin had gone into labour had me packing a bag and jumping on the first ferry to Dusk. I hadn't returned to the island I grew up on in years, and without this family emergency, I would have stayed away years longer.

I stood at the ferry railing, the salty air grating its way into my lungs. An acidic burn rose in my stomach as the ferry steered around jagged cliffs topped with thick forests.

Located way off the coast of France, Dusk welcomed thousands of supernatural tourists every year. For them, this island granted them freedom to be unapologetically magical in their downtime. For me, Dusk was home to a feud with deadly consequences.

I kept a hand on my coat pocket to sense any incoming calls. My dad wasn't one to text, especially at a time like this. I just hoped that my friends were.

Kira, Alison, and I had grown up together and even if we hadn't seen each other face-to-face in a while, we regularly had video chats. They had even visited me in London a few times, though neither one of them enjoyed the city as much as I did. I couldn't bring myself to text them until I got on the ferry, and neither one had responded yet.

I swallowed a lump in my throat. Even if they never got the chance, my last texts to them were sweet enough to serve up for dessert. If I was the one to die when this baby arrived, they would know I loved them.

Wooden docks zigzagged out from Newferry Port, and the spread of colourful storefronts that ran along the edge of the adjacent beach grew larger the nearer we drew.

The metal railing chilled my palms as I grasped it with both hands.

A long time ago, one of my ancestors had murdered a member of another ancient family in our very home. And with a bow forged from Dusk's Tree of Life, no less.

Almost simultaneously, a member of the Everhart family had killed another of my ancestors with a potion brewed from the heart of a dryad. Ever since, both our families were cursed to lose a relative whenever a baby was born.

The Arrowoods and Everharts were two families of witches that had hated each other since before the curse had fixed itself to us, and they wouldn't stop anytime soon.

I tapped the railing with my thumb as the ferry approached the dock. An ache rippled up my stomach and into my chest.

I wanted to see my dad. The constant feuding and fighting had made me want to put as much distance between me and Dusk as possible.

But what if, in doing so, I had just cut down the time I had left with my dad?

The curse had taken my mother the day I was born. He was the only parent I had left.

The ferry hadn't even stopped before I hopped the railing with my rucksack and suitcase and made off down the dock. I ignored the disgruntled shouts of an attendant behind me. Health and safety regulations wouldn't do much today if the curse had already marked this day as my last.

I pushed through the door into the waiting area, a fancy glass building with shiny turnstiles and plush seats. Only one man paced back and forth by the door, his mahogany hair peppered with more grey every year. He wore a red checkered jacket, loose threads tapering along his sleeves.

Every line on his face ran deep with a fear that always lay just beneath the surface. A fear I had brushed off until I learned about my cousin's pregnancy.

"Maeve." Dad spotted me before I could call for him, and he dashed to meet me as I extricated myself from the turnstile.

I had barely dropped my bags in time before he wrapped me up in a hug.

"Hi, Dad," I said.

We stood there for several moments, in the way of the influx of tourists who streamed past us with grunts and grumbles.

"How was your trip?" Dad asked when he finally released me and picked up my suitcase.

"Fine." A wave of unease overcame me.

Were we really going to act like this was a normal visit? As if neither one of us was at risk of dropping dead at any moment?

But that was apparently all the small talk Dad had in him. We put my bags in the trunk of his green Toyota and once we were in our seats, doors closed, the silence needled me with words I had to speak. But Dad beat me to it.

"Have you done something with your hair?" he asked as he started the engine.

"Huh? No." I took a lock between my fingers and held it up to my eyes.

Ebony from day one, my hair had a few blue tones when it caught the right light. According to Dad, Mum's hair had been the same.

"It looks more blue now," Dad said. "Are you sure you haven't dyed it?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Hmmm. I must be going crazy in my old age."

"Shut up, Dad. You're not old." I batted his arm with the back of my hand.

Dad ran a hand through his hair and then patted it back into place. "Days like today, I feel old."

Just like that, the gravity of our situation smothered me again.

“Dad, I’m sorry I didn’t come home sooner,” I said.

“Don’t be silly, now.” Dad shot a stern look at me. “You followed your gut and made something of yourself away from this place. I’m very proud of you, Maeve. Never forget that.”

I turned my face toward the window as tears prickled at my eyelids and my cheeks warmed.

He always told me things like that, but his praise cut a little deeper that day.

“Did you quit your job?” Dad asked.

“I had to.” I dabbed at a tear that squeezed out of the corner of my eye. “To come home for a while.”

My job had little room for upward mobility, but that never bothered me.

As a Nexus scuba diver, I had spent the past several years retrieving bodies and evidence from underwater. I loved the water, probably from a lifetime of open water swimming growing up on Dusk. But I had no fear of dead bodies, either.

Maybe the ever-present loom of death over our family all these years had made me indifferent to corpses.

“Perfect, I hoped you would. Maybe I can put you on the rota at the scuba centre.” Dad’s smile was weak, but his eyes shone. “Maeve... if the worst should happen, Brian will be in touch. You don’t need to worry. He will sort everything.”

Ah, Brian. Our family lawyer had no doubt been busy over the past few months.

I had exchanged several emails with him to settle my affairs. Not that I had much in the way of assets, but everything of mine would pass to Dad.

“I’ve spoken to Brian,” I said. “He’s sorted everything on my end, too.”

“Why?” Dad’s tone sharpened. “It won’t be you.”

“Dad, I’m not having this conversation with you again.”

Dad turned a corner a little too fast, and I slid across my seat, my seat belt straining.

He had a blind spot where the family curse was concerned. It didn’t matter that the curse had killed plenty of children before. In his mind, I was immune.

I had as much chance of dropping dead that day as any of our family members. We had argued about this far too much since finding out my cousin

was pregnant.

We would find out who drew the short straw before the day was out.

The streets of Dawn, the island's capital city, teemed with the first wave of spring tourists. The air rustled with new leaves and chatter. Stalls laden with produce had popped up along the street, and café tables spilled onto the pavements from their storefronts.

Dusk had a temperate climate all year round, but only when the sun came out did it and its residents rise from a dormant slumber.

High-rise buildings shimmered above us as we drove past. I tilted my head up to gaze at them through the sunroof.

London's skyscrapers were stoic, immovable, and imposed themselves on the city's skyline. In truth, the busy London skyline contributed to its vibrance. The residents of Dusk, however, had fought the proposition of high-rise buildings from the very beginning. In the end, the mayor of Dawn had established a compromise.

As we passed the skyscraper and turned off down the street, the building disappeared in a cloud of magical dust.

I ran the chain of my moon pendant I had inherited from my mother between my fingers. London had its unique brand of city vibrance, but it could never compare to the magic of Dusk.

The hospital was the only one on the entire island and stood on the outskirts of Dawn. I hadn't realised how small it was until I had seen the giant six-storey hospitals back on the mainland. But with magic on hand, very few people needed to stay overnight. Blowing fingers off in magical experiments was par for the course around here.

Dad parked in the parking lot of the hospital and we made our way to the maternity ward.

As we stepped through the double doors into the waiting room, a plethora of faces turned in our direction. The entire Arrowood family consisted of Dad's sister Sandra, my cousin Isadora, and my dad's cousins, Keith, Wendy, and their children and spouses.

I couldn't see Wendy or her husband Ray among the congregation of Arrowoods. Given their daughter, Rose, was giving birth today, perhaps they had joined her in the delivery room.

After today, Rose's husband would join the rest of us Arrowoods embroiled in the curse. The moment anyone had a genetic connection to the Arrowood family, their lives were also forfeit. I didn't understand how

anyone made peace with purposefully drawing themselves into this forsaken curse. Still, neither the Arrowoods nor the Everharts would exist without people willing to take the risk.

My aunt Sandra rose from her seat, a smile on her face but tears in her eyes. I hadn't seen her since leaving Dusk four years ago.

Originally a blonde, she had more silver in her hair these days and more lines around her eyes than I remembered.

"You've changed your hair," Sandra said, patting my head as she hugged me.

Her maroon scrubs scratched my chin in mid-hug. She worked in the magical department upstairs and dealt with backfired spells and potions. Some of the horror stories she used to tell me over dinner had my eight-year-old jaw dropping.

I decided not to answer her as we broke apart. Maybe I had been away so long that people had forgotten what I looked like.

"Any news?" Dad slipped his phone out of his pocket to check the time.

"Five centimeters dilated last we heard." Keith paced back and forth, his hands clasped behind his back.

The slivers of hair that ran along the sides of his head had gone, but plenty sprouted out of his ears. Keith had a quick temper and no filter, which had gotten him into more than enough trouble in the past. His wife, Lola, who sat hunched and dazed at the end of the row, never had any success in reeling him in, and their son was always at Keith's back.

I only hoped we didn't have to worry about Keith's behaviour when the worst happened.

Sandra placed a hand on my back and guided me into a seat. "It could be a few hours. Best we get comfortable."

Dad took a seat next to me and clasped his hands on top of his stomach, watching his thumbs as he twiddled them.

Sandra wrapped a tight arm around Isadora, who held a tissue to her face. Dozens of tear tracks marred her skin, and her eyes looked raw.

I tilted my head over the back of my seat. This was going to be a long few hours.



“I COULDN’T BELIEVE MY EYES. THE MOST DISOBEDIENT AND RUDE GROUP I had ever taken scuba diving, and they gave me a one-star review!” Dad threw his hands in the air. “Some days I wonder why I even put the company on those tourist review sites.”

I popped another potato chip into my mouth. There were worse last meals if this was the final thing I ever ate.

Dad owned the only scuba diving business on Dusk, but it didn’t hurt to have an internet presence. Without me, he would still be handing out leaflets on the street.

“Because more people will find the company on those sites than leave you bad reviews,” I said. “Everyone gets them.”

“There should be a site where I can review my customers.” Dad folded his arms, his bottom lip jutting out a little.

I smiled around the next potato chip. If such a site existed, I couldn’t let him find it.

The inconsequential chatter made for a great distraction; it kept the thoughts of imminent death of myself or a family member at bay.

“How’s Sammie and Flora?” I asked.

“Sammie hasn’t changed,” Dad said. “He’s still addicted to fetch. In fact, he plowed headfirst into a fence chasing a ball last week.”

I snorted. Our eight-year-old collie wouldn’t let anything stop him from getting his ball.

“I have to admit, I don’t know how Flora is,” he added. “She doesn’t give me many signals.”

“She has her signals. You’ve just got to look for them.”

“Well, if she has them, I haven’t seen them.” Dad shuddered. “I still don’t understand why you wanted a tarantula.”

“Spiders are gorgeous.”

“Your mum had a fascination with bugs, too.” Dad shook his head. “I could never understand why. Anyway, Flora is interesting to look at, I suppose. I took her out of your room and put her in my study in case she got lonely.”

“Aw, thanks, Dad.” I leaned my head on his shoulder.

Nobody in the Arrowood family understood Flora, but it warmed my heart to know that Dad cared for her. Even if she freaked him out.

I crumpled up my empty potato chip packet in one hand and felt for my phone with the other. When I pulled it out of my pocket, my face fell.

Kira and Allison still hadn’t answered my texts. I slipped my phone back in my pocket.

Another tear collected in the corner of my eye. A part of me had always known I might need to write final messages to my loved ones. I had only hoped that I could have made it to my thirties before needing to.

The double doors across the waiting room burst open. Ray ran in, tears streaming down his cheeks and into his beard.

I shot to my feet along with the rest of the family.

“It’s a boy!” Ray cried, his hand over his heart.

Before I could even crack a smile, Ray’s expression went slack, and he tumbled to the floor.



CHAPTER 2

“Cardiac arrest.” Sandra had her head bowed as she walked into the waiting room two hours later.

I clenched my hands together, fingers intertwined, as I leaned my elbows on my knees.

The method of the family deaths never changed; the heart of whoever was destined to die simply stopped. As magical curses went, it wasn't a bad way to go, but the fact Ray had died at all filled me with rage.

He had only shared in a handful of brief moments with the grandson he would have loved with all his heart. If the rest of the Arrowood deaths were

anything to go by, not even his ghost would remain to watch over his family.

Still, at least the new baby had both his parents to care for it. Most Arrowoods, since the curse began, couldn't say the same.

Dad plastered his palm over his mouth and bowed his head. He and Ray had a brotherly bond since long before Ray officially joined the family by marrying Wendy.

Every Friday they went out together for poker night with friends, and more than one of Dad's birthday presents from Ray were hand-whittled.

I wrapped an arm around Dad's shoulders, but he remained stiff.

Sandra looked around the empty waiting room. Me, Dad, and Isadora were the only ones to stay after Ray's body had been taken away.

Part of me resented them taking off the moment they knew they were safe, but deep down I knew they needed to begin to recover from the events of the day.

The golden rays of dying sunlight slipped between the blinds and spilled over the walls.

"How's Wendy?" I asked.

Sandra shook her head. "Inconsolable. I'll stay here with them, and the rest of you should go home and get some rest."

"No, Sandy." Dad looked up, his eyes shining. "You shouldn't have to do this all by yourself."

"You'll be doing me a favour by taking Izzy home." Sandra patted Isadora's head, which roused her daughter from a bleary sleep.

"But—"

"No buts. Go home, and I'll bring them all back when they're ready," Sandra said.

Dad's shoulders sagged.

As the eldest of the two of them, Sandra had spent most of her life bossing Dad around. He had told me more than once that he didn't quite know what to do if she ever stopped.

"Come on, Dad." I stood and hooked a hand under his arm. "Let's get back. There's nothing more we can do."

Sandra accompanied us to the sliding doors and gave us all a hug before waving us off across the car park.

"I'll drive," I said, holding my hand out for the keys.

Dad slapped them into my hand, every movement looking like a monumental effort.

“Look at this, Ben. Walk of shame if I ever saw one.” A voice I didn’t recognise snatched my attention and I turned around.

Two young men stood several yards away on the pavement, watching us. Or at least, one of them was. The other only looked up from his phone once his associate spoke.

Adrenaline flooded my muscles, and I stiffened. Adrian Everhart sidled off the pavement in our direction, flicking a cigarette between his fingers.

He had shed much of his puppy fat since I had last seen him and grown a good six inches. His jaw and cheekbones had sharpened, but something told me his tongue remained the sharpest thing about him.

“Ade, don’t,” the other Everhart said, the one I knew more about, Ben, Adrian’s older brother and a boy I had gone to school with.

They shared the same jet-black hair and brown eyes, but Ben had a gentler face. His hair had grown out into a tousled undercut since last I saw him.

Ben grabbed Adrian’s arm, but Adrian shook him off.

I squared my shoulders as Isadora hurried toward the car. She never had been one for conflict.

“One of you finally copped it?” Adrian’s pace quickened as Ben swiped at his jacket. “Long overdue if you ask me.”

My fist that held the car keys twitched.

“Get out of here, now,” I said.

“Or what?” Adrian was only a few feet away from me when Ben finally grabbed hold of him and yanked him backward.

“Or I’ll come over there and knock your teeth out,” I snapped.

“Maeve.” Dad placed his hand on my shoulder and steered me toward the car. “Stop.”

“He needs to be knocked down a peg,” I said. “Do you think Keith would stand down if someone said something like that to him?”

“Since when do you take life lessons from Keith?” Dad asked.

He had me there.

London had forced me to develop a hard shell. Part of defending yourself from the aggression of strangers was making them believe you would stand up for yourself if you needed to.

In *Dusk*, walking away was the only acceptable solution to conflict.

I snorted. How much had the outside world changed me since I left?

Adrian’s taunts echoed around the car park as we got into the car.

When I started the car, I revved the engine and drove out of the car park at a high speed, pressing my middle finger to the window as we passed them.

I glanced into the rearview mirror to see his reaction, but Adrian didn't even look in our direction. Instead, he focused on Ben who poked him in the chest before spreading his arms wide.

Hah. That dickhead deserved a dressing down.

Ben and Adrian Everhart hadn't been born into this curse, but they were in it whether they liked it or not.

In an attempt to get around it, decades ago, the Everharts had travelled to Japan to adopt some kids. It wasn't until they returned to Dusk with Ben and Adrian that they realised two Everhart family members had died.

This curse had no loopholes. Adoption wrapped people up in this shit show the same way as being born into it.

My mind teemed with smart remarks I wanted to make to the next Everhart I saw as we wound down country lanes. The eastern half of Dusk housed the tourist towns and larger settlements, whereas in the west, where we lived, it was more rural.

Dad and Isadora remained silent, both staring out of the window. I was content to leave them to their thoughts.

Fireflies drifted between the trees along the road, their glow outmatching the dying sunlight.

Despite the day's events, the sense of home brought an inner peace I knew was short-lived. It wouldn't take long to get embroiled in the feud again, and taunts from across a car park were on the milder end of the feud's spectrum.

As we pulled up to the electric gates, I wound down my window.

"What's the code now?" I asked.

Keith changed it every week.

"Six, four, seven, two," Dad said.

I punched it in and the gates opened. Up the winding drive to the top of the hill, Arrowood manor stood as proud as ever. Built by my ancestors in the curse's wake, it stood at four storeys and was the length of more than three Olympic swimming pools.

Our ancestors had decided that safety from the Everharts meant sticking together, and they created a red brick fortress so large that it would fit every generation to come. On this whole island, Arrowood manor was the one place we were safe from the Everharts.

Revenge wasn't the only reason they might try to harm us. A tentative rumour had banded about both the Arrowoods and the Everhart families for years that if one family went extinct, the other would be freed from the curse. Of course, the opposite could also be true in that both families would perish if one did. In my opinion, that possibility was the only reason we were all still standing.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I whipped it out as I pulled into a parking space.

"Is it Sandra? Do we need to go back?" Dad asked.

"It's Kira." I tapped a quick text back. "She's just making sure I'm okay."

I stowed my phone away as we got out of the car. After wondering if I would ever see my friends again, the edges of the icy feeling in my chest warmed at the prospect of having more time with them.

I grabbed my bag and suitcase from the trunk and followed Dad and Isadora into the house.

My heart sank as I stepped into the entrance corridor.

Draped across the wood-panelled walls, a dusty tapestry hung. Depictions of fights, complete with blood, balls of magic, and potion bottles had been weaved into its surface. And of course, the famed bow and dryad's heart stood together at the top, a black lightning bolt separating the two.

"I thought we agreed to take that down?" I said as I put my suitcase down by the hat rack.

We had put it to a vote when I was fourteen. I remembered because it was the first time I had been allowed a say in family matters. We had all but unanimously decided to store the wretched thing in the attic with other old feud-related memorabilia.

"Well... many of us had a change of heart after we learned Rose was pregnant," Dad said.

Great. I'd have a daily reminder of our family problems from the moment I came down for breakfast.

"Izzy, do you want some food?" Dad asked as Isadora made her way toward the grand staircase at the end of the corridor.

"I just want to go to bed, Theo." Her teenage tone told us everything we needed to know.

A series of excitable barks echoed from an adjacent corridor, and a moment later, a fluffy collie skidded around the corner.

"Hey, Sammie." I dropped to my knees just in time for my first face lick.

“Ew.”

I scrunched up my face under his barrage of affection but hugged him all the same. He was a smart boy, but that didn't mean he couldn't forget me.

“Oh gods, he hasn't had his dinner,” Dad said, heading for the kitchen door.

At the word ‘dinner,’ Sammie whipped around and hurtled after Dad, disappearing into the kitchen in all of three seconds.

I wiped the drool off my face with my sleeve as I stood up. Sammie's food motivation was strong enough to make training him easy. But he would still run away from a treat at full speed if he caught the scent of a decent steak.

I wasn't hungry, and there was another animalistic friend I had to say ‘hi’ to.

On my way to Dad's study, I inhaled a musty breath and tilted my head toward the vaulted ceiling. Apart from the addition of the tapestry, nothing had changed. My great-grandmother's hand-carved sigil of Aquarius hung on the wall, next to a framed family photo. It had faded a little more after years in the sunlight, but Dad would replace it again when it whited out too much.

I tried the handle to Dad's study and the door opened. It was always a toss-up if it was locked or not.

A cloud of vanilla scent breezed past me as I entered, and I eyed the line of giant scented candles on his desk.

“For the love of...” I picked up an unopened candle and looked it over. “Perfectly Pomegranate? Jeez, Dad.”

He had teetered on the edge of a candle addiction before I left, and without me to talk him out of his purchases, he had really gone off the rails.

I put the candle down as a golden glint caught my eye. A harp—Mum's harp.

I leaned against the desk and gripped the edge with my hands. Dad had insisted on lessons when I was little, and I had gotten quite good by my teens. But the older I became, the more I realised Dad wanted to keep my mum alive through that hobby. Ever since that realisation, playing the harp hadn't felt the same.

Turning away from the harp, I scanned the room and found what I was looking for. On the top of a bookshelf next to the window stood a glass enclosure packed with mossy branches and ferns.

“Hey, bristle-breeches,” I said and opened the plastic top to stick my hand

in.

Flora wiggled her two front legs at my hand before scuttling inside her favourite hollow log.

My heart sank a little.

Apparently, Flora's memory wasn't as good as Sammie's. Still, I would stay long enough for her to get to know me again.

"Is she all right?" Dad poked his head in the doorway.

"She's great." I removed my hand and closed the lid. "Thanks for taking care of her."

"You can repay the favour by giving me a tune, if you'd like." Dad stepped through the doorway and nodded at the harp.

I tensed and fiddled with the beaded friendship bracelet from Allison around my wrist.

He was always going to ask, eventually. I had just hoped it would be later rather than sooner.

"I'm kinda tired. Might have a shower and go to bed," I said.

"All right." Dad pursed his lips but opened his arms to me as I headed for the door.

I lingered in his hug for a moment. A few hours ago, I wondered if I would still have a dad by the end of the day.

"I'm glad you're home," Dad said.

"Me too."

I bid him good night and heaved my bags up the stairs. Still licking his lips, Sammie bounded up after me.

The long stretch of floorboards that ran the length of the second floor took me to my bedroom right at the end.

I kicked open the door with my foot and Sammie ran in ahead of me, jumping up on the bed. Someone had draped a pair of clean pyjamas and a folded towel on my ruby duvet.

I cracked a smile.

Dad would probably still parent me when I turned fifty.

Throwing my bags down, I took stock of my room. Nobody had touched anything since I left.

My bookshelf burst with sea creature and insect books, along with the one romantic comedy Kira had gotten me for a birthday that I'd never touched.

The boy band posters peeled off the walls, but I wouldn't take them down until they fell off themselves. All my playlists were still packed with guilty

pleasures.

I showered in my en suite, washing away two days' worth of sweat from fearing the mortality of myself and my family. Who needed workouts when impending doom would do?

As I reached to turn off the shower, a jolting sensation rocketed up my legs. I stumbled against the wall and pressed my back against it to steady myself.

Weird. I slapped a hand to my left thigh as the sensation subsided. A dull urgency remained, seeping into my core.

I turned off the shower and grabbed a towel. Maybe it was some leftover panic from earlier in the day. That was all.

Once I had changed into my pyjamas, I pounced on Sammie. His tongue lolled out the side of his mouth as he rolled over for tummy rubs.

“Silly pup.” I scratched his belly as I fell onto my back on the bed.

Today could have gone so differently.

In some ways, I had expected it to. The curse had no rhyme or reason. It was like a blindfolded executioner while we all stood on the firing line waiting for it to fire at random until it killed someone.

The Arrowoods took care of their own, and I knew how lucky I was to have such a large family. But if Dad had died today, would I have even wanted to stay? What else really tied me here besides my friends?

I rolled onto my stomach to rearrange my pillows.

I couldn't dwell on what could have been. The point of coming home had been to reconnect with everyone. Who knew, maybe after a few shifts at Dad's scuba business, I might feel at home again.

My skin prickled. Working was all well and good, but I would have to return to looking over my shoulder for Everharts. Especially if they were all as eager to rub our loss in our faces as Adrian was.

I folded my hands on my stomach. At least with the baby born, the only way we could die was if an Everhart or two broke in and murdered us.

Sammie sat bolt upright on the bed and stared at the window.

I stiffened. “What is it?”

I followed Sammie's gaze just in time to watch someone pry open my window from the outside.



CHAPTER 3

Sammie scrambled toward the window, barking.

“Sammie, no!” I vaulted off the bed and took off after him.

Whoever dared break into a house after dark likely wouldn’t think twice about harming him.

“Oh, give over!” Kira cried and squeaked as she tripped on the windowsill and toppled toward the floor.

But half a second before she hit the ground, Kira beat her silver wings and hovered in place. I threw my hands over my face as iridescent dust billowed across the carpet.

Sammie let out an almighty sneeze and with another squeak, Kira plummeted the final few inches to the ground.

“What are you doing, you psycho?” I grabbed her arm and helped her stagger upright.

As if nearly giving me a heart attack wasn’t bad enough, now I had to vacuum my bedroom.

“Uh, psychos, thank you very much.” Kira jerked a thumb at the window, running a hand through her blond ringlets.

I squinted into the night in time to see a pair of green eyes peeking above the windowsill.

Allison would have wanted to use the front door rather than climb the trellis to my bedroom window.

“Get in here, weirdo.” I grinned as I extended a hand to her.

Allison reached through the window, her hand and arm wooden and sporting delicate patterns of tree rings.

As a dryad, whenever she touched wood, she reverted to her forest form.

I grabbed her hand and yanked her through the window as flesh crept back up her arm and to her fingers.

“I told her we should have knocked,” Allison said through a curtain of lime-green hair.

“We don’t have to knock. We’re family.” Kira swept the fairy dust off her short skirt as Sammie sniffed her hand.

I threw my arms around them both, crushing them into a bear hug.

Their visits to London were fleeting, and neither one of them enjoyed city life. Especially Allison, who preferred sleeping in trees to pull-out sofa beds.

A familial warmth flooded my limbs as we rocked in each other’s arms—a sensation that felt just like home.

Sammie sat and stared at us, wagging his tail.

“You are in so much trouble.” Kira jabbed me in the side with her fingers. “Why didn’t you come home sooner? You knew Rose was going to pop soon!”

“The baby came early. I didn’t know I was coming home until late last night,” I said.

“If we’d known, we would have looked out for your texts.” Allison rested her head on my shoulder. “We were so worried.”

“Don’t be nice to her.” Kira elbowed Allison in the ribs, making her squeal. “She’s in the doghouse.”

I snorted.

Kira loved her grudges, but with her friends, they didn't last long.

I pulled blankets out of my wardrobe, and we curled up on the bed. Allison emptied snacks out of her tiny rucksack onto my duvet—standard procedure for our girly sleepovers.

Sammie shimmied his way in between us, on the hunt for the best position in which to get fuss.

“How's Rose after all this?” Allison asked, rubbing one of Sammie's ears between her fingers.

“Haven't seen her yet, but they're keeping her overnight,” I said.

“And what about you?” Kira's wings ruffled beneath her blanket.

The corner of my mouth twitched. “Careful, Kira. Someone might think you're letting me off the hook.”

Kira's eyes narrowed. “You wish.”

“But you're staying now, aren't you?” Allison's eyes sparkled. “You quit, right?”

“Yup. Slammed my badge on the chief's desk and everything.” I smirked and snatched a bag of Skittles out of the snack pile.

Kira grabbed my Skittles and popped them open, stealing a pinch of them before handing them back to me. “Liar. You probably gave your two weeks' notice like a square.”

“Maybe get a job before you judge me,” I said.

“Nobody here wants your nine-to-five crap.” Kira gestured around the circle before ruffling Sammie's head. “Do we, Sammie?”

He yawned and rested his head on her knee.

“I just don't understand it.” Allison also dipped her hand into my Skittles. “Why is the feud still going on? Surely both families can get on for one day to try and break the curse?”

If only.

More than a dozen family meetings had addressed that same issue, but they always resulted in the same conclusion. The Everharts weren't to be trusted and therefore, they would screw us over if we made a truce.

I couldn't pretend I didn't have my suspicions that the Everharts would do that. Adrian had taken enough joy in the death of just one of us. The entire family would throw an island-wide party if we all copped it.

“It's complicated.” I emptied the rest of my Skittles into my palm, only to find there were five left.

The food theft I hadn't missed.

"Forget all that depressing stuff." Kira waved her hands at us both. "We've got some living to do. You are joining me and Ali on an adventure."

"Oh, gods. What kind of adventure?" I popped the candies into my mouth and snatched another bag from the pile.

Alison tapped her fingertips together and fidgeted in place. "We're signing up to a dating agency."

I snorted as I opened my candy bag. "Uh, no way."

I liked getting dates the normal way: by rocking up to a club and playing Russian roulette but with men instead of bullets.

"It's not a normal dating agency." Kira grabbed for my Skittles, but I whipped them out of her reach. "They use magic to match you with the most compatible date."

"It gets better," Alison added. "The first three dates are anonymous and only after that do you reveal your identity."

"Uh-huh. What's the murder rate for that kind of setup?" I asked. "Anonymity's a great way to get shanked if your date goes wrong."

"You don't go on a date anywhere on the island, stupid." Kira grabbed a packet of chips. "The dates take place at the dating agency to keep everyone safe."

Sammie sniffed at my Skittles and I began shovelling them all into my mouth to stop any more thievery.

"It's still a nuts idea," I said with my mouth half-full.

Alison stretched her arms into the air. "You can't be so quick to dismiss this, given the state of your love life."

I pressed a palm to my chest and opened my mouth in mock shock. "Brutal, Ali. Really brutal."

True, I hadn't had a long-term relationship in years, but I wasn't one to mess around. If they weren't right for me, I didn't beat around the bush telling them to hit the bricks.

"The truth hurts, girl," Kira said. "Look at it this way: you have a chance to get laid. You're overdue."

"We're allowed to do it on the first date if we want to." Alison winked at me.

"Pffft." I couldn't quite believe that shy Alison viewed first date anonymous sex as an upside to this weird dating arrangement.

"Come on." Kira smacked me on the arm with her ring hand.

I rubbed the spot where she hit me. “Ow.”

“If we do this and you don’t, you’re going to look like a wimp,” Kira said.

“Only to you two,” I said. “And I don’t care if anyone thinks I’m a wimp.”

“Come on, please?” Kira pouted. “You can run out on the first date if you really want to. Just try it.”

I eyed the pile of snacks, contemplating a candy bar to deter thieves.

One thing was for certain: I wouldn’t hear the end of this if I didn’t go along with their insane idea. But on the one hand, it could have been my last day alive. Maybe I needed a little crazy right now.

“Fine,” I said. “But if this goes sideways, I’m holding it over you both for the rest of our lives.”

“Deal.” Kira held up her crisps like a drink to toast the pact.

Alison and I picked up a snack each, and we touched them together above Sammie’s head. He sniffed up at them, his eyes as wide as saucers.

I pulled open my bag of chips and dipped my hand inside, eyeing Kira.

Despite their harebrained ideas and kleptomaniac tendencies, I couldn’t deny I had missed the craziness they brought.

And it didn’t get much crazier than an anonymous mystery date.



I AWOKE IN A TANGLE OF BLANKETS AND LIMBS, BOTH HUMAN AND FURRY.

Like most of our sleepovers, we had fallen asleep chatting and eating rubbish. Neither Kira, Allison, or Sammie stirred as I rolled off the bed to have a shower and get dressed.

In all the craziness, I had forgotten to attend to some important business.

Once I had thrown on a casual blue dress, my favourite black fashion belt, and a pair of leggings, I grabbed a smooth rock with a hole full of small crystals from my rucksack.

Mum would like it. Maybe.

The sun was still rising, and the rest of the family hadn’t yet stirred. The corridors were empty as I walked down the stairs toward the garden.

My feet stopped halfway down the hall, almost against my will. A dark feeling blossomed through my veins, infecting every corner of me. At that moment, I realised why I had stopped.

I turned to the door on my right, which was scratched and dented. It was the one door in the house that nobody cared for.

Kneeling down, I looked through the keyhole.

The sight stole my breath, like always.

A wooden pillar stood in the middle of the room, with an arrow lodged in it halfway up. The arrow that helped start it all.

It, like the bow that had fired it, were gifts from the dryads that had welcomed my ancestors to the island. Yet, my ancestors had used it to kill a member of the family they had journeyed here with. Of course, if the Everharts hadn't also killed a member of my family, maybe they would have escaped the curse.

The arrow was a stoic reminder of our legacy, and anyone who tried to remove it died as suddenly as Ray had yesterday. I couldn't help but look at it sometimes.

I got up and headed at double speed toward the back door. We had enough morbidity around here without me staring at that damn arrow.

I slipped out of the kitchen door and into the garden, the grass tickling my bare feet, and the dew brushed my toes.

It didn't bother me. In fact, I loved the water so much I had made immersing myself in it my entire career. Even a smidgen of dew was enough to brighten my day.

Well-kept topiaries dotted the lawn, and pristine flower beds ran along the hedge. Sandra had the hedges planted when I was young to hide what lay beyond.

I found the iron-wrought gate between the hedges and stepped between rows upon rows of mossy headstones. The family graveyard held every Arrowood who had fallen since the day we landed here. But the one I was looking for wasn't far.

"Hi, Mum." I sat down cross-legged in front of her granite gravestone.

Dad had tucked the cloth he used to polish the stone under a glass jar half-filled with beach pebbles. I popped mine inside.

Dad's stories of the good times he spent with Mum often involved her running around on the beach, picking up pretty rocks. As I grew up, a tradition developed of finding nice rocks to lie at her gravestone.

“I got that one in the Lake District, camping with some friends. I hope you like it.”

Whether she could hear me or not was another matter.

Dad persisted for years in finding a necromancer that could find Mum’s spirit. But like every other Arrowood before her, she was nowhere to be found.

It wasn’t a bad thing that she had moved on. Spirits that stayed often had unfinished business or emotional burdens holding them back. If she was gone, she at least had a happy, fulfilling life.

I brought my knees up to my chest and rested my chin on them.

My aunts had especially supported Dad after Mum died, so I had some female influence in my life. But I had always envied Isadora’s and Rose’s relationships with their mothers. From what Dad told me growing up, Mum would have made a wonderful mother and a great friend.

“I’m sorry I haven’t come to see you lately, but I’ll be around more now.” I ran my fingers over the letters of her name: Celeste Arrowood.

Not her original name.

Mum had arrived on the island with no memory of her past, including what species of supernatural she was. The family had guessed she was a witch based on her magical capabilities.

A sharp breeze ruffled my hair, and a chill rippled across my shoulders.

“I’ll be back, Mum. I love you.” I stood and rested my hand on top of her gravestone.

The wind kicked up as I picked my way across the garden to the kitchen door, and once I had stepped inside, the door slammed shut behind me.

Allison jumped, spilling coffee all over the breakfast bar.

“We thought you’d run away again.” Kira cracked an egg into a sizzling frying pan on the giant farmhouse kitchenette.

A family this big needed all eight hobs daily. London had shocked me with its tiny apartments and kitchens. I hadn’t realised until moving into my flat that our giant kitchen island and plethora of cabinets was actually a rarity.

“So you thought you’d raid my kitchen?” I grabbed the full coffee pot and poured myself a cup.

“Again, we’re family. This is our kitchen.” Kira gestured around the room with a spatula. “Now sit your butt down. I’m making breakfast.”

Alison and I exchanged exasperated looks as I joined her at the breakfast bar.

“What shall we do today?” Alison leaned across the bar to grab a paper towel and mopped up her spill. “Shall we get ice cream and go see the petrified dragon like we used to?”

“You’re obsessed with that dragon.” I brought my cup to my face and inhaled the scent of roasted goodness.

“Yeah, we’re three more visits away from staging an intervention,” Kira said over her shoulder.

“You two are insane,” Alison said, throwing the balled-up paper towel at me. “That hunk of rock used to be a dragon. An actual dragon. How is that not amazing to you?”

“Someone could have just carved it and said it was a real dragon,” Kira said.

I picked up the paper towel and chucked it at Kira. It bounced off the back of her head and she spun around to glare at me.

“We agreed we wouldn’t ever say that out loud,” I reminded her.

“Yeah, well, she’s old enough to know Santa isn’t real.”

“You’re both super mean,” Alison said and drank from her mug.

The sound of the front door opening and shutting had me checking my phone. Eight a.m.

Most of the family worked for themselves or the family businesses, except Sandra. This meant a lot of work flexibility and a general culture of rising late the day after a family emergency.

Who was up this early?

Dad walked in fully dressed, shedding his coat.

“Have you been out already?” I asked.

“Yes. Hello, girls,” he added, waving to Kira and Alison. “I got a call from the chief a few hours ago. There’s been an incident.”

I stiffened. “What do you mean, an incident?”

Dad draped his coat on the back of a kitchen chair and leaned on it, bowing his head.

“I’m going to need to put you on the rota for work today,” he said. “We’ve got a body to retrieve.”



CHAPTER 4

When I left my job at Nexus retrieving cadavers from bodies of water, I hadn't expected my skills would be required on Dusk.

People died on Dusk sure enough, but a body in the ocean wasn't a common occurrence. The locals were too wise to the temperaments of the sea and mostly stopped tourists from doing anything stupid.

Chances were the body we were going to drag out of the ocean was a tourist who had made special efforts to act like an idiot.

Wearing my long black coat to cover up my casual attire, I walked side by side with Dad into the police station to meet with the chief.

The police station on Dusk was technically an offshoot of Nexus, but as Dusk was so independent from the mainland, they labelled themselves as they pleased.

The excited receptionist leapt up from her seat to buzz us through from the empty waiting room as soon as we entered. Dusk had a lower crime rate than a Temple of Pisces. This body was definitely the most interesting thing to happen in months.

We followed the single corridor to the chief's office in the centre of the building and Dad knocked. A faint "come in" granted us entry.

Chief Gretchen Mallory looked up from the file she was reading next to the window.

Dressed in a dark suit, shoulder pads and all, a Sigil of Libra hung around her neck. Entirely grey before reaching forty, Mallory had dedicated her whole life to working her way up to the police chief.

Last time I was on Dusk, she was still a bored detective contemplating a big move to Sydney.

"Thank you both for coming." She shut her file and gestured for me to close the door. "It's nice to see you back, Maeve. Are you staying long?"

"For the foreseeable future," I said, clasping my hands together in front of me.

"Excellent timing on your part. I'm told you have particular expertise in retrieving bodies from water." Mallory sidled behind her desk, hands clasped behind her back. "I'm very sorry for your loss, by the way. Ray was a good man."

Dad nodded stiffly.

"Where is the body?" I asked.

"Down by Qest Cove. On the rocks, beneath the cliff, so in quite an awkward location. Will that be a problem?" Mallory said.

"Shouldn't be with the right care," I said. "Do we know who we're retrieving?"

A crunching noise interrupted me as the door flew open.

"You can't just break in here!" a voice commanded from out in the hall.

Three young men staggered inside, one of them shaking off a police officer who had him by the arm.

I flinched.

Ben and Adrian Everhart, along with their cousin, Matthew, fought their way to the chief's desk, dragging the police officer along with them. Dad placed a hand on my shoulder and pulled me along as he took two steps back. Of all the good it would do. It wouldn't take them long to notice us.

Ben's biceps strained against the fabric of his t-shirt as he fought his way to the desk, the faint outline of defined abs running toward his belt.

I snapped my head up, my cheeks flushing. What in the name of Scorpio was wrong with me? Maybe Kira and Allison were right. I definitely needed to get laid if an Everhart could catch my eye.

He had been a late bloomer years ago, and since I'd been gone, he appeared to have become... a man. The hoodie he wore yesterday had concealed an interesting structure.

"It's Tyler, isn't it?" Ben pushed his way past Adrian and grabbed hold of the edge of the chief's desk. "The body. It's him."

Tyler Bakewell? He had been Ben's best friend all the way through school, but had always been lovely to me, regardless of the feud. Tyler's mother used to work with Sandra until her early retirement from disability a few years ago. If I remembered correctly, Dad still had poker nights with Tyler's stepdad from time to time.

It didn't sound like Ben was really asking if the body was Tyler's. He already knew, somehow.

The police officer yanked Matthew toward the door with little success.

"Get out of my office this instant." Mallory pointed to the door. "We are conducting confidential police business."

That was when Ben looked over at us, his eyes narrowing when he caught sight of us.

"Are you serious?" Ben pushed himself off the desk. "You're putting Arrowoods on this case?"

"Now listen here." Mallory stepped around her desk to stop almost nose to nose with Ben.

Ben took a step back, his shoulders hunching.

"This matter is of no concern to you," she said. "When we have information to relay to the public, you will hear about it."

"It is my concern!" Ben cried. "Tyler's missing. I need to know if it's him."

"Wait a sec." Adrian squared his shoulders as he turned to me and Dad. "They're scuba people. Are you asking them to get the body?"

Ben's face fell and his eyes shone. I might have felt bad for him if he wasn't an Everhart.

"Get out, all of you. Now!" Mallory picked up her desk phone and spoke into it too low for me to hear.

"They'll sabotage his body, just you watch!" Adrian said. "Give us the body of that old geezer of theirs and see if they play fair."

Air whooshed past me, and Dad was several steps ahead of me before I knew he had moved.

Adrian's face cracked into a grin and he raised his fists, slipping into a fighting stance.

I lunged and grabbed Dad's arm, yanking him back with such force that he almost fell over. Adrian sprung forward in his stance and jabbed a fist toward us.

Stepping in between them, I swiped Adrian's forearm with my own, deflecting the punch off to my right. The momentum shifted Adrian's weight onto his front foot. I raised my leg and swept his foot out from under him.

Adrian crashed to the ground, his gasp rattling on its way out as his eyes bugged out of his head.

"That's enough!" Mallory's shout came as half a dozen police officers spilled into the room.

Ben smirked at me as the police streamed in my direction.

I gulped.

But when Mallory pointed her finger, it didn't land on me, but Adrian.

"Put him in holding to cool off," she said.

Ben opened his mouth to argue, but shut it again when Mallory's magic finger shot in his direction.

"One more word out of either of you, and you'll join him. Understand?" Her words came out soft and dangerous.

Ben nodded, his eyes almost crossed as he focused on her finger.

"What?" Adrian cried, as two officers rolled him onto his front and slapped him in handcuffs. "She attacked me!"

Dad's lips parted, but I elbowed him in the ribs before he could say anything. He grunted and rubbed the spot I hit, glowering at me.

I tried not to look pleased as the officers led Adrian out in handcuffs, his brother and cousin along behind him.

On his way out, Ben shot me a look so venomous, I doubted any antidote would have saved me.

The door closed on them and when the silence returned, the sound of my thrumming heartbeat filled the air.

Mallory put her hands on her hips. "You've got some decent self-defence skills there, Maeve."

I shrugged. "They get me by."

Mainland Europe was a much riskier place than Dusk. I had been sure to go to regular combat classes just to keep myself safe.

"Well, if you can stop all your family behaving quite as rashly as your father, I have hope for the Arrowoods after all," she said.

Dad shook, his jaw clenching. "I know you think that this is some petty squabble, Gretchen, but we have lost many lives in this fight. We can't just end it."

"And yet end it you should," Mallory said. "Wouldn't that save more lives? Wouldn't it have saved Ray's?"

I rubbed my temples to calm the headache brewing there.

It hadn't taken long for the feud and the curse to take centre stage in my life again. No wonder I had left.

Mallory raised her finger, and Dad closed his mouth, though his cheeks remained red and his eyes hard.

"I've given this speech to both your families too many times," she said. "And frankly, I didn't expect to have to give it again, today anyway. All I want to know is, can you retrieve this body for me?"

"Yes," I said, eager to move the conversation along. "We can."

"We have the skill set available to us." Dad thrust his hands into his pockets, all formality gone.

Mallory opened her mouth to speak but a question burned in my throat that I couldn't leave unanswered.

"Is Ben right, Chief?" I asked. "Do you think body is Tyler Bakewell?"

"At this point it's too early to say," she said. "But given that he is the only person on the island who has been missing for twenty-four hours, it's likely that we will be retrieving Tyler's body, yes."

I dropped my hands to my sides, my shoulders sinking. It seemed even less fair than Ray's death that someone as young as Tyler could lose his life.

"But where is the body, exactly?" Dad asked.

Mallory picked up a pen and twirled it between her fingers. "That's where we may have a problem. The body is in merfolk territory."

"Why is that a problem?" I asked.

The merfolk on and around Dusk kept their distance from the “land dwellers” as they referred to us. But there had always been an element of cooperation between us.

What had changed since I left?

“The merfolk have expressed their concerns in the run-up to the new tourist season,” Mallory said. “Tourists have disrespected their boundaries over the past few years. We didn’t take their demands as... seriously as we should have, and they have banned land dwellers from their waters.”

I fiddled with the ends of my hair. “Have they cut off all communication?”

“The only thing we have available to us is the visitor’s boat,” Mallory said.

The boat the merfolk had established to carry land-dweller visitors to and from Magdora, their island off Dusk’s south coast, was under their control. By disallowing boats and Dusk residents into their waters and on their land, they had made themselves clear: only they would decide who could visit them.

It was all I could do not to make a curt remark about the police department’s lack of tact. The merfolk didn’t ask for much, but they drew hard boundaries.

“I’ll see if I can talk to them,” I said.

Mallory raised her head an inch. “You still have a good relationship with them?”

“I mean, it’s been a while, but I hope so.”

Dad had taken me for lots of walks on the beach, following the routes he and Mum took before she died, along the south coast of Dusk. I had gotten to know many of the young merfolk while swimming and made some friends.

Last time I checked, we were still on good terms.

“I would appreciate you reaching out to them,” Mallory said. “Let me know how it goes, and we can start planning a retrieval.”

“Not a problem,” I said.

Mallory showed us out and had barely closed the door before Dad muttered under his breath, “Can you believe that? How brutish of those boys. I can’t say I’m surprised, though.”

“Dad, just leave it.” I was already getting sick of the fighting.

Not that I hadn’t enjoyed throwing Adrian on his ass. I indulged in a secret smile as we made our way back to the car.



THE SAND CRUNCHED BENEATH MY SNEAKERS ON THE WALK ACROSS CELESTIA beach. The breeze played with me, dying into a gentle caress one minute and then whacking me in the face the next.

I had learned to be grateful for the sudden winds. They cleared the clouds and made way for the sun. The sea stretched endlessly under a perfectly blue sky, smeared with a few scattered clouds.

Days like this were the ones I loved to venture outside.

Sammie ran along the shore, darting in and out of the water as he played chicken with the waves. It would have been a crime not to take him with me.

I traipsed across the beach, hugging my coat to me until I got to an old rowing boat wedged between two rocks. Faded crystals lined the pale splintered wood with the telltale glint of magic within.

At the stern of the boat, a large opal bulged.

I whistled for Sammie and heaved him into the boat. He panted and wagged his tail as I clambered in after him and sat down.

“Hopefully I’m still a friend to the merfolk,” I said, taking Sammie’s face between my hands and fussing him.

If they refused me access to the island to speak with their High Priestess, I didn’t know how we’d retrieve the body.

A head poked out of the water at the side of the boat and a mermaid grinned up at me. Her teeth were brilliantly white, and her mossy green hair plastered itself to her head.

Her skin had a silvery sheen so subtle that anyone might perceive it as a figment of their imagination or trick of the light.

“Maeve.” She rested her chin on the edge of the boat, grinning as Sammie licked her cheek. “Where’ve you been?”

“Mylania, you know where I’ve been. I told you before I left, remember?”

Mylania rolled her eyes. “It was a rhetorical question. You said you’d be back in a few years, max.”

I smiled sheepishly. That was the same story I told myself until I actually settled in London.

“Big-city life agreed with me.” I shrugged. “How have you been?”

Mylania cracked a small smile and pressed her hand to the opal inside the boat. With a jerk, the boat got moving.

Excellent. I still had their acceptance.

“We’re much better now that we’ve outlawed land dwellers from our territory. No offence,” Mylania added as she swam along, flicking her tail lazily. “No more unexpected intrusions. We’re all very relaxed. Are you staying on Dusk or are you visiting?”

“Staying for now,” I said.

I didn’t exactly have anything to go back to except a few work friends whom I could still text.

“And what brings you to Magdora?” Mylania asked in a singsong voice. “Is it just to see my beautiful face?”

“That’s always one of my reasons.” I grinned at her. “But I have something I need to speak to Janeira about. Something important.”

“Oooh, serious matters. Did you bring trouble back with you from the mainland?”

I shuddered in the wake of a harsh breeze. “I hope not.”

The boat skimmed across the water, slowing only when it slid up the beach of Magdora.

I clambered out of the boat with Sammie and bid Mylania goodbye as she splashed back out into the sea.

As I walked up the beach toward the collection of huts that marked the merfolk settlement, I realised they had built a few more homes since I last visited.

I followed the sound of laughter from along the beach to a stretch where the merfolk coven gathered. Most of them frolicked in the water, sending rainbows across the surface with flicks of their tails.

I searched among them for Janeira, the coven’s High Priestess and the only person among the merfolk who could grant the permissions we need.

Sammie bounded into the water, tongue lolling out of his mouth, and was immediately swarmed with young merfolk eager to pet him.

As I tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear, I spied a red tail a stone’s throw from the main group of merfolk. Janeira floated on her back, staring at the sky, her hair like veins of silver in the water.

A rocky outcrop stretched toward where Janeira floated and I clambered along it, waving to get her attention.

“Well, look at this.” Janeira twisted in the water and floated toward me. “The wanderer returns.”

I smiled as she reached a hand up to me and I shook it.

“I won’t be wandering far anytime soon,” I said.

“That’s nice to know. I’d like to see more of you.” Janeira’s face fell a little. “Are you here about the body?”

I froze halfway to sitting down on the rocks. “You heard about that?”

“What are they saying about it?”

I checked over my shoulder in case someone had wandered nearby. Mallory hadn’t released any official information to the public yet, and I didn’t want to cause a leak.

Janeira rested her hands on the rocks by my feet, the crinkles around her eyes deepening.

“He fell off the cliff,” I said. “He went out for a run and lost his footing, is what they think.”

Janeira touched the shell necklace at her collar. “This was no accident, Maeve. That boy was pushed.”



CHAPTER 5

My stomach dropped as if I'd swallowed a lead weight.
“Pushed?” I said. “How do you know that?”

Janeira clasped the necklace in her palm, the wrinkles around her eyes deepening. “Rela was heading a fishing trip that day with a few others. She heard a commotion at the top of the cliff. Arguing, fighting.”

My eyes widened. “And?”

“The boy tried to stop himself from going over, but he was no match for them,” Janeira said.

I clenched my hands into fists atop my knees.

Ben Everhart may have been right all along. As much as I hated to admit it, even to myself.

Regardless, this situation had turned from a simple body removal to a murder enquiry.

“Did she see who pushed him?” I asked.

“She didn’t see. The cliff was too high. But from the sound of the altercation, the other was male.”

“Did she try to help him? The boy, I mean?” Despite my good relations with the merfolk, they weren’t always so sympathetic to the rest of us land dwellers.

Janeira wouldn’t have left Tyler to die on the rocks, but I couldn’t say the same for some of her coven.

Janeira shook her head. “There was no helping him, Maeve. He was gone the moment he hit the rocks.”

The breeze swiped at us a little harsher suddenly, and the hairs on my neck raised.

“You need to tell the police this,” I said.

Janeira swished her tail with a sudden fervour, making her bob a little higher above the waves.

“You know we don’t get involved in land-dweller affairs,” she said.

“I know that, but surely this is an exception?” I gestured wildly with my hands. “This is a murder, Jan. If you don’t care about the outcome, why are you telling me this?”

“Because what happened to that poor boy is unacceptable, but this is the extent of my help, I’m afraid.” Janeira ran her hand through the water to guide a small colourful fish on its way. “You know what will happen if your authorities learn we witnessed this. They will swarm this place in the name of their laws and we have been very clear about our stance on visitors lately.”

My heart raced, but I drew in some slow, salty breaths.

Getting frustrated with Janeira over this wouldn’t help matters. She was trying to protect her coven, and the whole reason they cordoned their island off to visitors was because of land-dweller behaviour.

Getting them involved wouldn’t help merfolk relations, but how was I supposed to prove that someone had murdered Tyler without the testimony of the people who had witnessed it?

“It’s important for us all, including the merfolk, that the police solve this mystery,” Janeira said. “I am no more comfortable that a murderer lives in

our midst than you are. But our input would be of no help. We don't know who killed this boy, only that he was."

I balled up my sleeve in a fist.

How the hell was I supposed to go about this? Go to the chief and announce it was a murder with no proof?

No. The realisation finally sank into me. I would have to find the evidence myself.

I was no detective. All I had ever done when working for Nexus was retrieve the bodies and let the actual detectives figure out how they'd gotten there.

This situation was well beyond my area of expertise.

"I would have your word," Janeira said. "That you won't mention the merfolk to your authorities?"

"I promise I won't say anything to them," I said. "But... I'm not exactly qualified to figure this out."

"Perhaps not in the eyes of the police," Janeira said. "I think you'll do a fine job."

I pursed my lips. The merfolk didn't have qualifications or courses. Instead, they taught their young their ways and once they had proved they could do it themselves, they were competent.

Although in this case, I was not qualified by either land-dweller standards or merfolk standards.

"Thank you," I said. "For telling me this."

She didn't have to, after all.

Janeira's eyes warmed, and she dipped her shoulders beneath the waves. "I wouldn't have dared tell any other land dweller."

Warmth glowed in my chest.

I couldn't pretend I didn't feel a little special about having this relationship with the merfolk. They didn't like to mix with land dwellers, but I had played with the young mermaids in the sea since I could swim. For whatever reason, they had taken a liking to me.

"Well, what I really came here to ask you was if I could get the body out of merfolk waters. We will need a team to remove it," I said.

"Of course." Janeira waved her hand. "The sooner it's out of here, the better."

I nodded stiffly, my gaze drifting to the island's shores.

Here I thought that returning to Dusk would only mean dealing with the

feud. Now I had to solve a murder with no evidence whatsoever.



AS I SLIPPED ON MY WET SUIT IN ONE OF THE CHANGING ROOMS OF DUSK Diving, Dad's scuba diving company, I couldn't help but notice the sombre looks on the faces of the staff members who had volunteered to help.

They clambered into their gear, their faces a mixture of disgust and horror, eyes glazed over.

I recognised the look. Lots of new divers had worn the same look during my time at Nexus.

Death wasn't something most encountered on a day-to-day basis, and seeing a dead body was a stark reminder that one day, death would come for us all.

When we were all suited up, I led the way out into the staff room where Dad waited, already in his wet suit, studying a map on the table.

"Everyone take a potion and a talisman." He gestured to a smaller table against the wall without looking up.

Potion vials and talismans lay on the table, neatly arranged. Everyone grabbed one of each, downing the potion and holding on to the talisman in their gloved hands.

I only grabbed a talisman.

The potion allowed us to see underwater without the use of goggles and stop the water from irritating our eyes. I had to take them while at Nexus, as a matter of policy, which they took seriously in the capital.

But I had never found it difficult to see underwater, even in the murkiest waters. If anything, my eyesight was better underwater than above the surface.

With no threat of disciplinary action from my higher-ups, I preferred to skip taking the potion altogether.

The talisman would allow us to breathe above or below the surface. Even without testing it, I was certain I couldn't breathe underwater.

"If anyone wants to back out, now is the time." Dad straightened up, but kept his fingertips pressed to the table. "Are we all set?"

A series of stiff nods rippled throughout the handful of volunteers.

“Excellent. Maeve, you’re up,” he said.

I tossed the talisman up into the air and caught it again as I walked up to the table and pulled the map toward me to give it a cursory look.

The rocks would be the biggest threat to us out there, but the sea wasn’t choppy today, and we were all qualified to help each other out in a jam.

As it stood, this would be a pretty low-risk operation.

“This is a pretty straightforward dive,” I said, my gaze roaming over the rows of pale faces. “We stick close to the shore to get to the body. Do we all have our gloves?”

Another series of nods rippled throughout them.

Unlike our normal diving gloves, these gloves that I had snaffled from the police stores had a magical advantage. Imbued with tiny crystals, the gloves, once activated, would hover the body in the air. Manoeuvring the body across rocks and water would be tricky, but we needn’t worry about breaking off limbs if nobody had to touch it.

At least if anyone hurled, we would be in the ocean.

“We’re going to levitate the body along the shoreline. Some of us will be in the water, some of us on the rocks,” I said. “This will ensure the body doesn’t go back into the water. We don’t want to lose him.”

I put my hands on my hips.

The body probably wouldn’t be in a pleasant state, but no amount of warning them would prepare them for the reality.

“Unless anyone has questions, we should head out,” I said.

Everyone remained statue-still.

That was that, then.

Dad locked up the building and popped the Closed sign in place on the door, as the rest of us piled into the minivan.

This wasn’t a deep dive, so we weren’t in need of heavy-duty equipment. With only flippers in hand, we parked the work vans at the edge of the beach and traipsed across the sand to where yellow tape fluttered around a gathering of police officers and an empty body bag.

“Are you ready?” The chief’s face was the only part of her visible in her bulky black coat. “The winds are going to pick up in a few hours.”

“We won’t need that long,” I said, tying back my hair with a scrunchie. “We’re ready to go.”

I looked back at Dad, who gave me a nod. This was his business, even if

he had put me temporarily in charge.

“Talismans on,” I said.

I wedged my talisman into the hexagonal plastic talisman holder in the chest of my suit. A small hole at the back allowed the talisman to touch the skin, allowing the effects to take place with no fiddling on my part.

We stepped into our flippers, and as the police officers looked on, I led the way, wading into the water, the others following a few paces behind.

Once the water came up to my arms, I plunged under the water. Despite the purpose of the dive, a sense of peace washed over me.

I couldn't put my finger on what it was about swimming in open water that I loved so much. Perhaps it was the weightlessness or the gracefulness of movement that I just couldn't accomplish on land, but swimming was a pleasure I could never give up.

The ocean gaped beneath us, with no fish in sight. Shark sightings were frequent around Dusk though, and I wasn't sure how they would react to the presence of a dead body. I would keep an eye out.

We gave the rocks a wide berth as we swam around to the divot in the cliffs where the body lay.

The body was draped over a plethora of jagged rocks, its head resting at an awkward angle. Its arms and legs drifted up and down with the waves, the hands and feet dangling into the water.

I slipped off my flippers and wedged them onto a nearby rock. I had climbed enough of them in my youth to have developed a tough layer of skin to protect my feet from the sharp protrusions.

“Dad, can you get up here?” I asked as I manoeuvred across the rocks toward the body.

It was actually in a suitable position. If I could keep most of the staff in the water, they wouldn't have to see much of the gross parts.

Dad clambered up behind me and followed me along the rocks.

Under the eyes of all the approaching staff, I kept a neutral expression as I caught my first sight of the corpse's face.

It wasn't the face I remembered, but there was no doubt in my mind the body was Tyler Bakewell's.

His mouth gaped, and something had plucked out an eye, revealing a greying hollow socket. His skin had the consistency of paper and looked whiter still. The fish had already gouged chunks out of his ankle overnight, but the limb remained intact.

Dad winced and pressed a fist beneath his throat. Whatever was coming up, I hoped he kept it down.

“We should close his mouth.” Dad reached gingerly for Tyler’s face, but I grabbed his wrist before he could touch him.

“Waste of time,” I muttered.

I couldn’t explain that his jaw would sooner break off than close when rigor mortis had set in. Not in front of the staff, at least.

“If you could all get into two lines and hold a hand above your head, we’re going to feed him over to you,” I said, wincing at my choice of words.

The staff trod water into two wonky lines just long enough to accommodate Tyler’s body, and each stretched a hand gingerly above their heads. The higher we could levitate his body, the less they would see.

I clambered around the rocks to the other side of Tyler’s body. His ear was missing on the other side.

“On the count of three, Dad, we’ll lift him,” I said. “Ready?”

Dad nodded, the whites of his eyes too visible as he stared at Tyler’s face.

“Dad?” I asked.

His attention snapped back to me and he blinked a little too fast.

“Fine,” he said. “I’m ready.”

“All right. Three, two, one.”

Engaging my core, I slipped my gloved hands underneath Tyler’s body at the same time as Dad, and the corpse levitated inches into the air.

“He’s coming to you,” I told them. “Ready?”

“Ready.” They sounded more certain than they looked.

“Here we go,” I said.

My foot slipped a little on the rock and I grunted as my core engaged to keep me upright. With a gentle shove, Tyler’s body tipped onto the waiting hands of the scuba staff.

“Everyone all right?” I asked as Dad and I clambered down into the water alongside them.

Murmurs rippled across the water, but no concrete answers were audible.

The sooner we got this body out of the water, the less chance something would go wrong.

I quickly retrieved and donned my flippers, then swam around to the front of the convoy and held up my hand to support Tyler’s damaged ankle. Dad joined me on the other side.

“Nice and steady, let’s swim him back to shore,” I said.

Swimming with one hand and holding a body was no simple task, especially when trying to keep in sync with a convoy of others at my back. Slowly but surely, we swam the body safely back to the beach.

Upon seeing us approach, several police officers waded into the water to meet us, wearing the same levitation gloves.

“Hand him over, we’ve got him,” an officer said as my flippers found sand.

Quicker than I would have advised, the staff simultaneously shunted Tyler’s body toward the officers.

Tyler’s limbs held firm as the officers scrambled to arrange themselves in time. I held my breath as Tyler’s wet, sandy hair passed just inches above my face, and the pressure on my gloves released.

Without a look back, the officers waded back toward the beach with Tyler in their hands.

I breathed a relieved sigh. We had done it.

As we gathered on the sand in a group and took off our flippers, I cast a glance over at the officers. Tyler stared at the sky with his one eye for a final time, before the body bag zipped up around him.

“Well done, everyone,” I said, pulling the scrunchie out of my hair.

“Was that... good?” longtime employee, Paul, asked.

He was one of the company’s first divers over twenty years ago, his short hair and stubble now peppered with grey.

“It went smoothly even by professional standards.” I squeezed the water out of my hair. “Great job, guys. Let’s head on back and get cleaned up.”

I doubted anyone would want to get back into the water anytime soon.

“You did good.” Dad patted my back as the staff traipsed back toward the vans.

I shrugged. I’d done enough body extractions to know the drill by now. If I couldn’t have retrieved Tyler’s body, I wasn’t up to code in my profession.

We headed up the beach after the staff, but stopped dead as an agonised shriek pierced the air.



CHAPTER 6

I whipped around at the sound of crunching sand.

A woman tore across the beach toward the cordon, her flowery blue dress whipping out behind her. One of her sandals flew off midstep, but she didn't even blink.

I held my flippers to my chest. Normally, Michaela Bakewell had the disposition of a flower child in a field of corn on a sunny day. But her son, her only surviving child, had meant more to her than her own life.

"I need to see him!" Michaela stumbled again, but fell to her knees this time.

Sand flew up around her as she scrambled back to her feet.

Behind her, two figures followed at a run. The first was a lumbering man who limped across the beach, already out of breath, Michaela's husband and Tyler's stepfather, George. His military buzz cut spoke of his past as a member of the supernatural armed forces. A past that was long behind him.

The other had my stomach turning. Ben Everhart dashed across the beach at a pace a big cat would have struggled to match. He reached Michaela just feet away from the cordon and wrapped his arms around her.

"I need to see my boy!" Michaela beat her fists against Ben's arms.

A handful of officers ducked under the cordon and guided them both away from the scene.

Over the top of Michaela's shoulder, Ben's gaze met mine. My breath caught in my throat. I had expected more anger, maybe resentment. But his eyes shone with nothing but sorrow.

Perhaps the blow of losing one of his best friends had pushed our feud down the list of Ben's priorities.

A lump rose in my throat, and I continued my trek toward the van. They needed a little solitude, and our presence wouldn't help matters.

But a hand on my shoulder stopped me in my tracks yet again.

The chief pursed her lips, her gaze bypassing me completely to watch Michaela kick sand at the officers and shove them with all her might.

"We'll have the autopsy results in a few days," she said. "I'd like you to come and evaluate them."

"Me?" I asked. "I'm no mortician."

"No, but you can surely confirm which injuries killed Tyler and which were sustained after?" she said.

I mulled her words over for a moment, with difficulty, as Michaela's cries rang in my ears.

It didn't sound as though the chief had any suspicions about Tyler's death. But a look at the autopsy might lead to uncovering injuries that could point to a murder.

"Whatever I can do to help," I said.

The chief clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Thank you. And thank you for all you've done here today."

I nodded and cast a final look back at Ben and the officers wrangling Michaela as I followed Dad up the beach.



THE TWO LIPSTICKS IN MY HANDS DIDN'T LOOK DIFFERENT ENOUGH TO BOTHER with choosing. What difference would it make, really?

Dragging Tyler's body out of the water had really put a damper on my day. The last thing I wanted to do was prepare for this weird dating agency thing.

But as ever, Kira and Allison had burst into my room—through the door this time—and torn through my wardrobe to help me find something suitable to wear.

They hadn't stopped even when I told them about what Janeira had told me about what happened to Tyler.

"I think it's ridiculous." Kira flicked her eyelashes with mascara next to me, staring into my mirror. "I get they don't like us, but someone was just murdered. Don't the merfolk care?"

I put down the redder of the two lipsticks on my vanity and popped open the pinker one.

"You know they don't trust land dwellers," I said, before running the lipstick across my upper lip.

Allison twirled in front of my full-length mirror, admiring her brown dress. "Land dwellers haven't exactly treated the merfolk well. I'm not surprised they don't want to get involved."

Kira snorted. "They could make more of an effort to integrate—. Ow!"

I elbowed her in the ribs. Staying on an island where everyone thought the same did little for her empathy. I hoped I could poke some sense into her by force.

"They have every right to be defensive," I said. "Give them the benefit of the doubt."

The recent issues with tourists were small potatoes compared with the past battles between merfolk and land dwellers. Civil wars had taken place centuries back over ownership of Magdora, and the merfolk weren't quick to forget.

"I'm not just mad for Tyler, I'm mad for you, Maeve." Kira put her mascara back into its holder and tapped it against my head. "Did Janeira

think about you at all when she put this enormous responsibility on you?”

I smacked my lips together to even out the colour. The warm glow of my cheeks couldn't break through the layer of foundation. I had forgotten that sometimes Kira's offensive stance was in defence of her friends.

“Someone has to do it,” I said.

“Well, what are you going to do?” Allison asked, flopping down on my bed. “Where do you even start?”

“I'm going to wait for the autopsy results and see if any of Tyler's injuries could support a murder.” I swivelled the lipstick back inside. “There isn't much else I can do right now.”

I needed a little time to think up a game plan, and the day hadn't allowed for even a smidgen of clear thought.

“If that's how it is, then tonight your responsibility is to not think about it,” Kira said, smoothing out her hair. “Tonight, you think about getting laid.”

“You've got me worried that the first thing you're going to do when you meet this complete stranger is pull his pants down,” Allison said.

“Do you know nothing about seduction, Ali? They'll take their own pants off if you show them an inch more skin than they were expecting.”

“Okay, well, we won't wait up for you then.” I grabbed my clutch and took a step back to look at myself in the mirror.

Kira had decided on a navy dress and matching heels for me when I had taken too long to decide.

I had curled the ends of my hair a little to add as much flair as I dared.

Neither of them had given me much idea what to expect, and allegedly, the dating agency had only told them to dress for a date and not worry about anything else. The lack of detail had my stomach rolling.

But at least I would be with my friends. Even if worst came to worst, we'd have an adventure to laugh about in a few years' time.

Once ready, we tottered downstairs, none of us very competent in heels. Dad poked his head out the kitchen door with a cup of tea in hand as we made it to the bottom.

“Are you off?” he asked.

“Going now. Bye, Dad.” I waved at him as we headed for the door.

“Don't be out late!” His voice followed me down the corridor.

“Dad, I'm an adult. I might be out late.”

“At least text me to let me know you're getting on all right.”

“Okay, Dad, bye!” I called before shutting the front door behind us.

We clambered tentatively into Dad's car, and I drove us toward Dawn. The closer we got to the city, the more excited our chatter became.

Allison announced she felt sure she would find her soulmate, whereas Kira was happy just to find someone to spend the night with.

I had no expectations other than that I would awkwardly embarrass myself, especially as I was going in sober. Still, at least the dates were anonymous to start with.

I parked the car off the main square in Dawn, and we tottered, arm in arm, along the rows of closed cafés and boutiques.

"Here it is." Kira steered us down a side street to a brand-new building with no windows, but lit up so brightly that astronauts might have spotted it.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked as Kira reached for the door.

Kira whacked me with her handbag. "If you don't enjoy yourself tonight, I'm gonna be so mad at you."

"Fine." I folded my arms and allowed her to tug me inside, Allison squeaking as she stumbled after us.

We stepped into a tiny green reception area with nothing but a small desk manned with a receptionist wearing a Venetian mask and a black suit.

"Ladies, welcome," he said, rising from his seat and walking around the desk toward us with a clipboard in hand. "My name is Mervyn, and I'll be guiding you through your dates tonight. Can I take your names, please?"

We listed our names, and after ticking them off his list with a flourish, he ushered us through a door behind the reception desk.

The room we stepped into was well lit, lighting up the only objects in the room. There was a red curtain that was completely pulled across one half of the room and a bin.

Yeah, this place really gave off some serial-killer vibes.

"So... we'll have safe dates, right?" I asked. "Nobody's going to come at us with a machete?"

"Certainly not." Mervyn bent forward at the hip a little before returning to his upright posture. "Any weapons, magical or otherwise, would have been detected by our talisman-based screening system the moment the offender walked through our front door."

Well that was reassuring, if this screening system was up to scratch.

"Who would like to go first?" Mervyn gestured to the front.

"Ooh! Me!" Kira all but leapt forward.

The attendant pulled a leather pouch out of his pocket and unwrapped it,

taking a needle and a tiny piece of cloth out.

“Wait. Are you taking our blood?” I asked.

“That’s how it works.” Allison nudged me.

“We pride ourselves on providing the closest viable matches, and to do so, we need blood to enter into our database,” he said. “Will this be a problem?”

“So you’re using spells?” I said. “Not like a questionnaire or something?”

“Ignore her, she’s boring,” Kira said and stuck out her finger.

I snorted as Mervyn pricked Kira’s finger and dabbed a drop of her blood onto the cloth.

Did boring people leave home to remove dead bodies for a living?

“Anyone else?” he asked, tossing the needle into the bin.

Allison went next, her shoulders almost up to her ears as he drew her blood. She shivered as he dabbed a fresh cloth piece onto her finger.

“Are you partaking?” he asked me.

Kira glared at me over her shoulder.

If I didn’t, I wouldn’t hear the last of it.

With a sigh, I held out my finger.

Once he had taken my blood, Mervyn excused himself and disappeared behind the curtain with our blood samples.

“We don’t get to see them do the spell?” I tapped my thumb against my clutch.

“They don’t want anyone learning how they do it. They’re the only one of their kind,” Allison said, hooking her arm through mine.

How convenient.

I didn’t want to be cynical about all this, but I found it hard to believe that two people could take a blood test and match up well.

After a few minutes, Mervyn returned and handed us each a piece of paper with two numbers on it.

I took mine. Ninety-seven and eight?

“The top number is how closely matched you are with your prospective partner,” he said. “The second is your room number.”

“You’re kidding.” I flashed him the paper. “Ninety-seven percent?”

That was basically soulmates, wasn’t it?

“Our highest match yet.” Mervyn beamed under the lip of his mask. “Exciting, no?”

Exciting? I wanted to throw up.

Nobody had mentioned accidentally finding someone I might actually connect with. Where was the informal fling Kira promised?

“No way!” Kira snatched the paper off me and held it up against hers. Whoever she was about to meet had a seventy-nine percent match with her. “I thought seventy-five percent was the average?”

“Ooh, I like my chances then,” Allison said, holding her paper to her chest.

“Seventy-five percent was our average. However, after today, I expect it will be a little higher.” Mervyn handed us each a Venetian mask. “Please, put these on and we can begin.”

Kira jammed hers onto her face before he had even finished speaking. Before my eyes, she transformed from a blond, silver-winged fae to a redheaded, black-winged one.

“Ooh, lovely!” Allison said, before fitting hers onto her face.

I shot out a hand to steady her as she shrank an inch and teetered toward me in surprise. Bright-pink tones spread through her hair from root to tip, and as I held her arm up to help her upright, I noticed her skin was a shade darker.

“Come on, don’t be a wimp.” Kira poked me in the shoulder as Allison righted herself. “You’re doing this with us, aren’t you?”

I stared down at the red mask in my hands. The whole reason I had agreed to do this was because I wanted to seize the day a little more. And how dumb would I have to be to turn down a ninety-seven percent match with someone, no matter how scary it sounded?

I put the mask on, which stuck to my face like a magical magnet. The strands of hair around my face lightened, and I grabbed a lock in time to watch the blond seep down to the tips.

In a moment of rebellion as a teenager, I had wanted to turn bleach-blond, but I’d chickened out at the salon. I made a note to check myself out in the next reflective surface I found.

“Ladies, if you’ll follow me, please.” Mervyn led the way to another door across the room and we followed him through it, arm in arm.

We walked down a red-carpeted corridor that seemed to go on forever, lined with doors bearing numbers.

“This is me!” Kira squeezed my arm before she unhooked herself from me. “Wish me luck!”

“Happy boinking,” I said as she opened the door.

Allison giggled at my shoulder. Kira made an obscene hand gesture at me

before dashing inside.

“Even if ours goes wrong, at least Kira will have a good time,” Allison said as we continued down the corridor.

“Silver lining,” I said.

My insides writhed like snakes as we walked along. Somewhere behind one of these doors, someone I was supposed to have a strong connection with waited for me.

The number ninety-seven seared itself to the front of my mind, refusing to let me forget that whoever this person was might have high hopes if they had been informed about our match percentage. Considering how little I had wanted to come here, would I disappoint them when they got to know me?

Mervyn stopped us in our tracks, and it wasn't until Allison nudged me that I caught sight of the number eight on the door we had stopped by.

Oh, gods.

“You are free to leave whenever you like,” Mervyn said. “But with a pairing like yours, I don't think you'll need to.”

“Uh-huh.” My eyes had glazed over and the eight had become a fuzzy bunch of pixels.

“Are you going in?” Allison asked.

I unhooked her from my arm and patted her shoulder. “You guys go on. I just need a minute.”

“You sure?”

“Sure. Have a good time, Ali.”

Allison waved at me as they walked away, and my eyes finally refocused.

I stared at the ornate door handle, my fingers twitching.

“It's fun,” I muttered. “Nothing serious, remember? Just have a good time.”

With a firm hand, I grasped the door handle and pulled.



CHAPTER 7

A young man sat bolt upright on the sofa as I entered, so suddenly that I froze halfway in the doorway.

A green Venetian mask was fixed to his face and the same shade of blond hair as mine spilled over the top of it. He wore a pair of crisp jeans and an ironed long-sleeved shirt that he had just splattered a touch of his drink down.

An awkward silence hung between us, which got more awkward still when I took in the furnishings of the room.

The fireplace roared with flames at the foot of two sofas and a coffee

table. The cabinet full of both alcohol bottles and potions brought my heart rate down to a less terrifying pace. At least I wouldn't have to go through this sober.

The tendons in my neck tightened as I realised the silence between us remained unbroken.

“How strong is the booze?” I nodded at his cocktail glass.

“Not strong enough.” The moment he said it, his cheeks paled. “Not that I need to be drunk to meet you, I just... um.”

I shut the door and leaned against it. If he was as nervous as me, maybe we were a match made in heaven.

“I'm sorry.” He got up and batted at the stain on his shirt. “I just...I'm not...”

“Your friends put you up to this and you needed some Dutch courage?” I asked.

His deer-in-the-headlights look was exactly how I pictured my own face when walking in here.

He ran a hand around the back of his neck. “That's it,” he said. “I didn't feel like coming at all today, but...”

Sorrow tinged his eyes, and even from where I stood, they appeared to redden.

Gods, what did I do? Did I give him a free pass to bow out? Compatible or not, something was clearly going on in his personal life to make him emotional in front of a stranger.

“Can I get you a drink?” he asked, forcing a smile onto his face.

“Uh, sure... a glass of white would be great.”

Why I hadn't thought of drinking one before I got there was beyond me.

He opened a bottle of wine and poured me a glass, all trace of his prior sorrow vanished. When he handed it to me, our fingers brushed each other, and the hairs along my arm prickled in all the right ways.

“Thanks.” I took a generous swig from the glass.

He raised his half-full glass in response.

It wasn't until I clutched the wineglass to my chest that I realised how close we were. The prickling on my arms turned into full-blown goosebumps.

Did knowing that we had such strong compatibility make my body react to him this way? Or did I really find him attractive?

His social slipups and offer of alcohol made a good start, but how could I feel legitimately connected to him when I didn't even know what he looked

like for real?

Nobody was that compatible. I had to put any inner quivers and bodily reactions down to anticipation before I got carried away with ideas of destiny.

I cleared my throat. "So... um, what are we supposed to do? Talk?"

Even before I finished speaking, I cringed. Sandpaper was smoother than me.

"Oh, right." He dashed back to the sofa and beckoned me over. "They've given us a list."

"A list?" I followed him and sat down on the sofa.

I kept a safe distance, but not so far from him that I wouldn't still feel that thrill of close proximity.

He picked up a piece of paper off the coffee table and held it between us.

I blinked. The sheet was blank.

My date turned it over, but the back was blank, too.

"The guy who brought me here said there'd be instructions," he said.

I took the paper between my fingers to pull it closer. The moment my fingertips touched the paper, words blossomed onto the page in blue ink.

"Welcome to your first date. To maintain complete anonymity, you shall refer to each other as William and Rachel."

William. While not his real name, it was nice to have something to call him.

Almost as soon as I finished reading, the ink bled into the paper, disappearing. A second later, more words appeared.

"You are to ask each other the following questions. Question one: What is your deepest desire for the rest of your life?"

Wow. Way to throw us in the deep end.

"Deepest desire?" 'William' adjusted his collar as he put the paper back on the coffee table. "That's heavy."

"Tell me about it." I took another gulp of wine and hoped the buzz would hit me sooner rather than later.

The only thing I wanted in the world was for my family's curse to lift, so we could go about our lives without fear. But I wasn't about to tell that to a guy I'd just met.

"You first," William said before drinking deeply for a full five seconds.

It looked like I wasn't the only one who found this question came a little too soon.

"I suppose I'd like peace in my future," I said.

“Peace? You prefer a slower-paced life?” he asked.

“No, that’s not what I mean. I love excitement, just without the drama.”

If a curse that killed my family members counted as drama.

Around his mask, William’s features relaxed. So, a partner in crime was what he was looking for.

“What’s your answer?” I asked.

“I want to get off this island and see the world.” William leaned back, cradling his drink at his belly.

“Why haven’t you already?”

“Too many responsibilities... and parents who won’t let me out of their sight.”

The paper on the table twitched violently and turned a deep shade of red.

“What does that mean?” William leaned forward.

“Maybe we’re not supposed to talk about our families. In case we guess who each other are.”

The anonymity aspect was a big part of this whole charade. If we guessed who each other was, we would have ruined the process.

Without us having to touch the paper, it returned to its original colour, and more words appeared.

“Question two: What’s the most devious thing you have ever done?”

“Oh, that’s easy.” I nearly snorted wine out of my nose as I took a sip. “My cousin ate all the chocolate in my Yule basket one year, so I put a fake tarantula in her bed. She thought it was my real pet tarantula and freaked out.”

“Pet tarantula? Really?” William’s knuckles whitened around his glass.

“I love bugs,” I said with a shrug. “Are you afraid of spiders?”

“...a little.”

That was a yes.

“Mine is very sweet. She won’t eat you.”

William chuckled but had to clear his throat halfway through.

“Anyway, what’s yours?” I asked.

“Uh...” He tapped his glass with his forefinger for a moment. “When I was little, I swapped out my mum’s night cream for whipped cream. Took her half a tub to realise.”

I slapped a hand over my mouth to stop myself from spitting the wine out. Instead, it sputtered into my palm and dribbled down my chin.

My cheeks flushed as I put down my glass and reached for my clutch.

William laughed and reached toward me as I struggled to open it one-handed.

“Need some help there?” he asked.

I nodded, my mouth still full of wine I couldn't swallow.

William snapped open my clutch, and I snatched up a tissue from inside.

I cringed so hard as I tidied up my face and hand, swallowing the wine in one painful gulp. At least it hadn't come out of my nose.

“Better?” he asked, handing me another tissue, which I took even though I didn't need it.

“Can we just pretend that didn't happen?” I asked, before coughing into the tissue.

“Pretend what didn't happen?”

I shot him a grateful smile, and the paper spawned yet more words. Perfect timing.

“Question three: What's your most devious sexual desire?”

Now William's cheeks reddened.

“They don't hold back, do they?” I said, dabbing at my face, hoping to tidy up any smudged makeup.

“They sure don't.”

“Well? It's your turn to go first,” I said.

William screwed up his face, but there was no disguising the smile at the corner of his lips.

I leaned back and swung one leg over the other. He was enjoying this, even if he preferred to hide it.

“Okay,” he said. “If I have to answer, it's having sex somewhere... public.”

Oh damn. This boy was on my wavelength.

“What a coincidence.” I made to drink more wine, but decided against it. Clearly, I couldn't be trusted with it.

“What is?” he asked.

I raised my eyebrows at him, touching the rim of the glass to my lip.

William tilted his head toward me, his eyes sparkling when he realised what I meant.

“That's rare for a girl,” he said in low tones.

“How would you know? You only know Dusk girls.”

“And are you a Dusk girl?”

The paper glowed red once more, and I pursed my lips.

“I guess I can’t answer that one,” I said with a shrug. “What do you think?”

William looked me up and down, sticking his lower lip out. “You’re giving me some exotic vibes.”

I snorted. “Exotic? Hardly.”

Leaving Dusk to live in London for a few years classed me as ‘adventurous’ in the eyes of the island folk. But I had hardly visited anywhere more exotic than the Cheddar Gorge.

William opened his mouth to respond, but the new green glow of the paper snatched my attention.

Newly inked onto the page were the words: Should you both be willing, you may share a kiss.



CHAPTER 8

My eyes glazed over, and my entire body felt like I had plunged into an icy lake. I wouldn't have dared look at William even if I could have.
Kiss?

I wanted to tell myself how crazy it sounded. That we couldn't possibly, we had only just met.

But I wanted to, in no small way.

Maybe it was the anonymity and knowing that if I messed up, he never had to learn who I was. Maybe I just wanted to take a leap into the unknown, like I had convinced myself I should. What with my lifespan being so

uncertain.

I took a moment to thaw, but when I did, I looked at William.

He had shuffled a little closer while I had zoned out and had taken possession of a cautious smile.

“No pressure,” he said. “What do you think?”

I didn’t think. Not fast enough to stop myself, anyway.

If I dove toward him any faster, I might have head-butted him. Despite my speed, our lips only brushed together, but that was enough to send the hairs prickling up the back of my neck.

William’s fingers stroked up my neck to my face, and my cheek blossomed with heat. Every nerve in my body lit up like a Yule tree, urging me to sink deeper.

My back arched, without my say so, and our lips pressed together. I ran my hands up his chest, my limbs taking advantage of my bewildered mind to do as they pleased.

Passion exploded in my core, but the masks made deepening the kiss difficult, scraping together if we got too close.

My fingers slipped over the top button of his shirt, and it was all I could do to fight the urge to undo it.

His heart hammered beneath my palm, and my guard fell away completely. I wanted to let this escalate way past the suggested kiss.

A knock at the door had us both pulling away.

His eyes were wide, and mischief touched his lips. Apparently, I hadn’t been alone in my desires.

I reluctantly looked toward the door, around which Mervyn poked his head.

“Your date has concluded,” he said. “We hope you enjoyed your time together. If the lady could please follow me?”

I stood, still on autopilot, and hurried to the door. But remembering at the last minute what had just happened, I paused at the door. Still wide-eyed and clasping the edges of the sofa with both hands, William’s look asked for clarification.

I smiled, hoping it was enough to assure him I’d be back. He smiled back.

We agreed, then.

I followed the attendant out the door, my entire body buzzing. What had I just done and why did I have zero shame about it?



DAD OBSERVED MY UNUSUAL CHEERINESS AND POSITIVITY ALL MORNING, BUT it wasn't until we were in the car on the way to the autopsy results at the police station that he dared ask anything.

"Good night last night?" he asked, holding on to the passenger side grab handle as I drove us out the gates of the Arrowood mansion.

"Maybe," I said.

I didn't know how much of this I wanted to divulge to him, given his fruitless boundary setting last night.

"You've been on cloud nine all day. Where did you go last night? Did you meet someone?"

I scrunched up my lips. I didn't want to tell Dad what we had done last night, but he wouldn't stop asking until I gave him something.

"Kira and Allison talked me into going to that new dating agency in town," I said. "The one where you don't know who each other is for three dates."

The night before, we had met up outside after our dates finished and spilled the beans about our evenings. Thanks to the traffic light style list, Kira hadn't made as much progress as she would have liked. Allison, on the other hand, had enjoyed a nice gentle talk with her man, and could barely wait for a second date.

"Dating agency?" Dad snorted. "Since when do you need help getting dates?"

On an island where I had known most of the population my whole life? Constantly.

"That's not what it's about." I fed the steering wheel through my hands instead of yanking it around like I usually did. "It's the novelty. A bit of fun."

I couldn't admit to Dad that the matching percentage between me and William was record-breaking. I certainly couldn't admit that I had felt a connection, despite my determination not to.

Until I could see what the near future held for us, I would have to keep the details secret from him. Just to save myself the earache.

"So, who was your date, then? Did you like him?" Dad asked.

“We got on okay.” A huge understatement.

“Are you seeing him again?”

“Dad, will you chill out?”

“I just want to make sure you’re staying safe, honey. That’s what dads do,” he said.

Maybe it was because I was his only child and he didn’t have Mum to temper his reactions, but the moment I was old enough to date, Dad’s protectiveness had amped up like crazy.

It had forced me to sneak around in my teens to see boys without Dad knowing. Kira and Allison had been happy to help.

By the time I got into my late teens, the subterfuge had gotten tiring. We had clashed a lot on whether I was old enough to go out and meet boys. If it hadn’t been for Sandra, I may have lost that battle. As the primary female role model in my life, she came down on my side in matters like that.

Dad said little more as we drove into Dawn and I parked outside the police station. Hopefully, the autopsy results would take his mind off my dating life.

We made our way up to the chief’s office and Dad knocked, entering first when summoned.

Dad spluttered the moment he stepped inside, and I stepped around him to see what the problem was.

Arms crossed, sitting on a chair on the other side of the room was Ben Everhart. In the seat next to him sat Tyler’s stepfather, George, leaning forward on his knees, his head hanging toward the floor.

“Before you say anything.” The chief held up a hand toward me and Dad as she stepped out from behind her desk. “Ben has promised to behave himself to be here today. I hope that’s enough to stop any conflict happening here. This is a solemn matter, after all, and I won’t tolerate any fighting.”

“Of course,” I said before Dad could answer. “We’re happy to cooperate on this occasion.”

Dad huffed a sigh through his nose and side-eyed me.

I ignored him.

“Good.” The chief picked up a file off her desk and handed it to me. “You’ll probably be able to make more sense of this than I will.”

I flipped it open and perused the papers. While my job had entailed mostly diving, I was familiar with autopsy reports. Call it morbid curiosity and friendships within the morgue. Living ones, of course.

“What’s the conclusion?” Ben asked. “You said you’d tell us when they got here.”

“Death by misadventure,” the chief said.

Ben sat bolt upright in his seat, unfolding his arms. “That’s not true.”

I glanced up from the report.

Ben sounded oddly sure that it wasn’t the cause of death. Did he also suspect that foul play was involved?

“What makes you say that?” I asked.

Ben screwed up his face as our eyes met. “Tyler went jogging along that route for years. He knew the dangers. He wouldn’t have fallen off that cliff unless someone —.”

“Let’s not make any outrageous claims,” Chief Mallory said.

I returned to the report and flipped through it, looking for something, anything that would point to Tyler’s death being something other than an accident.

But all of Tyler’s recorded injuries had occurred because of his fall. No stab wounds, no gunshot wounds, and no talisman marks.

If the merfolk were right and someone had pushed Tyler, there would be no evidence on his body.

My heart sank. If there had been anything in the report I could have called into question, I would have jumped on it. But as far as the autopsy was concerned, this was an open-and-shut case.

I closed the file and handed it back to the chief.

“Looks like an accident,” I said, choosing my words carefully.

George leaned back in his seat, his head still hanging low.

Ben stood up, his hands balled into fists as he glared at me. “I knew you’d side with them.”

Dad squared his shoulders as Ben stormed toward us, but I pushed him aside to clear the path to the door. With little more than a venomous look at us, Ben yanked open the door and slammed it shut behind him.

Unease stirred in my gut. Ben seemed so sure that something untoward had happened to his friend, and I had to find out what. If he had some idea who had done this to Tyler, I had to speak with him. Even if it meant him taking a swing at me.

The thought of trying to have a constructive conversation with an Everhart filled me with dread. But if it meant uncovering what really happened to Tyler, I had no choice.

“Well, that’s everything.” The chief placed the file back on her desk. “Thank you for offering your expertise, Maeve. I am very grateful.”

“Anytime, Chief,” I said.

I cast a sympathetic look back at George as we left.

Tyler was beyond help, but I owed it to his family to find out what had happened to him.

“Well, I’m glad that’s over,” Dad said as we walked across the car park. “Do you want to get some ice cream? I could do with a boost.”

“Count me in,” I said.

The ice cream parlour had been our go-to hangout when I was a kid. After whatever adventures we would go on in the woods or along the beach, the ice cream parlour was where we always concluded the day.

But out of the corner of my eye, I spied Ben storming off down the street.

My heart leapt into my throat. He was alone. Was this the only chance I would have to ask him about Tyler without a threatening entourage?

An electric prickle shot up the back of my neck.

Even the idea of speaking with Ben had my body warning against it. What if he decided me talking to him was an attempt to break the already tentative ceasefire our families had established?

I had to find Tyler’s killer, but there had to be another way. We had barely managed to stay cordial in the presence of the police chief herself.

As Ben got further down the street, I realised my window of opportunity was fast closing.

Whether I liked it or not, Ben Everhart was probably the only person on this island beside the merfolk who knew Tyler’s death wasn’t an accident. If he had a lead, I would be stupid to ignore it.

Well, here went nothing.

“Actually, Dad, I’ll meet you there. There’s something I need to do first,” I said.

“Don’t be long!” Dad called as I hurried off down the street.

My brisk walk turned into a jog as Ben turned a corner up ahead.

Was I crazy? This might have been one of the few times Ben was alone, but what was to say he wouldn’t kick my ass all by himself?

I snorted. I’d had to hold my own in London, of all places. Ben-freaking-Everhart could barely measure up considering he had never even left Dusk before. As far as I knew, anyway.

I turned the corner he had disappeared around and frowned. A shadowy

alley stretched up ahead, and Ben was nowhere to be seen.

Where had he gone?

I stepped cautiously down the alley, giving the dumpster and full garbage bags a wide berth.

Had he run off? How had he gotten away so fast?

Something yanked my collar, and I inhaled a lungful of hot garbage stench that was swiftly pummelled from my chest as someone slammed me against the alley wall.

The icy bite of a blade pressed against my throat as Ben stared down at me, fire in his eyes.



CHAPTER 9

“Why are you following me?” he growled.

My heart hammered, but I kept my expression neutral and my eyes on him. Anything to distract from the athamé that was one quick slice from ending my life.

Damn, he had more awareness than I gave him credit for. Did he really expect an Arrowwood to follow him around every corner? Although, case in point, I had.

Regardless, I had to tread carefully if I was going to stop him from using

that athamé on me.

“I know someone murdered Tyler,” I said.

“I know you know.” Ben’s grip on my collar tightened. “So why did you lie to the chief? Just to spite me?”

“That autopsy report didn’t show any kind of foul play,” I said. “I looked for something, but there was nothing to find. That’s why I need to talk to you.”

The fury melted from Ben’s face as confusion took over. “If there was nothing in the report, how did you know Tyler was murdered?”

I tried to lean further away from the blade, but my head pressed against the wall.

“Someone saw,” I said. “They told me.”

“Who?”

“I can’t tell you. But they told me because they want the killer to be found. I thought I was the only one who knew this wasn’t an accident, but after what you said in the office, it’s obvious you know something.”

Ben’s brow creased, and he let the athamé drop to his side.

I inhaled, luxuriating in my first safe breath in too many minutes.

Our bodies were just inches away and my skin prickled with Ben’s proximity. Yet, somehow, it didn’t feel like danger.

Ben took a step back but didn’t sheathe his weapon. “What happened? What did they see?”

I lifted my hand slowly to adjust my collar. Sudden movements wouldn’t do me any favours.

“They saw someone push Tyler off the cliff,” I said.

“I knew it.” Ben kicked a can on the ground among the nearby garbage bags. “Did they see who?”

“No. That’s why I’m looking into this,” I said.

I had just come home. I didn’t want to solve a murder in my spare time.

Ben pointed the athamé at me. “Who told you?” he asked slowly. “I want to speak to them.”

“I’ve told you, I can’t. Now put that thing away. I’m no threat to you.”

Ben snorted. “Like hell you aren’t.”

I scrunched up my lips.

I was getting really sick of all this drama. Apparently, even finding out who killed his friend wasn’t motivation enough for Ben to cooperate with me.

Well, I wasn’t about to let him threaten me any longer.

“I don’t have time for this,” I said. “Tell me why you think Tyler was killed.”

“You think I’m going to tell you?” Ben asked. “You’d just sabotage —”

While he spewed his vitriol, I seized his wrist in both hands and twisted.

Ben yelled, and the athamé slipped out of his grasp, clattering to the ground.

With my thumbs pressing on the back of his hand, I jammed him into a wrist lock. Ben fell to his knees, trying to wriggle his hand out of my grasp.

I held firm and pressed a little harder. Ben yelped again.

“Okay, okay! Stop!” he gasped.

“You need to calm down,” I said. “I won’t hurt you.”

“You’re hurting me right now!”

“Don’t be such a baby. This is just a control method.”

“You’re an Arrowood. Don’t pretend you wouldn’t stick that athamé between my ribs if you had the chance,” Ben spat.

His words bled into me like a paralytic poison.

How many times had my family members also said that about the Everharts?

“I don’t want to stick you with anything,” I said. “You were threatening me and I disarmed you. We’re even now, okay?” I said.

“We’re only even if you don’t break my wrist,” Ben said through gritted teeth.

Ugh. Had the guy never been in a proper scrap before in his life?

I released one of my hands from his wrist and picked up the athamé, tossing it among the garbage bags before releasing him entirely and stepping back.

Ben groaned as he stood, trying to rub the grubby stains off his jeans with his sleeve.

Hah. Served him right.

“You going to pay for this dry cleaning?” he snapped.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” I said. “Now, before you go off on one, just listen to me. I know our families are technically at war, but this situation calls for a bit of collaboration, don’t you think?”

“If you want to share information with me, you’ll tell me who saw Tyler get killed,” Ben said.

I shook my head. “That’s the one thing I can’t tell you. If I could, I’d have told the police already. But I want to find out who did this, too.”

“Why?” Ben shoved his hands into his pockets.

I eyed them suspiciously. Hopefully, he didn't have any other weapons stashed on him anywhere.

“Why wouldn't I? I care he died and that his killer is out there somewhere. And Tyler wasn't one to get into trouble, right? What if the murderer strikes again?”

“Huh... hadn't thought of that.”

I tried so hard not to roll my eyes that I nearly pulled a muscle.

Of course. Trust an Everhart to only worry about the vengeance and nothing more.

“Why don't you tell me what you believe happened to Tyler? Who would have wanted to hurt him?” I asked.

Ben glared at me, but behind his tough facade, I could almost see the cogs turning.

“Tyler said he needed to talk to me about something important the day before he died,” he said. “He said he thought his mum was in danger. I don't think it's a coincidence.”

Well, this opened a whole new can of worms.

Tyler had a secret he wanted to share with Ben about the safety of his mother. What would be so important that someone would kill Tyler to keep it a secret?

I would need to speak to Michaela Bakewell as soon as possible. The timing wasn't great, but if someone was going to hurt her, too, I couldn't afford to delay this conversation.

“What are you going to do about this?” Ben asked. “And what the hell makes you think you're qualified to investigate?”

Really? The guy who had lived at home his whole life thought he could do a better job than me?

“I was in Nexus until two weeks ago,” I said. “I'd say that makes me more qualified than you.”

Ben scowled.

“Listen, I don't like this any more than you do, but I think we need to stay in touch about this,” I said.

“Ugh.” Ben spat on the ground but at least had the decency to turn his head away from me to do so. “For all I know, you could be lying about this just to mess with me.”

“Funny how you're accusing me of being that monstrous when you just

attacked me.” I eyed the pile of garbage bags where the athamé was buried.

Ben followed my gaze, his eyes narrowing. “I have no reason to trust you.”

Well, he had me there.

I folded my arms. “Did you ever think that this isn’t about you? This isn’t about the stupid feud or our families. This is about finding Tyler’s killer, and if Michaela is in danger, it’s about keeping her safe, too.”

Ben ran a dirt-streaked palm around the back of his neck as his gaze softened.

A long pause hung between us.

“I’m going to do some digging,” he said eventually. “If you find anything, tell me. Got it?”

“And vice versa,” I said, holding out my hand for a handshake. “Do we have a deal?” This wouldn’t be a one-way arrangement.

“Fine.” Ben took his other hand out of his pocket, and I glanced at it to make sure he had nothing offensive in it.

He hesitated before he took my hand and shook it. My skin tingled under his touch, and I snatched my hand back the second the gesture was complete.

Ew. I hoped he didn’t use his garbage hand.

Ben pointed a finger at me, but I stared him in the eye, ignoring it. “If you do anything to sabotage this, you won’t have to wait for the next baby for an Arrowwood to die, understand?”

I batted his hand aside and stepped into his space, our faces inches apart. He swallowed hard but didn’t step away.

Ugh. His cologne smelled amazing.

“Don’t threaten my family and I won’t threaten yours. Agreed?” I said.

“Fine.”

With that, Ben turned his back on me and waded among the garbage bags to look for his athamé.

I took that as my cue to walk away, the imprint of his touch lingering where he had shaken my hand.



THE MOMENT BEN AND I SHOOK HANDS ON OUR ‘INTEL TREATY,’ I WAS determined to find a new lead before he did.

Tyler’s concern for his mother’s safety gave the murder theory slightly more weight, but it didn’t exactly point the finger at anyone.

So, later that afternoon when I walked down the stairs to see Dad putting his coat on with a wrapped up homemade lasagne, I mentally cancelled my plans to scoff ice cream with Sandra and Isadora in front of the TV.

Homemade food to-go meant a trip to see someone recently bereaved. Who might just have information on what happened to her son.

“Where are you off to?” I asked.

Dad grinned as he adjusted the collar on his coat. “I thought you didn’t want us to discuss our relationships?”

I rolled my eyes. “If you’re planning on rocking up to a date with a lukewarm lasagne, let me save you the trouble and tell you right now: you won’t get another one.”

“Oh, very funny. I’m just popping by George’s to drop this off.” Dad gave the dish a wiggle.

“I’m coming.” I hurried down the rest of the steps and grabbed my own coat off the hanger.

“Are you sure you want to?” Dad asked. “I wouldn’t expect much conversation.”

“No, but it’s nice to show support, right?”

I brushed off the guilt as we walked to the car. Tactless was the best word I could think of for going to a recently bereaved mother’s home to discuss her son’s activities before his death.

But if Tyler had really thought his mother was in danger somehow, I owed it to him to investigate as soon as possible.

The Bakewells lived on the outskirts of the Teapot Forest, so named for its uncanny resemblance to a teapot from above. To my memory, the Bakewells’ garden had always been alive with wildlife due to its array of tempting flowers and vegetables, but as we walked down the garden path, the weeds tickled my knees.

I bit my lip as Dad knocked on the door. Michaela had neglected this place long before Tyler died.

George answered the door, his smile tight when he saw us. “Theo, Maeve. What brings you out here?”

Dad held up the lasagne dish. “Just bringing a little dinner round to check

up on you both.”

George stepped aside and we stepped over the threshold into the living room.

A wall of warm, stale air hit me as we walked in.

Empty takeout containers littered the coffee table and mantelpiece that hugged the wall above the electric fireplace. A collection of empty wine bottles stood together between the sofa and an armchair. Someone had made a half-hearted effort to hide them.

I had never actually stepped inside the house before, so it could have been like this all the time, but I doubted it.

Michaela was curled up under a blanket in a recliner chair, with red eyes and a puffy face.

“How’re you holding up, Mickey?” Dad squatted down next to her and offered her his hand.

Michaela took it and shook her head but didn’t look at him.

“We won’t take up much of your time, but Sandra wanted to make sure you were eating well, so we brought you some food,” Dad said.

“Thank you.” Michaela’s voice was so cracked, I wondered how long she’d gone without speaking. “For getting his body back.”

I swallowed at the lump in my throat, but it didn’t budge.

What should I even say to that? You’re welcome?

“I’ll... go find somewhere to put this,” I said, before heading for the only other door in the room.

I navigated the corridor, peering in through a few doors before finding the kitchen. It wasn’t in a much better state, only in this room there were poker chips and cards strewn on the kitchen table.

Making a beeline for the fridge, my shoes made a horrible, sticky noise with each step.

What was I thinking? Michaela had given me a perfect opening to speak to her about Tyler and I had walked away. Some detective I made.

The fridge was pretty empty, so I slid the lasagne inside and closed the door.

Urgency gnawed at my insides as I leaned against the counter. Time was of the essence if whoever murdered Tyler planned on targeting Michaela, too.

Maybe if I sat down with her and started up a casual conversation, some relevant information might seep through?

“You know I’ll help you with the funeral costs, but you need to get some

help.” Dad’s voice drifted through the crack in the kitchen door.

“I’m trying to get the gambling under control, but... it’s been harder since Tyler passed.”

I eyed the kitchen table. That much was clear.

“It might be worth speaking to a therapist again, George,” Dad said.

“I’m not a lunatic, Theo.” George had an aggressive edge to his voice.

“That isn’t what I’m saying. You’re months away from bankruptcy, and I can’t help you with that.”

“Not that it’s any of your business,” George said. “But the boy’s life insurance policy comes through in a few weeks. We’ll manage.”

My blood ran cold, and a shiver racked my shoulders.

Life insurance policy? On Tyler? Who in their right mind would take out a policy like that on someone so young?

My eyes widened. Had someone killed Tyler to collect on his insurance policy?



CHAPTER 10

“George!” Michaela’s cracked voice still reached into the hallway.
“Can we talk about this later?” Dad asked.
“What’s there to talk about, Theo?”

Their footsteps echoed off into the living room, but I still left it a few moments before following them.

Tyler’s life insurance was suspicious enough on its own, but what I really needed to know was who had taken it out on him. Had he even known?

I highly doubted Michaela would have put a price on her son’s life. George? He and Michaela had gotten together when Tyler was in his teens,

and I didn't know whether Tyler liked him.

George had seemed pretty enthused about the money. With a gambling problem so severe that even my dad had concerns, maybe he had a reason to be.

My stomach rolled as I walked back into the living room. The only person I knew who would have in-depth information about the relationship between George and Tyler was Ben Everhart.

I had hoped I wouldn't need to speak to him so soon after our last encounter.

"Morty, how are you?" Theo offered his hand to a man closing the front door.

He wore a cheap suit and lopsided, stripy tie. Sporting a short beard cut back significantly, and grey hair hanging down to his chin, he had the look of an aged salesman.

"Oh, you know how it is, Theo." The man shook Dad's hand with gusto.

"Maeve, this is Mortimer," Dad said, gesturing to the man. "George's brother. I thought you were in Dubai?"

"Got on a plane as soon as I heard about poor Tyler." Mortimer shook his head, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets. "Family, well... you come home for family, don't you?"

I nodded absently as I intertwined my fingers together. It seemed I wasn't the only one around here who was drawn back to this place by death.

"Morty paid for the funeral, George." Michaela had regained some of her voice, clutching a glass of water in both hands.

At least, it looked like water.

George whipped his head around from his perch on the arm of the sofa to look at his brother.

"You paid for it? How?" he asked.

Mortimer shrugged. "I had some tucked away."

Dad shot me a look and jerked his head toward the door.

Damn it. I needed more time. But before I could signal to him, he had already started his exit line.

"Well, we should go, but please, don't forget to let us know if you need anything. Anything at all," Dad said.

Michaela nodded and sipped her drink.

"Thanks again, Theo, Maeve." George waved a hand at us as we left.

I scrambled to think of something to say as we made our way out.

Something that could instigate a conversation that might give me a clue. When the door shut on us, my heart sank.

It was a good thing I only retrieved bodies, because I would have made the worst detective.

As I drove us home, I wanted to ask Dad about the life insurance policy, but it seemed he had found out about the same time as me. And I'd have to admit to eavesdropping if I brought it up.

Nope, my best hope, unfortunately, lay with Ben Everhart.

"I do hope George is taking care of her," Dad said as we passed the boundary out of Dawn.

"You think he isn't?" I asked.

I mean, the place could have done with a cleaning, but hopefully, George was more focused on caring for his wife than the house.

Dad grabbed the passenger side handle above his head. "George gets easily distracted."

"By cards?"

Dad pursed his lips.

The whole reason he had a friendship with George was because of their weekly poker night with their friends.

The card game was just a weekly indulgence for Dad, but George had a much larger appetite.

"She seemed all right," Dad said.

"All right?" I snorted. "She was a wreck, Dad."

"I'd be worse if it were me."

I shut up.

Without being a parent, I couldn't exactly comprehend what it would mean to lose a child.

I drove us back to the house and parked up on the giant driveway.

"Your name is on the work schedule properly now," Dad said over the top of the car as I locked up. "Perfect timing, too. Sharon is due for some holiday. I'll send you a copy to your email."

I nodded, my mind still elsewhere.

Work was something I had looked forward to until I learned I had to solve a murder. It felt like being on the rota might get in the way of the investigation. But I couldn't exactly tell Dad that.

The second I opened the front door, a volley of raised voices struck us from down the corridor.

“Gods above, what now?” Dad pushed his way through and made to march off down the corridor.

But a loud bang had him staggering against the wall as the opposite one exploded in a hail of rock chunks and splintered wood.

“Dad!” I raised my arm to cover my head as I ducked and hurried through the cloud of dust that had enveloped him.

“I’m all right.” Dad coughed as he clambered to his feet. “What was that?”

Excellent question.

I straightened up and swiped my hand through the cloud of debris to clear the air. A crumbling hole connected the hallway to the living room, through which a cacophony of shouts and bellows escaped.

Wendy brandished a potion bottle in the air that was a red colour too vivid to miss. Well, that explained the hole in the wall. Red potions were often the most explosive kind.

Where on earth had she gotten that? She couldn’t have made it. Even our family potion stores didn’t have ingredients to create a potion half that powerful.

“It’s not good enough!” she screamed as Keith, Lola, Sandra, and Isadora teetered on the edge of the room.

Wendy’s usually pristine bun had fallen into an ashy mess at the base of her neck, and there was a large coffee stain on her blouse.

“By Scorpio’s grace,” Dad muttered as he caught sight of the scene over my shoulder.

We hurried around to the living room archway and dashed inside.

“What is going on in here?” Dad asked. “Wendy, put that down for goodness’ sake.”

“You don’t think we’ve tried that?” Sandra said out of the corner of her mouth, hands out in surrender.

She still had her work scrubs on. What a thing to come home from work to.

“I can’t take it anymore!” Wendy sobbed. “Everywhere I go, there’s an Everhart taunting me about Ray. They’re glad he’s gone! They won’t be happy until we all are!”

Furious embers burst to life in the pit of my stomach.

It was bad enough that Adrian had gotten his jabs in when we left the hospital, but they wouldn’t sink nearly as deep into us as they would Wendy.

But then, hadn't our family done the same to them the last time they had lost a family member?

Who knew when it had first begun? But each new death presented an opportunity for the opposite family to get revenge for the last family member they had lost.

Wendy's eyes were red and puffy from hours of crying, her jaw taut and teeth bared.

I took a few careful steps forward, shaking off the warning hand that Dad placed on my shoulder.

I was no negotiator, but having friends across many departments in Nexus had clued me in to a few techniques.

Wendy had already used one potion to make her point, and I knew she would use the other. But something told me she wouldn't use it on any of us.

"What do you want us to do about this?" I asked. "How can we help you?"

"They need to die. They all need to die!" she shouted.

"It makes sense." Keith looked the least concerned out of us all, leaning his shoulder against the fireplace with folded arms. "If they're all dead, maybe the curse will lift."

"Oh, do shut up," Sandra snapped, earning herself the stink eye from Lola.

I kept my eyes on Wendy and tried not to let my exasperation get the better of me. It was that kind of shortsighted thinking that led to more tragedy.

"What if their deaths mean the death of all our family, too?" I asked. "Has anyone thought of that?"

Wendy's face crumpled, and with a wail, she collapsed onto the love seat behind her.

Apparently not.

"It isn't fair," she sobbed. "I can barely keep it together as it is, but the moment I see one of their smug faces..."

Tears cascaded down her face, her whole body racking with sobs.

I took the opportunity when her eyes closed to slip to her side and squat down in front of her. Claspng both her hands in mine, I teased the potion bottle out of her grip and put it on a side table.

The lack of a label caught my eye, and there was nothing special or branded about the shape of the vial, either. That didn't bode well.

What shady character had she gotten it from?

With the potion now out of her hands, Sandra dashed forward and pulled Wendy into her arms on the love seat.

“I know, lovely, I know,” she murmured, rubbing her shoulders.

I looked back at Dad, who held fistfuls of his sleeves, squeezing the life out of the fabric. Maybe, just maybe, I could talk Ben Everhart into calming things down on his end. At least long enough for our family to recover.



“WHAT HAPPENED HERE?” ALLISON ASKED AS I LET HER AND KIRA IN through the front door later that evening.

“Family meeting,” I said.

Kira’s face lit up as I shut the door behind them. “Can I come to the next one?”

“I’m not going to the next one, if that’s how it’s going down.”

I explained the full extent of the incident as we went up to my bedroom to change into swimsuits and strolled down to the indoor swimming pool.

That night, we were due to have our second dates at the agency, and all three of us needed to blow off some steam before we went. The last thing I wanted was to show up to a date with ‘William,’ still fraught with the day’s events.

I swam lazily around in a circle while Kira sat on the edge and Allison clung to it, kicking her legs happily.

I had suggested the pool. Water washed away all my troubles, and today of all days, I needed just that.

“Anyone getting lucky tonight?” Kira asked.

“If you’re going to live up to your boasting, then you are,” I said.

“Boasting?” Kira scoffed. “I was hopeful, that’s all. But he wanted to follow the instructions.”

“Is he really that close a match with you, then?” Allison kicked so hard, she splashed water right in my face.

“I’ll give him a few more chances.” Kira shrugged. “Well, Maeve? Going to take the plunge?”

“Following the instructions sounds good to me,” I said.

William had seemed as grateful as me to have some direction on our last date. Considering its success, I was happy to put my trust in the agency to guide us again.

My shoulders clenched, the tension radiating up to my jaw as the weird sensation from my shower the other day returned.

It rose up in me like a bubble this time, its urgency injecting panic into my core. I fixed my gaze on the water’s surface, the rhythmic lapping bringing calm to meet the chaos.

Little by little, the bubble receded.

“Boring.” Kira reached her hand into the water and splashed more at me.

Still dumbstruck, the water hit me straight in the face, but I didn’t even blink.

I needed to distract myself before I went down a mental rabbit hole trying to pull apart these weird feelings.

“I’ve got something to tell you guys,” I said, tilting my head up to the wooden beams in the ceiling.

Kira cocked her head. “What have you done?”

“Don’t make it sound like she’s done something wrong, Ki,” Allison said.

I dipped my mouth under the water and back up again. “No, she’s right Ali. It could be one of the dumbest things I’ve ever done.”

“Hah.” Kira’s face split into a gleeful smile. “What did you do?”

“I made an... alliance for lack of a better term, with Ben Everhart.”

Allison’s gasp lasted until she ran out of breath, after which she nearly inhaled a mouthful of water.

“First off, go you,” Kira said, grinning wider. “Second off, why?”

“I didn’t want to.” I trod water a little faster to keep my head above water. “But he is basically the only other person on this island who also thinks someone murdered Tyler. We stand a better chance of solving this if we share information, that’s all.”

“Are you sure this is safe?” Allison asked. “What if he hurts you?”

“He already tried. I got him pretty good.”

“You go, girl.” Kira fluttered her wings. “But seriously, if you need us for backup, we’re only a call away.”

“I’m trying not to gang up on him,” I said, swirling my arms back and forth in the water. “But I’ll take that into consideration.”

“Well? What have you learned so far? Are you any closer to finding out

who did it?" Allison asked.

She let go of the side of the pool and floated on her back, infinitely more buoyant than either me or Kira. Dryads floated.

"Closer to a motive," I said. "Today I learned Tyler had a life insurance policy."

"Oh, I could have told you that," Allison said.

I whipped my head around to look at her, a wet strand of hair sticking to my face. "You could?"

"My cousin is a financial advisor for the Bakewells," Allison said. "Remember? Tyler took out a huge policy on himself because if his dad hadn't had one, he and his mum would have really struggled. He did it so he wouldn't leave his mum in the lurch if he died."

"Did he tell anyone about it?" I asked.

"Nobody, as far as I know."

I dipped my nose and mouth beneath the surface of the water.

If Tyler had taken out his own policy and told nobody... his murderer couldn't have killed him for money. Which only left limited possibilities. Back in the bowels of London's supernatural population, people were murdered for money, for clout, and sometimes because they knew something they shouldn't.

With the first two off the table, had someone killed Tyler to conceal a dark secret?



CHAPTER 11

My nerves prickled in all the wrong ways as I followed Mervyn down the dating agency corridor. Swimming had calmed me right down until Allison had thrown me that curveball.

Here I thought I'd been onto something with that policy, and now I was back at square one.

I smoothed out my dress, a forest-green one today and a little shorter than the one I wore last time. It wasn't fair on William if an informal murder investigation I shouldn't even have been pursuing distracted me.

Like it or not, I couldn't do anything about it that evening, anyway.

Unless I rocked up to the Everhart home to ask Ben more questions about Tyler.

No thanks.

“Have a wonderful date, ma’am,” Mervyn said as he opened the door for me.

“Thanks, Mervyn.” I stepped inside.

A bar dominated the middle of the room, with a curtained off area behind it. A series of stools stood before it and a few booths lined the walls, all empty.

A man dressed in a white shirt and a cumberbund leaned on the bar, looking at me as if he had been waiting specifically for me to walk in. He also had a Venetian mask on.

But the main attraction, William, was nowhere to be seen.

My heart sank. Had he opted out?

I slid onto one stool and set my clutch on the bar. “Where’s...?”

“Your date is running late,” the bartender said as he readjusted his drinks shaker. “But he’s definitely coming.”

The bartender jerked his elbow at a piece of paper a few feet down.

Our instructions. Well, it couldn’t hurt to get a head start on William.

I reached along the bar and grabbed the paper, words inking onto the paper the moment I touched it.

“Create a cocktail for each other with one potion included.”

Oh, this would be fun.

“Can I start before he gets here?” I asked.

“Have at it.” The bartender gestured a hand at me.

I scratched my chin as I mulled over my options. Did I lay a trap for him and spike him with a truth potion to find out how he really felt about us? Or did I play nice?

The latter won over.

“Make him a Shamrock with a calming potion,” I said. “If you please.”

“Coming right up.”

The creak of the door opening had me swivelling around on my bar stool.

Shutting the door with one hand and readjusting his mask with the other, William dashed toward the bar.

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” he said, sitting down on the stool next to me.

“I barely waited.”

Despite the heart attack at thinking he wouldn’t show.

“For you, sir.” The bartender slid a cocktail glass filled with a sea-green liquid.

“What is it?” William picked up the glass to inspect it more closely.

“I ordered it for you,” I said.

“What’s in it?”

“Drink it and find out.”

He narrowed his eyes, but a smile played on his lips.

He took a big gulp, rather than a sip. Someone was feeling brave.

“Shamrock,” he said. “Is there something else in it?”

“You’ll feel it in a minute.” I crossed one leg over the other.

Oh boy, how dodgy did that sound?

William’s calm expression, however, remained intact. Not that he had much choice, considering what I’d spiked his drink with.

“Well, it’s either a rooie or a calming potion,” he said, but took another gulp even so.

“Do I look like a girl that would go around drugging men I’ve only just met?” I asked.

Did I even want to know the answer?

William shifted in his seat. “I don’t even know what you really look like, so I have no idea. Although, I’d like to know.”

I eyed his mask, longing rising from the pit of my stomach.

Finding out who each other was would be as simple as slipping our masks off our faces. The need burned me and not in a way I found pleasant.

“Not yet,” the bartender said. “Follow the rules, remember? Now, it’s your turn to order a drink for the lady, sir.”

A wicked grin split William’s face and he got off the bar stool to press his hands over my ears.

“I want to surprise you, too,” he said, before cupping his palms in place.

Heat burst across my cheeks at his touch, but I still pressed my hands over his. I wanted a surprise as much as he did.

When he had finished telling the bartender my order, William’s hands dropped just an inch from my ears to my cheeks.

My breath evaporated in my chest; the sound of my heart thrummed in my ears.

Our eyes met, our fingers manoeuvring to each other’s hands. The world seemed to freeze with us in our moment, all sound evaporating as if we were in a vacuum.

There was something so addicting about his touch. I wanted more of it, everywhere. How crazy was I to have felt that way after just one meeting?

I felt like I knew him better than I should have. The familiarity of his touch went beyond *déjà vu*.

“For the lady.” The bartender slid a turquoise cocktail glass toward me and William’s hands dropped from mine.

He picked up the glass and handed it to me. “M’lady.”

“My thanks, kind sir.” I took a generous swig.

I didn’t want him to think I wouldn’t dare drink his concoction when he had so bravely drunk mine.

The liquor tasted of peach and pomegranate, and I gave the glass a swirl as I waited for the potion to kick in.

After another swig, a prickling of power rippled up my forearms and biceps.

“Is that some kind of strengthening potion?” I asked.

“Bingo.” William sat down in his seat again and drained the last of his glass.

“And why would I need that?” I knew people, my uncle Keith included, who took strengthening potions frequently. Usually, they were the kind who looked for a fistfight.

“I want to make sure you get home safe,” William said.

A fondness shimmered in his eyes, igniting a burst of the same in my belly. Could he be any sweeter?

The bartender whipped up a few potion-less cocktails for us both and disappeared in the back, telling us to press the crystal sitting on the bar if we needed him back.

The paper instructed us to talk alone for a while, and it pleased me to feel only relief when the bartender left. A part of me had wondered if the awkwardness from our last date would bleed into this one.

“I hope you don’t feel pressured when I say this, but...” William twirled the stem of his empty glass between his fingers. “...I can’t stop thinking about our kiss.”

“Yeah, it’s... been on my mind, too,” I said.

My fingers found a loose thread on my dress, and I repressed the urge to pull it and tucked it out of sight instead.

“When they told us how high our compatibility was, I couldn’t believe it,” I added.

“Me neither.” William snorted. “I thought my friends had paid this place off to prank me.”

“Hah. Ditto.” Kira and Allison would have gotten a kick out of that.

William’s eyes misted over and he let go of his glass and straightened up. “Have you really been on the island this whole time? Right under my nose?”

The paper turned red so quickly it almost quivered with the effort.

“I guess that topic of conversation is off the table,” I said. But he asked an interesting question.

Surely people as allegedly compatible as us would have found each other before now?

“What *can* we do then?” William asked.

I was halfway through drinking my cocktail when I spied his mischievous look over the rim of my glass.

Oh, hell yeah.

I put my drink down and parted my knees at the same time he got off his stool. He slipped between my thighs with a delicious ease, and the moment his hands grasped my hips, a spasm of pleasure rocketed up my spine.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, drawing him to my lips.

Our last kiss had been hesitant, but I had shaken any doubt I’d had before I left the room on our last date.

Our lips moved with a certainty that only fuelled any naughty intentions I had dreamed up since our last meeting. Kira’s plan circled my mind like a ravenous vulture.

“Do you think that piece of paper will let me do some really inappropriate things to you?” I asked in between kisses.

William froze, both of us looking at the paper, but it remained white.

Without warning, he dove for my neck, and a small gasp escaped me as he kissed me there. My leg hitched itself up around his hip, and his fingers curled around my knee to keep it there.

My hands slipped under his shirt and roved his body as he kissed up the length of my neck toward my jaw.

The paper trembled on the counter, turning a bright red. William didn’t see with his back to it, and I didn’t want him to know. Why did the paper have to dictate what went on here?

“Are we ready for the next part?” The bartender came out of the back so quickly, I nearly fell off my stool.

William’s grip tightened on my hips as I grasped his shoulders for

support.

William cleared his throat as he stepped back, the longing shimmering in his eyes as he sat back down.

“I suppose so,” he said.

“Look at the paper.” The bartender tapped it before whipping out a new, bigger cocktail glass.

I had completely forgotten the last cocktail he made us.

I touched the paper to distract myself from the tidal wave of lust that ripped through my body. Gods, if I could have just had ten minutes alone with him.

Words inked onto the paper: “Create a cocktail together that you will drink together.”

“There’s a list here, in case you’re having trouble deciding.” The bartender had the audacity to pump his eyebrows at us before handing us a menu.

Well, at least he looked impressed rather than judging us.

“How does a daiquiri sound?” I asked, smoothing my hair.

“Great, yeah, great.” William adjusted his collar. “How about a memory potion with that?”

“Memory? You want to forget this date?” I laughed, but there was no humour in it.

William chuckled. “Not a forgetfulness potion, a memory potion. I don’t think I want to forget this date, or any part of it.”

This guy was smooth.

“Yeah,” I said. “Me neither.”

Neither one of us said a word as the bartender whipped up the drink and slid it over to us with two straws.

As we drank it together, almost nose to nose, I couldn’t help but feel that this man was going to be in my life for a long time.

“Um, can I ask you something?” William asked, checking the bartender was still busying himself at the back of the bar.

“Sure.” I played with my straw in the half-empty glass.

“Can you keep a secret for me?” he asked.

“A secret? That’s bold of you.” But I liked that he wanted to trust me so early on. “Of course I can.”

“Okay.” William exhaled harshly and held out his palm. “Give me your hand.”

I eyed his hand. Under any other circumstances, I would have felt cautious. But instead, I indulged in intrigue.

With no hesitation, I placed my right hand in his. So gently anyone would have thought he was handling fine china, William guided my arm toward him. He touched the fingers of his other hand to the topside of my forearm, and a golden light zipped from his fingertips to underneath my skin.

A tan mark inked onto my arm, a symbol I didn't recognise.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's my power," he said. "I can control people's luck."

Well that was a handy power, and it ruled William out as a witch. But the power of luck wasn't one I had heard of on Dusk. Had he really been here all his life?

"Good luck or bad?" I asked.

"Both." William pumped his eyebrows, his fingers tracing over the mark. "But this symbol? This is good luck."

Warmth seeped into my smile. "You really want me to get home safely, huh? That's one way to get a third date."

"There's definitely going to be a third date?" he asked.

I levered my right hand up so my fingers brushed the underside of his arm, my fingertips tingling. "Definitely."



"I CAN'T BELIEVE THEY WOULDN'T LET US HAVE SEX LAST NIGHT," KIRA SAID, fluttering her wings indignantly as she hauled a bag of oxygen enchantments toward me.

Perched on a wooden crate of new flippers, I scrolled down the inventory on my clipboard.

Easily the most dull task of the entire business, inventory would take a whole day if I let it. Kira and Allison didn't just make for good company, but if I bossed them around enough, they helped me cut down the time I was stuck in the back room by half.

"That's the only thing you signed up for, wasn't it?" Allison counted the new shipment as she sat on the floor surrounded by masks in new packaging.

“When I paid for this thing, they told me I could bang. I’m allowed to be mad,” Kira huffed.

“We’re probably not allowed until the third date,” I said, scribbling down numbers.

Kira narrowed her eyes at me. “How do you know?”

My cheeks flushed, and Kira grinned. Nothing I said now was going to fool them.

“You tried to do it, didn’t you?” she said, chuckling.

Well, there was only one way out of this situation.

“Who wants lunch?” I slapped the clipboard down on the crate and stood. “On me.”

“Oh, come on.” Kira folded her arms as I locked up the back room. “You don’t have to be embarrassed around us.”

“I’m not.” I pushed them both out through the front door and down the street. “But if my dad overhears us, I’m going to get an inquisition like you’ve never seen.”

He was out on another tourist dive until after lunch, but he had a habit of appearing out of nowhere and completely unexpected.

I linked arms with them and we made our way toward the main street of Newferry. It didn’t have quite the array of lunch spots as Dawn, but we had a few favourites to choose from.

Newferry had tourists in mind, with merchandise spilling out of colourful storefronts. Delis and restaurants threw their doors and windows open, allowing plumes of rainbow mist to spread through the street.

I inhaled a breath tinged with the scent of spaghetti Bolognese. Those magical clouds smelled of whatever you craved, whether you knew it or not.

Kira steered us into the third place we encountered, jabbering about croissants. We ordered some drinks at the bar and Allison tried to sit down near the window, but I shook my head and jerked my chin toward the back.

I needed some privacy if I was going to talk to them openly.

“It’s dark back here.” Allison screwed up her nose as we sat down.

“Yeah, well, deal with it. I need to bounce some ideas off you,” I said as I slid to the end of the booth.

“Sex advice?” Kira leaned across the table, waggling her eyebrows at me.

“Please, bestow all your wisdom upon me,” I said, deadpan. “No, idiot, I’m at a dead end with Tyler’s murder.”

And no matter how much I thought about it, I couldn’t work out what the

next step was.

“All you had was a potential motive, anyway. Would it even have helped that much?” Allison said, tearing open a sugar packet and pouring it into her glass of water.

Dryads had some weird dietary habits. Sugar water wasn't even the strangest. Allison and all her family were vegetarian. I loved seafood too much to even consider it.

“More than zilch would have.” I rested my elbows on the table on either side of my lemonade. “The only thing I actually know is that someone murdered Tyler. That's it.”

“What would you do if this was work?” Kira asked, stirring her drink with a metal straw. “Or would you not get into any of the investigation at all?”

“That's for the detectives,” I said. “We would just scout for any evidence around the body, bag it up, and...”

My eyes glazed over.

Evidence. Nobody had asked me to look around the location of the body for evidence, because Mallory had deemed Tyler's death an accident even before the autopsy.

A tingling sensation on my arm drew my attention, and the faintest glow pulsed underneath my jacket. I placed my hand on top of the glow to conceal it. If Kira or Allison knew someone with luck powers, I didn't want to know. I'd tell them when I found out who William really was.

But why was the good luck mark activating now?

“I need to go for a dive where we found Tyler,” I said, snapping back to reality.

“It's been days since you retrieved the body, Maeve.” Allison wrapped her glass up with both hands. “Won't any evidence have washed away by now?”

Perhaps, but with a little luck...?

“Maybe. But I have little else to go on. Scouting the site is the only way to —”

“Jeannie? What's wrong?” A high-pitched cry cut me off.

Kira and Allison whipped around to follow my gaze past them at two young women having milkshakes a few tables down.

The redhead was on her feet, hands reaching toward but not touching her friend, who clutched her arm, breathless. A black rash wound its way up her

forearm, as if lightning ran through her veins and burned her from within.

“What’s happening?” the girl asked as the rash spread up toward her pastel-yellow sleeve. “What is this?”

The redhead spun around to look at the server behind the counter, but he stared on in as much horror as she did.

“It hurts,” Jeannie said, pawing at the rash, her eyes widening as it enveloped her entire arm.

My blood ran cold. I had seen that rash before, on a body I had pulled out of the Thames.

“Aconite poisoning,” I muttered.

Kira swore loudly. “What the hell do we do?”

“Get help, now!” I leapt to my feet and dashed over to the counter, where the server continued to stare at the horror unfolding in the middle of his café.

“Hey!” I grabbed his shoulder and shook him. “Do you have any mugwort in the back?”

The menu had offered potion infusions in the drinks. It stood to reason they might have some ingredients on hand. The tingling on my arm intensified. Damn it, had it activated because of what had happened to this girl? If we were going to save her, I wouldn’t turn my nose up at a dose of luck.

The server opened and closed his mouth like a beached fish.

“Mugwort!” My shout snapped him out of his stupor and he stammered.

“It’s just a young plant,” he said. “It’s still growing.”

“Get it. Now.” The moment he disappeared into the back, I dashed over to the girl, Jeannie, who had fallen to her knees next to her table.

Allison dithered at her side, her hands held out like Jeannie’s friend. Anyone who grew up with magic knew not to touch the afflicted with bare skin, just in case it spread to them.

“What’s happening?” Tears spilled down Jeannie’s cheeks as she watched the rash spread across her collarbone and down her other arm.

“Lie down.” I grabbed the coat off the back of her chair and wrapped my hands up in it to help ease her onto her back.

If we didn’t get her help in time, her heart would give out first, so the least stress we could put on it, the better.

“I’ve got the plant!” The server appeared behind the counter, waving a terracotta pot in the air.

“Ali, make it grow,” I said. “As big as you can.”

Allison squeaked and dashed over to the counter, snatching the pot off him. She touched a finger to the base of the sproutling and it erupted into a leafy, mature plant.

“You.” I pointed a finger at the server. “Do you have boiling water on hand?”

The server had apparently done away with answering me and seized a bowl and filled it from the industrial tea kettle.

Jeannie grabbed my arm, her eyes bugging as she took a ragged breath.

“I can’t... I can’t...” she gasped.

The rash snaked up her throat. She was going to suffocate.

I wrenched out of her grip and grabbed the plant and bowl of water. Setting them both on a nearby table, I ripped leaves off the plant and tore them in half, throwing them into the bowl of water.

A pot of cutlery sat in the middle of the table and I grabbed a fork and prodded the leaves in the water.

This would make the most horrendous mugwort tea, but we didn’t have the luxury of time.

“Jeannie!” her friend shouted, as the girl took a shuddering breath and fell still.



CHAPTER 12

Time slowed as adrenaline shot through my system.

I snatched Allison's glass of water off our table and poured it over Jeannie's face.

She gasped and juddered as the shock roused her.

"Here." I grabbed the bowl and knelt next to her. "You've got to drink this, Jeannie."

I looped an arm under her shoulders and eased her head up, pressing the rim of the bowl to her lips.

Jeannie took measured gulps, but choked on the third mouthful. The

concoction sprayed all down her top and dripped into her mousey hair.

She inhaled another shaky breath, and around her throat, the spread of the rash receded just an inch.

“In here!” Kira dashed in, followed by two paramedics dressed in their purple uniform.

Both their eyes widened at the sight of the rash.

“Stand back, all of you!” one of them ordered.

I lowered Jeannie back to the ground, Allison’s hands grabbing my arm to guide me away.

I clutched the bowl of mugwort tea to my stomach as the paramedics surrounded Jeannie.

How had aconite, a cautiously used ingredient by all magic practitioners, found its way into this girl’s system?



ALLISON WATCHED ME PACE FROM HER FOETAL POSITION ON THE WAITING room chair.

The paramedics had insisted we come to the hospital after learning we had given Jeannie mugwort tea. Aconite poisoning had been rare enough even in London, but on Dusk? Unheard of. The doctors needed the witnesses close by in case they required more information.

Kira had taken advantage of the empty waiting room to flutter, cross-legged, just underneath the light fittings.

Her wings always were the most jittery part about her when she was nervous.

I ran a hand through my hair and caught a few knots between my fingers.

We couldn’t have gotten Jeannie to a hospital any faster, but that didn’t mean she was going to survive. The tea had halted the aconite’s progress, but done little to undo its damage.

I glanced at the spot on my arm where William’s good luck mark lay under my jacket. Without it, could we have even helped as much as we did?

Footsteps approached from down the hall and I stopped pacing.

Sandra appeared, her scrubs stained and her hair wild.

“Is she all right?” Allison asked, as Sandra opened her mouth to speak.

“She’s in a bad way, but alive and stable, thanks to you girls,” Sandra said as she reached me, putting her hands on her hips. “Maeve, how did you know to give her mugwort?”

“I’ve seen it before, in London,” I said.

My friend in pathology had explained how small the window was to saving someone with aconite poisoning, and the only thing that could lengthen it.

“Well, you may very well have saved her life.” Sandra adjusted the pen around her neck. “Now that she’s recovering, we’d like to know how the poison got into her system.”

Now that I didn’t know.

“They were drinking milkshakes,” Allison said.

“Yeah, but the other girl was fine.” Kira fluttered down to stand next to me. “Unless the server slipped it in there?”

“He didn’t look the type. He was too flustered,” I said. “Whoever poisoned her wasn’t there when she went down, I’m sure of it. The aconite didn’t act like I expected, either.”

“This poison had some intricate tendencies,” Sandra said. “Aconite was the key ingredient in whatever she ingested, but we found something else in her bloodstream.”

Something else? I exchanged looks with Kira.

“A trace of a hybrid ingredient called ‘yewlock,’” Sandra said. “Illegal in most countries, and certainly on Dusk.”

“What does it do?” I asked.

Allison unravelled herself to come and stand with me and Kira. She stared at Sandra, open-mouthed.

“It’s a suppressant,” Allison said. “It stops any counteracting effects of the potion it’s put in.”

“Wait.” I planted my hand on my chest and clasped my pendant. “Do you mean someone spiked her with a potion that was designed not to let antidotes work?”

“Thankfully, they didn’t put enough of it in,” Sandra said. “Which is why your mugwort worked just enough to save her.”

A piece of my hair tickled the back of my neck as an icy feeling rippled down it.

“They really wanted to make sure she died, huh?” I muttered.

This couldn't be a coincidence. Someone pushes Tyler off a cliff and then a girl's milkshake got spiked with aconite?

Someone was happily skipping their way around Dusk, murdering their butt off.

"Does Mallory know?" I asked.

Involving the police was the last thing anyone did around here, but attempted murder was on that small list of things you told them about.

"She's on her way, or someone is, anyway." Sandra waved a hand, her eyelids drooping. "I'm guessing they'll want to speak to you three. Have you called your dad?"

I pursed my lips.

In all the drama, I had completely forgotten.

"Call him," Sandra said, walking back down the corridor. "My shift ends in ten minutes. I'll stay with you in case the police need a chat."

I opened my mouth to argue, but stopped myself. All this babying would take some getting used to, because nothing I said would make her stop.

The moment Sandra walked out of sight, the three of us huddled together. I peeked over Allison's head to check the receptionist wasn't watching.

She stared, zombie-eyed, at a computer screen, cheek smushed into her palm as she leaned on her hand.

"There's a murderer out here somewhere." Allison squeaked her way through the sentence. "How do we know who he's going to kill next?"

"We don't know it's a he," Kira said. "It could be a she, or a they."

"Statistically speaking, it's going to be a man."

"Since when do dryads read statistics? Actually, since when do you read? I thought it creeped you out?" Kira said.

Allison wrinkled her nose.

The dryads' disdain for books made sense, given what paper was made of. It had become a morbid tradition in the past that any war the dryads lost would see their corpses turned into books.

Learning that fact had made me look at my bookshelf a little differently.

"I listen to murder mystery podcasts," she said. "For... fun."

She bowed her head, almost as if she was ashamed.

"You devil." Kira grinned and batted Allison with her wing, causing her to stumble.

I grabbed Allison's arm to stop her toppling, and she stuck her tongue out at Kira.

“Gender aside, we need to catch this person,” I said. “They could be the same person who killed Tyler.”

“Do we really think that?” Kira asked. “These are two completely different methods of killing. Too different.”

I ran my fingers up and down my pendant chain.

She wasn’t wrong. Pushing someone off a cliff seemed more opportunistic, whereas poisoning would have taken far more planning.

The server at the café had appeared too legitimately surprised to have had anything to do with the poisoning. Which meant that whoever had tried to kill Jeannie had put a lot of effort into making sure the aconite found its way into her milkshake.

“So it’s possible there are two killers,” I said. “But why now? Dusk hasn’t seen a killing in decades.”

And even those had been mostly accidents.

The chance of two killers emerging at the same time seemed like too much of a coincidence.

At least Mallory would look at this case with a critical eye, and any leads she might unearth could point us toward Tyler’s.

If the same person who killed Tyler had also tried to kill Jeannie, they had just opened a whole can of worms that I was all too happy to delve into.

A loud bang made all three of us jump and the receptionist jerked out of her sluggish stupor.

I whipped around in time to see three police officers in uniform following a plainclothes detective into the waiting room.

“Which one of you is Maeve Arrowood?” The detective marched over to us.

With a smidge of hesitation, I raised my hand.

“Excellent. If you could please go with my colleagues, you are wanted down at the police station.”



CHAPTER 13

I tried not to panic as an officer escorted me into Mallory's office. Worst-case scenario, she had me pegged as a suspect. My ties to Tyler's murder wasn't exactly suspect-worthy, but the attempt on Jeannie...

Mallory was deep in discussion with another detective as I entered, and they immediately stopped talking.

The officer who had escorted me in closed the door behind me.

"Oh good, you're here." Mallory gestured to a seat opposite her desk.

Well, it didn't sound like I was about to get interrogated.

"Don't look so worried, you're not in trouble," Mallory said as I sat

down. “You did a great thing today. Without you, that poor girl would certainly have died.”

My efforts wouldn’t have been for much if I couldn’t find out who had tried to kill her.

“Are you going to question me?” I asked.

Mallory waved a hand in the air. “No need. We know what happened.”

I cocked my head. They what?

“You know who did it?” I asked.

Mallory swivelled her laptop around to face me. On the screen was a CCTV image of Jeannie and her friend chatting at the café table. They didn’t have their milkshakes yet.

But as I looked closer, I spied them, almost finished, on the counter. The server had his back turned to them, shaking a can of whipped cream.

For a moment, I wasn’t sure what I was looking at. But then I spotted the shadow.

A figure lurked outside the window, their face obscured by a hoodie and their hand outstretched toward the glass.

“Who is that?” I squinted, leaning in further to the screen.

“Jeannie Gallagher’s ex-boyfriend, Steven Simms.” Mallory pressed the space button and the image sprang to life.

Nothing moved much except for a small bunch of pixels that floated through the air toward the milkshakes.

“What is that?” I asked.

Mallory held up an evidence bag which encapsulated an almost empty vial.

“An aconite poison, as suspected,” Mallory said. “We haven’t tested it yet, but we’ve got Steven’s confession.”

“He already confessed?” I asked.

Wow, they had worked fast. If they had approached Tyler’s case as a murder, they might have solved it already.

“Mr. Simms has the talent of telekinesis.” Mallory put the vial back on her desk. “He used it to spike Jeannie’s drink with the potion, after what he described as a difficult breakup.”

“Let me guess. He didn’t want it, but she did?”

“Bingo.” Mallory took her laptop back and closed it. “This act alone is abhorrent enough that he might see attempted murder charges, but it speaks to a bigger problem.”

“Where he got the potion?”

In London, when detectives asked that question, they would already have a list of suspect gangs who could have supplied it.

On Dusk, where would Mallory even begin?

“Exactly,” Mallory said, placing her fingertips on her desk. “We might have an illicit substances smuggler here on Dusk, and that’s just the best-case scenario. The worst is that someone is making and selling illegal potions and spells.”

My blood ran cold. Wendy.

At the time she had exploded a hole in the living room wall, I hadn’t thought too much about it. But to my knowledge, our alchemy room didn’t have the stock to produce the firepower she had exhibited that day.

A litany of curse words streamed through my consciousness.

Did Wendy have connections with whoever had made the potion that nearly killed Jeannie?

“I asked you here to provide a statement so we can solidify our case against Simms. But few people on Dusk could identify aconite poisoning so quickly. I need you to keep an eye out for more occurrences like this, although hopefully nowhere near as deadly. It seems you know what to look for.”

I wanted to correct her and tell her that what I knew about murder methods wasn’t professional. Chatting with my colleagues and work friends had me picking up information that had come in handy with what happened to Jeannie.

But I stopped myself. I didn’t want to appear to distance myself from Mallory’s request. Especially not if she found out about Wendy’s potential involvement with this supplier.

An icy sensation crept across my skin and all the hairs raised in quick succession.

The feud. Would the emergence of this unknown supplier throw fuel onto an already out-of-control fire?

“Sure.” I twisted my fingers together in my lap until pain spasmed through my joints. “Absolutely.”



I BRACED MYSELF AGAINST THE SPEEDBOAT STEERING WHEEL AS A LARGE wave nudged the boat's nose into the air.

The boat hit the water, and I lurched forward, clinging to the wheel. Seizing the throttle, I dialled it back a notch.

The seas had gotten choppy as the winds grew wilder.

I would have to make this trip quick.

Wispy clouds streaked the sky as the sun sank toward the horizon, tinging the heavens with pinks and oranges.

I had wanted to explore the site of Tyler's death with Kira and Allison in tow. But the moment their parents learned what they had been involved in, they had summoned their children home.

Technically, Dad had summoned me, too, after a phone call when I got out of Mallory's office. But I told him I had forgotten something at the scuba office and had to go back to get it.

I used my keys to get into the storeroom, changed into a wet suit, grabbed an oxygen enchantment and a pair of flippers, and hopped into the speedboat.

Despite what had happened to Jeannie, I couldn't allow myself to get distracted. Tyler's murder was my first concern, given that his mother might also be in danger.

The deadly potions and spells circulating Dusky, and even the Arrowood household, would have to wait. Trust the entire island to go down the pan the second I arrived home.

I parked the boat up a short distance from the crevice where we had retrieved Tyler's body and dropped the anchor.

The chances of finding a clue around here weren't high, but the next time I crossed paths with Ben Everhart, I wouldn't have him accusing me of not being thorough.

I tucked the talisman containing the oxygen enchantment into the gap in the neck of my wet suit. Magical wet suits could hold many talismans and spells that would aid in maneuverability in the water.

The oxygen one was my favourite. It made me feel like a mermaid. If only.

I sat on the edge of the boat and toppled off backwards into the water.

I was suddenly light, both in body and in soul. Kicking out, I propelled myself through the blue waters toward the sea floor about ten feet below.

If only I could free-dive this. I would have loved to swim this without equipment. But on the hunt for belongings, I needed the air if I wanted to avoid bobbing up and down.

Although, my free-diving wasn't exactly up to scratch after years of using gear.

A familiar tingling sensation curved around in a circular motion on my arm. Excellent. What better time was there for a bit of luck?

Sunlight shimmered down from above, casting its glow onto the silty floor. If it weren't for the growing roughness of the waves, I couldn't have asked for better conditions to search.

I dove deeper, trying not to disturb the silt. The swells encouraged me along like a parent to their child on a bike with no stabilisers.

Anything that had fallen off Tyler or his killer could have gotten swept away by the current or even eaten by wildlife. But if there was one thing professional scuba diving had taught me, it was that objects could get stuck in, or on, the most unsuspecting of things.

A metallic glint caught my eye as I shifted to the side, allowing the sunlight past me. I didn't get my hopes up. There was plenty of trash to be found on the seafloor.

But as I dusted the sand away, a watch face glinted up at me, its glass heavily cracked. I grabbed it and withdrew it out of the sand, holding it up to my eyes.

My stomach rolled. Was this Tyler's watch, or did it belong to the person who had killed him?



CHAPTER 14

My phone buzzed and lit up through my jeans as I locked up the office. I didn't need to check; it was probably Dad.

Even the lingering glow along the horizon had disappeared, allowing the stars free rein over the sky.

I would take the all-night teleportation circle in Newferry back home and pop up in the living room in less than twenty minutes. He could yell at me then.

I had wrapped up the watch in a plastic pouch and placed it in the company safe. The combination hadn't changed since I left, which spoke to

how often Dad actually used it.

A lock of still-wet hair tumbled off my shoulder and stuck to my collarbone.

My body convulsed and I grabbed the door handle for support as another odd ripple tore through my insides.

I inhaled a shaky breath, my grip tightening on the handle as the sensation subsided.

Gods, what was that? Did I need a doctor? Maybe Sandra would have some answers.

I made a mental note to ask her about it.

As I locked up the shop, an additional concern struck me. How was I going to get Ben's attention to speak to him about whose watch this might be?

The only time I saw him was when we were unlucky enough to cross paths on the island. Did I dare approach him in the street? I certainly couldn't in front of his family. That would send all the wrong questions right up the family tree.

I heaved a sigh as I shoved the keys into my shoulder bag. How was I supposed to run an investigation when my only informant was so inaccessible... and my worst enemy?

But evidence like this didn't pop out of the woodwork every day, and Ben would know for certain if the watch belonged to Tyler, or his killer.

The road to Newferry was bathed in blinding white streetlights, so I veered off into the woods on my usual shortcut.

I took in a deep breath tinged with pine. For all my wishes to explore the world, I had missed this place.

A branch snapped behind me, and I jerked my head to look over my shoulder. My limbs turned to jelly at the sight of Adrian Everhart making his way up the path toward me.

With purpose. Had he followed me here?

I picked up the pace and hurried at a jog up the path. Why hadn't I taken the damn bus?

"Stop running!" Adrian sprinted toward me.

I plunged my hand into my shoulder bag and grabbed a remnant of my days in London: a temporary incapacitation potion. I whipped around and held it above my head.

"Stop right there or I'll throw this!" I shouted.

Adrian skidded a little in the dirt as he stopped in his tracks.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Never you mind. What do you want?”

“I want to know what you wanted to talk to my brother about so urgently the other day,” Adrian said.

Really? That was it?

“How do you know about that?” I asked.

If he knew, did any other Everharts also find out and plan to follow me home?

“I saw you and him walking out of the alley within seconds of each other when I went to pick him up from the police station.” Adrian’s gaze hardened.

“Haven’t you asked him?” I said.

Adrian shook his head. “He won’t tell me. Which means it’s probably a threat. What did you say to him?”

“Oh, for the love of...” If Ben hadn’t told him what we discussed, he probably had a reason. But if I didn’t tell Adrian, he might just jump me. “I needed to speak to him about Tyler, that’s all.”

“What about Tyler?”

“If he wants you to know, he’ll tell you. Now go back the way you came and leave me alone,” I said.

“You’re lying.” Adrian took a step toward me. “Whatever you’ve got on him, I’d drop it if I were you. No good comes from threatening an Everhart.”

Ugh. The macho bullshit made me want to vomit.

“I really don’t give a damn if you believe me,” I said. “Just go away.”

“I knew you’d bring trouble with you when you came back.” Adrian cracked his neck, and a darkness flooded his eyes. “Tyler dies the day you get home, and then you talk to my brother? Real suspicious if you ask me.”

A scoff burst between my lips. Did he really think I had something to do with Tyler’s death? No, just like Everharts did, they wanted to find anything to pin on us Arrowoods.

If Adrian really thought I had hurt Ben’s friend and threatened Ben, what would he do, just the two of us, alone in a forest?

“You’re crazy,” I said. “And I’m done talking to you. Turn around and walk away.”

“No.” Adrian took another step toward me.

Hell no. I hurled the potion at Adrian, and the vial smashed at his feet. Yellow plumes of smoke billowed into the air, engulfing Adrian and the trees

around him.

I bolted.

The path was too obvious; he would follow it to find me. Instead, I hurtled between the trees, into complete darkness.

The glowing dots of fireflies descended around me, their tiny light illuminating bits of the trees ahead. Just enough to stop me from running face-first into a trunk.

“Hey! Get back here!” Adrian bellowed, too close for my liking.

Seriously? My potion skills weren’t exactly stellar but how had I made an incapacitation potion so weak that only gave me a three second headstart?

“I’m going to find out what you said to him, mark my words! No Arrowwood threatens my family and gets away with it!” he shouted.

I glanced over my shoulder to see how close he was, just as the mark on my arm burst into light so blinding that I squinted. But I didn’t even get to look for Adrian as my foot plunged into thin air.

The black abyss of the sea rushed up to meet me as I tumbled headfirst off the cliff.



CHAPTER 15

I floated, weightless. Like I was in water. Was this a dream?

I tried to tap into my memories in search of something to orient me. For a few moments, nothing surfaced.

But then, the memory of falling off the cliff struck me like a speeding train. My eyes snapped open and stared, dazed, into a dark abyss.

I was in the ocean, but which way was up? The sun had set, and with no light to guide me, I rolled around trying to find the surface.

I tried to calm myself, though my breath was far from depleted. In fact, I felt as though I had only recently taken a breath.

Maybe I had only blacked out for a few seconds.

Follow the bubbles.

That was what Dad had taught me from day one. If I was ever unsure which way was up, I had to follow the bubbles to the surface.

I tried to release a little air from between my lips, but nothing came out. What was going on here?

Placing a hand to my chest, I felt for the sensation of breathlessness that should have come with being underwater. But my lungs didn't burn or struggle the way they should have.

A fluttering on either side of my neck had me running my fingers up my throat to investigate. A few slits, too large to be scratches, ran up the sides of my neck. Yet, they didn't hurt.

My stomach lurched. What the hell had happened to me?

I was dreaming. I had to be.

Whatever this weird dream was, I wanted out of it. People didn't die in dreams. I just had to wake up.

I tried to kick my legs, but a powerful force launched me into a somersault. As my lower half twisted around into my line of sight, my eyes widened further still.

A long, sleek, mermaid tail glinted purple in slivers of moonlight... and it was attached to me. My trousers were gone.

This was one weird dream, but I'd be damned if I didn't dream of mermaid life before now. Whatever hyper-realistic illusion this was, it was just that—an illusion.

The moonlight caught my eye, and I followed it, beating my tail until my face broke the surface.

I inhaled a ragged breath, but the relief I had expected never came. I ran my hand over my neck again. Did I have gills?

The silhouette of the cliffs rose high above me into the sky, and my cheeks stung with the cut of the night winds.

A flood of adrenaline rushed through my limbs as a large wave lifted me up. I rode it and beat my tail in rhythm with the ocean to keep myself upright.

I exhaled a breath tinged with ecstasy. Had I ever felt so in sync with the ocean before? Every time I slipped into the water decked in gear, I felt like a visitor—welcome, but misplaced.

How long had I yearned for true alignment with the sea that had always seemed out of reach?

“This isn’t possible,” I whispered. “This is... just a dream. Just a dream.”

Out of the gloom, behind the spurts of sea spray, a cliff emerged. The cliff I had fallen off? But if I had fallen off that cliff, then that meant...

I took a deep breath and dipped beneath the water, running my hands down my hips. Smooth scales slipped under my fingers, and I beat my tail again, rocketing back to the surface.

“Holy marscapone,” I whispered.

Was this real? Was I a mermaid?

No, I couldn’t be. I was dead, probably, suffering the same fate as Tyler and my soul was stuck in some weird limbo where I lived out my more obscure dreams.

I steeled myself and searched for shore. Whether I was dead or a mermaid, I had to get back to land to make sense of this.

I ducked under the water and swam at lightning speed around the island’s cliffs. I couldn’t help but grin. Powering through the water with a little more than the flick of a tail gifted me an effortless speed. Adrenaline surged through me as the water rushed over my skin.

Plunging deeper, I rolled around in a series of somersaults. If this was the afterlife, I could cope.

But a thought struck me as I speared through the sea.

My mother’s origins were unknown. Nobody knew where she came from or who she was. Allegedly, not even her. What if...?

No, it wasn’t possible. My mother wouldn’t have kept something like this from Dad, would she?

An icy feeling settled in my stomach. I didn’t know.

The feeling followed me up onto the beach, and I dragged myself up the sand with my arms.

For a second, I stared at my tail and flopped it a few times just to make sure it really was mine.

This was insane. Truly insane.

But how this had happened got pushed to the back burner when I realised I didn’t know how to change back.

I swore under my breath, running the very tips of my fingers along the scales around my hips.

The way Janeira and her coven transitioned from human to mermaid form looked effortless. Yet, I didn’t even know how I’d gotten into this state.

I scrunched up my face and whacked my tail against the beach a few

times, smacking the sand in the hopes it would turn back into legs.

Chewing my lip, I considered my options. Did I go in search of Janeira and ask her how she did it? No, I couldn't show up in the middle of the night like this. I had no answers for the questions she would inevitably ask.

I shuffled into a sitting position, but with the lack of a bum, it wasn't easy. How did mermaids even go to the bathroom? I grimaced. Did I even want to know?

"Gods above, Maeve, will you focus?" I muttered.

I was alive, and in one piece—technically in fewer pieces than I had been before—and I had to figure out how to transition back.

The wet sand that had slipped up my jacket arm grated against the faintly tingling mark there. I wrenched my sleeve up. Still there, though faded from when William had first gifted it to me, the good luck mark might just have saved my life. Falling off a cliff that high with jagged rocks below...luck was the least you would need to avoid them.

How many more near-death experiences did I have before it disappeared completely?

Closing my eyes, I tried to envision my legs returning. How, I didn't know, but they needed to come back.

An odd sensation rippled down my legs and my eyes snapped open to see the scales receding and the skin returning.

"Yes!" I pumped my fist, only for the scales to pop up again. "No, no, no!"

I gritted my teeth and envisioned the skin returning. Inch by inch, the scales melted into skin. The moment my thigh gap reappeared, what was left of my tail snapped apart into two legs.

"Ugh." I flopped back onto the beach.

How in the hell had I ended up here, like this?

"Oh, gods!" I didn't have any underwear, trousers, or shoes on.

Not that I remembered, but they had probably torn off when my tail emerged. How was I supposed to get home in the dark, half-naked?

"This is just great," I muttered as I staggered to my feet.

On my second step, the sand came racing up to meet me and I slammed into the beach. Was finding your "land legs" a thing?

I spat a wad of sand out of my mouth. Ugh, I'd taste that for days.

After a couple of wobbly attempts, I stood and yanked my jacket off to wrap around my waist.

I had a bum again, and I was in no hurry to let anyone see it.

I cursed the gods under my breath as I hobbled toward the tree line. Why had everything gone tits up since I returned home?



THERE WAS NO WAY IN THIS LIFE OR ANY OTHER THAT I WOULD HAVE WALKED in the front door in my state.

Scraping my legs all the way up, I scrambled over the back wall into the graveyard and picked my way between the graves to the trellis outside my window. I clambered up it, wincing as a splinter stuck into the sole of my foot.

I rolled in through my open window and limped to the bathroom, jaw clenched. This was ridiculous.

It wasn't until I landed on my shoulder bag that I realised it had stayed wrapped around my torso the whole time.

"Nooooo." I plucked my phone out of it and pressed the "on" button.

Nothing. Just great.

After plucking the splinter out of my foot, I threw off my soggy clothes and jumped into the shower.

As the water washed the salt away, I questioned everything that had happened that evening. I had fallen off a cliff. Maybe I had hit my head on the way down and hallucinated the whole mermaid thing?

I ran my hands down my legs. In the safety of my shower, the whole idea of being a mermaid sounded absurd. But as I slipped my fingers back up my thighs, the soft skin transformed to smooth scales.

"No, no!" I plummeted onto the shower floor as my tail burst back into existence, pain blossoming across my back as I slammed into the wall. "For the love of —"

I pushed open the shower door to give myself more space, and water splattered all over the floor. The fins at the end of my tail slapped against the tiles.

"This is not happening." I closed my eyes. "You've snapped, that's all. Mental breakdown, nothing to worry about."

I opened one eye, but the tail was still there.

It took several more minutes for me to urge my legs to return, and once I could finally stand, I finished my shower at double speed. I shoved on a pair of warm pyjamas and wrapped myself up in a dressing gown. If I couldn't see my legs, they couldn't turn into a tail... right?

I needed a drink.

All the lights were on in the corridor, but there wasn't so much as a murmur from behind any of the bedroom doors.

Gods, what time was it?

I kept one hand on the wall as I made my way toward the stairs, in case my legs miraculously disappeared again.

Blaring red and blue lights at the end of the corridor had me stopping in my tracks. The police? Here? Why?

I broke into a run to the top of the stairs. Headlights beamed through the open front door, casting an unnatural light down the corridor.

My stomach lurched. What had happened?

Raised voices rose from the living room and I dashed down the stairs toward the commotion.



CHAPTER 16

Two police officers, one with a notebook and pen, stood a few feet in the doorway.

Dad stood before them, grabbing a fistful of his hair. Sandra had her arm around him, dressed in her fluffiest pyjamas.

The entire family congregated on the sofas, watching with stricken faces from a distance. Even Rose, who I hadn't seen in days, rocked her baby in an armchair by the fire, her husband squatting down by her side.

“What's happened?” I asked.

Every head in the room snapped in my direction, and a solemn silence

fell. Dad's eyes glazed over as he stared at me.

"Can someone tell me what's going on here?" I asked. "Is someone hurt? What —?"

Dad pushed past the police and pulled me into a bear hug.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"I got in half an hour ago. I was in my room," I said. "Dad, what's happening?"

"We received an anonymous call." One of the police officers tucked his notebook into his pocket. "A report that someone had seen you fall off a cliff."

All the blood drained from my face.

Had Adrian called in to report my fall?

"Was this the Everharts?" Keith balled up his fists. "Were you pushed?"

He actually wasn't far off the mark, but I couldn't admit that if I wanted to keep the peace.

"No, I... I didn't fall off a cliff!" I said, struggling to move my arms in Dad's grip.

He pulled away, red-eyed, with tears streaming down his face.

"Dad..." I chewed my lip. I hadn't wanted to cause him all this hurt.

"Where have you been, then?" Dad asked. "The last thing I hear is the police have picked you up about that poisoned girl, and then you just disappear!"

"I went back to the office to pick something up, and I guess I lost track of time?" I said.

"Lost track of time?" Sandra pointed at the grandfather clock. "Maeve, it's three a.m.!"

I followed her finger to the antique clockface. Ten to three. Gods... how long had I been floating around in the sea for? I wasn't even pruning.

"Sorry," I said. "I... don't know... what..."

"Well, if there's nothing more." The police officer nodded at Theo. "We'll call off the search and get out of your way."

Dad cleared his throat. "Sorry to waste your time, Officers."

"You folks have a good night, now." The officers closed the door behind them.

Dad rounded on me, his hands on his hips, and his face apparently trying to decide whether to be angry or sad.

Oh boy, was I going to get it.

“You didn’t fall off a cliff?” Dad’s voice dipped low.

“No, Dad. I’m fine,” I muttered.

I hated lying to him, but to tell him the truth meant revealing what had happened to me. Until I knew what was going on myself, I had to keep him in the dark.

“Who made the call, then?” Keith asked. “An Ev —?”

“I swear to the gods, Keith, if you finish that sentence, I will shove my foot so far up your—” Sandra began.

“Will you all stop it?” Dad’s voice boomed so loudly that the chandelier shook. “This is no time for this pettiness.”

I stiffened. Catching Dad in a mood this bad was a rarity. But I supposed believing you had lost your daughter at sea might do it.

He turned back to me, his expression dark. “Why didn’t you call?”

“My phone broke.” That part wasn’t a lie, at least.

“Maeve, you’ve just disappeared off the face of the earth for eight hours. You can’t honestly expect us to believe that you just lost track of time?” he said.

The urge to tell the truth bubbled to the surface. But I couldn’t drop a bombshell like that on him after all he had gone through that night. It would have to wait.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be, young lady.” Sandra raised her voice as the baby wailed. “Your dad was at his wits’ end.”

“Can we go to bed now?” Keith asked.

Well, not everyone had been that worried, apparently.

The family filed out, patting Dad and me on the backs on their way past. Sandra glowered at me before she disappeared into the hallway, leaving me and Dad alone.

“Maeve.” Dad grasped my shoulders. “I won’t be angry if you were out with someone. I know I can be protective sometimes, but you’re a grown woman and I trust you to make sensible decisions. But please tell me what happened tonight.”

“Dad, I wasn’t out with anyone, I promise. I just went... walking. Too late, I know, but...”

Gods, it sounded worse every time I said it. Why hadn’t I just said I went out on an impromptu night out with the girls?

Dad’s face fell. “I didn’t think we couldn’t be honest with each other,

Maeve. That's... a shock to me."

A pang shot through my heart. We were alone now. Should I just tell him?

Right, I thought, and shatter every image he had of his late wife and leave him with more agony and questions? Nope. I was going to have to take this one for the team.

"Dad, I'm sorry if you don't —"

"Go to bed." Dad released my shoulders and pressed a hand on my back to steer me into the hallway. "For goodness' sake, don't leave the house without at least telling me tomorrow."

I couldn't argue with him as he guided me to the stairs. At the bottom, he pushed me up them but didn't come with me.

"Night, Dad," I muttered.

He didn't answer me, and instead paced back to the living room, running a hand through his hair.

I trudged up the stairs, wanting so badly to turn around and tell him the truth. But I kept on walking to my room.



AFTER THE PREVIOUS DAY'S DRAMA, I TRIED TO KEEP A LOW PROFILE. I stayed at the front desk in the scuba office, reading magazines and answering the phone. Half of them were Dad checking up on me.

He had said little that morning, but he had at least mustered a smile or two over breakfast.

Keith had only opened his mouth to shovel food into it, so I hoped that the family had mostly forgotten the previous day's events. Or at least chosen to ignore them.

I flipped through my magazine, spinning around on my chair. I wasn't even reading it.

Memories of the night before plagued every thought. What few hours of sleep I had gotten featured dreams of swimming underwater in mermaid form, just to turn into a human again and drown.

However much I tried, I couldn't deny that I had somehow transformed

into a mermaid. A part of me wanted it to be a dream, but another part of me... well, I hadn't worked that out yet.

Regardless of how I felt, the truth behind it still eluded me. My best theory was that Mum had kept her mermaid status a secret. Or Dad knew and wanted to keep it from me, but that seemed unlikely.

Which meant that my answers would come from digging a little deeper into where Mum came from. Dad wanted to talk about Mum more than I wanted to listen. Maybe there were some things I had missed over the years.

The door to the office creaked open just a crack. I peered over the top of the counter, ready to put on my customer service face.

Ben Everhart poked his head around the door and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw me.

"What are you doing here?" I put my magazine down just in case I needed to throw a few punches.

"I thought you were dead." Ben looked around like a nervous cat before stepping inside. "My brother said you fell off a cliff last night."

I paused. Who hadn't heard?

"Sounds dramatic." I stood and leaned on the desk.

Ben's eyes narrowed. "He said he saw you fall."

I spread my hands apart. "Well, I'm still here, aren't I? Why was he chasing me, anyway?"

"He couldn't mind his own business." Ben shoved his hands into his pockets. "I only came here to check you weren't dead, so..."

"Awww, how sweet."

"Not for you. I don't care about that. Fall off a cliff anytime you want, so long as we find Tyler's killer first."

I laughed over the counter. What a burn.

"Anyway, I'm leaving," he said.

"Wait." I circled around the desk to go into the back room. "Stay here."

Even if he had only come here to check if he still had an amateur investigation partner, Ben's arrival had saved me tracking him down all over Dusk.

I dashed through the break room and into the back office and took the watch out of the safe.

"Come in here," I called to him once I'd returned to the break room. "You've got to see this."

"Is this some kind of trick?" Ben called from the office.

If I rolled my eyes as hard as I wanted to, my eyeballs would have done a one-eighty. “Just get in here.”

Ben inched through the doorway, peering around the door as if expecting a horde of heavily armed ogres on the other side.

“Mind the booby trap by the coffeepot,” I said, raising an eyebrow at him. He actually flinched. Dumbass.

“Does this look familiar?” I held up the watch.

The moment he caught sight of it, Ben hurried over and snatched the bag from me.

He held the bag closer to his face, recognition sparking in his eyes. “This is George’s or Morty’s.”

I balked. “You’re sure?”

Why would George or his brother have wanted Tyler dead? The life insurance policy might have been incentive enough to a gambling addict, but Ben had also mentioned Tyler had learned an intimate secret.

Had this secret belonged to one of the brothers and the money was just a convenient silver lining?

“Where did you find this?” Ben asked.

“It was on the sea floor close to where Tyler’s body was,” I said. “I didn’t think it was a coincidence.”

“You think Tyler might have torn the watch off as he went over?”

“I’m guessing. You can’t tell whether this is George’s or Morty’s?”

Ben put the bag down on the table and returned his hands to his pockets. “They have identical watches. No inscriptions or anything.”

“So whichever one of them killed Tyler is missing a watch,” I muttered.

Ben paced back and forth, interlinking his hands on top of his head. For someone who had just learned the possible identity of his friend’s killer, Ben was remarkably calm.

“You don’t seem shocked,” I said, folding my arms.

“The only thing that shocked me is that someone wanted to kill Tyler.” Ben swivelled on the ball of his foot and paced back the way he came. “The who, after that, isn’t surprising. Do you think this will be enough evidence for the police?”

I slid the bag over to me. “I doubt it. We need to dig deeper if we’re going to prove anything.”

Ben stopped in the middle of the room and whirled around. “We need to get into the house.”

Okay, why did he make this sound like it had to be some sort of heist movie?

“Michaela has visitors all the time. How is that hard?” I asked.

Ben rolled his eyes. “Yeah, but only on the ground floor. When I wanted to get some stuff of Tyler’s that Michaela said I could have, George wouldn’t let me go upstairs. He’s hiding something. Will you come with me?”

I scoffed. “You want me to come?” This was a first for Arrowood-Everhart relations in at least a century.

“Don’t flatter yourself.” Ben blew a piece of stray hair out of his eyes. “I need someone to blame if we get caught.”

Ah, there it was.

He was a fool if he thought I wouldn’t drop him in it if we got caught.

“Fine. When are we doing this?” I asked.

Ben rolled his shoulders. “The only time they ever leave the house these days is to go to Temple on Sunday mornings. I know how we can sneak in. If you meet me at the house at seven a.m. Sunday, we’ll have a good three hours to scour that place.”

The front door squeaked as it opened into the front office.

“Maeve? Are you here?” Dad called.

Every fibre in my body turned to stone. Dad was about to find me here with an Everhart on his property.



CHAPTER 17

“Hide!” I seized Ben’s arm and pushed him away from the door.
“Where the hell am I supposed to hide?” Ben hissed as I dashed for the door to the front office.

“Oh please, have you never played a game of hide-and-seek before? Get creative! I’ll get rid of him.”

I shut the door on Ben’s bewildered face and stood against it as Dad came in, twiddling his car keys in one hand. He had a brown paper bag in the other.

My eye twitched when I caught sight of the dolphin logo printed on the

front.

“Wilma’s?” I asked. My favourite burger joint since I was six, Wilma’s did the best fries on the island. I hadn’t even found better in London.

“Sandra told me you didn’t pack a lunch,” Dad said. “Thought I’d bring you some.”

All morning, I had contemplated my new mermaid status and the guilt of making my family think I was dead. Lunch hadn’t crossed my mind.

It was nice to know he wasn’t so mad that he was avoiding me. In fact, talking about last night might just buy Ben enough time to hide.

“Thanks, Dad. Listen, could we talk about —?”

“Not now, sweetheart.” Dad waved a hand at me. “We’ll talk about it later. I need to pick up some more oxygen enchantments for the afternoon dives.”

Oxygen enchantments. From in the back room.

“I’ll get them. You sit down and relax for a bit.” I gestured to the desk chair, then slipped back into the employee area and purposefully closed the door behind me.

At first glance, Ben had disappeared. But on my second look, the tablecloth of the employee lunch table had ridden up on one side. A spotless designer sneaker poked out the bottom.

Idiot. Maybe he *hadn’t* played hide-and-seek before.

I yanked the tablecloth back into place as I passed it on my way to the enchantment cabinet.

I just had to get the oxygen enchantments as quickly as I could and get Dad out of there before he noticed anything.

“Actually, this morning’s group had some awful kids.” Dad stepped into the room just as I opened the cabinet doors.

I jumped so hard, I nearly pulled the whole cabinet down on me.

“Yeah?” I tried to keep my voice level as I searched the cabinet for a pack of enchantments.

“Some of the worst I’ve had in a while.” Dad yanked a chair out from the table and sat down on it with his back to the table.

I nearly dropped the hessian bag of enchantments I had grabbed to check the contents. Did nobody label these things anymore?

“One kid just wouldn’t do as he was told. He ‘saw a cool fish’ or ‘wanted to see how deep he could go.’ That’s great, Timmy, but those excuses won’t fly if you drown and I end up in court.”

“Why don’t you just blacklist them? You’ve done it before,” I said.

My heart stopped as Ben’s face appeared on the other side of the table. He peered over the top of the table at Dad’s back.

What the hell was he doing?

Dad’s face creased as he caught sight of my face and twisted around.

“You know, Dad?” I said loudly, snatching his attention back to me. “You really should blacklist more people. Losing your licence would suck, especially for a few stupid people.”

“I’ll never let that happen.” Dad turned to face the front and fiddled with his keys again. “The moment we lose our licence is the moment before the Everharts decide to start up their own scuba company.”

I dared to peer into another pouch. Why did everything we did or didn’t do have to revolve around the Everharts?

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Ben scuttle silently over to a desk by the open window.

What the hell was that moron thinking? Did he want to get caught?

Dad had bowed his head, his eyes glazed as he played with his keys.

I dared to tilt my head just enough for Ben to see I was looking at him, and he pointed to the window.

I shook my head. Although, it’d be pretty funny if he fell out of the window.

Ben jabbed his finger even harder at the window, but I shook my head harder until Dad looked up again.

“Any luck finding those enchantments?” he asked.

“Not much.” I put the pouch back on the shelf and grabbed another. “What happened to the labelling system?”

My filing system, which had required a lot of organisation and printing out labels, had apparently disappeared when I had.

“I couldn’t keep on top of it after you left,” Dad said. “I know you explained it to me, but I couldn’t make sense of it.”

“Three times. I explained it three times.”

Maybe he needed me around more than I thought.

I snapped open the new pouch I had picked out. “Here we go. Oxygen enchantments.”

I gave them to Dad as he stood up and I linked my arm through his to guide him to the office door.

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

I dared a look past Dad's shoulder to the window, and to my horror, Ben was on top of the desk, attempting to climb out of the window.

As he raised his arm to steady himself on a tree branch outside, his elbow bumped the blinds, rattling them.

Dad stopped in his tracks and made to turn.

Oh crap. Oh crap. Oh crap.

The first thing I thought to do was to throw my arms around Dad and pull him into a hug.

Dad chuckled as he hugged me back. "What's all this for?"

"Oh, you know. I just feel really guilty for worrying you last night. I love you, Dad." It might have been a distraction, but I meant it.

"It's all right, sweetheart. I just... well, you terrified me last night."

"I won't do it again, I promise." What were the odds I'd fall off a cliff again and randomly turn into a mermaid?

As we pulled away, I looked over Dad's shoulder. The desk was empty, and Ben was gone.

As I followed Dad out into the office, potent irritation tinged my relief. What had I expected from a reckless Everhart?



I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN DAD WOULD NEVER LET ME LOCK UP ALONE THAT night. I waited around for half an hour after closing for him to rock up in the car to collect me.

Something told me it'd be a while before I could close shop alone again.

But his earlier frostiness had melted away, which filled me with relief. I hated disappointing him.

"Open the glove box," Dad said, nodding to it as we wound down the roads toward the capital city.

Sandra had requested a pickup for when her shift ended in an hour, and Dad was happy to make the detour.

Bemused, I popped open the glove box and a rectangular container slid to the front.

"New phone," Dad said as I picked it up. "Got it for you today."

“Dad, you didn’t have to. I could’ve gotten one.” I pulled the box open all the same and marvelled at the shiny new tech.

“When? In three weeks when you remember? You’ll have me worried sick if I can’t get hold of you.”

A smirk pursed my lips. What on earth would he have done if we lived in a pre-phone era? Worry himself to death?

I put the box back together and put it back in the glove box. It would take me all night to put the contacts I’d lost in it, but at least I was connected again.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“So, how long do you think you’ll be staying on Dusk?” Dad asked.

“Why? Sick of me already?” I teased.

“Har-har. Are you planning on staying?”

I shrugged. I hadn’t really given it much thought. “For a while, at least.”

“What if I asked you to be my business partner?” Dad asked.

I was mid-swallow and choked on my spit. I hacked into my elbow for a full minute before I could take a proper breath again. Embarrassing enough for a regular person, but considering I had spent the other night asleep in the sea, it was even more so.

“Business partner?” I wiped my eyes. “Really?”

“You kept this place on the level,” Dad said. “I’ve let things slip since you left. The entire company will go to you anyway, when I’m gone. So, why not start now?”

I grabbed the water bottle in the centre console and took a swig.

Dad had always talked about me owning the place one day, but that had always seemed so far away. Always in the future.

Becoming a partner would give me a bit more sway over the place. Hell, maybe I could even get us a proper logo and branding.

But having my name on official papers and bearing actual responsibility for the business meant I wouldn’t be able to leave Dusk as freely as I had before.

Was that why Dad was offering this up?

I screwed the lid back on the bottle and tucked it back into the cupholder.

Probably. Almost certainly, in fact. But no matter what his motivation, Dad wouldn’t have asked if he didn’t trust me.

I couldn’t pretend I didn’t want this. After all, diving was what I lived for. The muscles in my shoulders stiffened, and the ones in my back, neck,

and arms followed suit. Did I love being in the water so much because —?

“Are you going to keep me in suspense any longer?” Dad asked.

“Uh, yes. No! I mean... what’s brought this on?” I asked.

Dad pulled up to a set of traffic lights and leaned his elbow on the windowsill. “After you left last time, I realised how much easier it was to find everything when you were here. Clearly, you’ve been ready to do this for a while now and I just didn’t see it.”

“Nothing to do with wanting me to stay home, then?”

“That cinched it for me.”

“Knew it. When do I get to put my name on all the deeds, then? Also, I want a pay raise... and my own office.”

Dad scoffed. “Where do you suggest we build that? In the break room?”

“Nah, I want a floating office so I can micromanage all our dives.”

“I’m regretting this already.”

“Too late. No takesie backsies.”

He chortled. “Well, if you’re going to be my business partner, you’ll need to keep your phone charged.”

And out of the sea. Easier said than done considering I apparently had a tail.

We circled around the outskirts of Blackwater Park, the largest of its kind on the island and famous for its black, apparently bottomless, pond.

Kira, Allison, and I used to throw glow-in-the-dark enchantments into it to see if we could glimpse the bottom. We never did.

But as the car drew level with the fountain at the park’s entrance, my heart leaped into my throat.

“Dad, stop.” I slapped my hand on his arm so hard that Dad hit the brakes.

“What?” he asked.

I pointed into the park.

In front of the fountain, four people faced off in defensive stances, all wearing official druid robes—the kind of attire you wore to Temple at Yule.

Keith’s sleeve had slipped down to his elbow as he held a potion vial above his head. Wendy stood at his side, a talisman in her gloved hand.

Opposite them, Nigel and Robert Everhart stood shoulder to shoulder.

Both of Ben’s uncles had toed the line of conflict between our families for years, the same as Keith. But now with Wendy in an unusual fury, it seemed Keith finally had a partner in crime.

In Nigel's hand, pointed directly at Keith, was a wooden wand dotted with red crystals, though I couldn't make out what they were exactly. Red in the world of crystals rarely meant anything good.

Through the window, I couldn't hear what they said to each other, but the sharp movements of their jaws as they spoke could only mean a furious exchange.

Dad swore and unclipped his seat belt. "Stay here, Maeve."

But as soon as he got out and shut his door, I opened mine. Even from a distance, this standoff looked like a ticking time bomb. I couldn't let him walk right into it without backup.

I jogged to keep up with Dad as we approached, and as we got closer, Nigel jerked his head just an inch in our direction.

"You!" He lowered his wand an inch in surprise, but immediately lifted it back up.

For a second, I thought he was talking to Dad, but as we got closer, I realised his gaze was fixed on me.

Dad must have realised at the same time as me because he stopped dead in his tracks and held an arm out to stop me, too.

"Barely a week since you got back and you're already throwing us Everharts under the bus," Nigel snapped.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

What had I done?

"Adrian has barely left the police station since you got back," Nigel said. "Strange coincidence, hmm?"

"Your boy got himself into trouble; don't blame Maeve for his stupidity." Keith readjusted the potion in his hand.

"Let's all just take a breath." Dad stepped forward with palms facing out.

My throat constricted as he did so. Usually, the disagreements between families were nothing but arguments on the streets, at least since the police had put their foot down. With weapons, the four people who stood there threatened to reignite a full-on war between the Arrowoods and the Everharts.

"None of this is Maeve's fault, there have just been some misunderstandings, that's all," Dad said.

"There are no misunderstandings with the likes of you." Robert shot me a dirty look. "It's sabotage."

"Prove it," Keith said.

"Keith." Dad's warning tone did nothing to deter him.

“What a great idea.” Nigel glared at me with a wicked grin. “Give me five minutes alone with her and I’m sure I could make her confess.”

“That’s enough.” Dad stepped forward again, but I grabbed his arm to stop him.

After all this time, he should have known an empty threat when he heard one.

Keith, however, raised his arm even higher. “You don’t threaten the Arrowoods.”

My heart sputtered as Keith hurled the potion toward the two men. It smashed at their feet and a black plume of smoke exploded into the air, engulfing them both.

“Get back, get back.” Dad grabbed Wendy’s arm to drag her away from the cloud, but she wrenched her arm out of his reach.

“If you’re not going to help, just leave!” Wendy spat words laced with venom.

Through the dark cloud, a series of orange lights grew suddenly, until they burst out of the darkness. Balls of fire hurtled toward us at breakneck speed, and one of them shot straight toward Dad.



CHAPTER 18

Without thinking—without even breathing—I launched myself at Dad. We collided and slammed against a nearby tree.

But the jolt of my collarbone faded into nothingness as a sharper, more consuming pain ripped across my hip.

I cried out, rolling onto the grass as the sensation seared into my skin.

Tears welled in my eyes but I blinked them away as I reached a trembling hand toward the source of the pain.

My jeans had torn across my hip, the edges frayed and singed. A slick

sensation coated my fingertips as I touched them to the area.

I hissed as the pain shot up my torso, and not a second later, a familiar jolt racked my body.

No... no, no!

My skin rippled with the sensation that promised its transformation into scales. I gritted my teeth and clenched my abdomen as I fought the urge.

I couldn't turn here, not in front of Dad. Not when I hadn't told him yet. Worse still, I'd be a sitting duck without my legs in a fight like this.

The good luck mark tingled faintly on my arm, its power waning. Given how much I had called on its power lately, was it any surprise?

The urge disintegrated under a wave of pain as a breeze dashed against my open wound. I gritted my teeth and grabbed handfuls of the grass as the agony radiated up to my torso and into my very bones.

"Maeve!" Dad scrambled to my side and rolled me more onto my side as he inspected the wound. "Gods..."

Keith and Wendy had taken cover behind a pair of trees as Nigel and Robert staggered out of the black smoke, hacking and coughing. Soot smeared their faces, like they had just fallen out of a dirty fireplace.

My body convulsed for the final time as a police siren cut through the night, and the sound of hurried footsteps approached.

I fell limp as exhaustion took hold, the tears in my eyes blurring everything. Even Dad's voice sounded fuzzy, and I sank into a stupor bathed in red and blue light.



MY DAZE CONTINUED AS I WAS LOADED INTO AN AMBULANCE, DRIVEN TO THE hospital, and deposited onto a bed. Light came and went from my sight, but always looked like Yule tree baubels no matter how much I blinked.

Dad fussed the entire way, but his words became garbled noises in my ears.

The pain had my jaw clenched so tightly that it ached, but my main concern was keeping my transformation at bay. My body hadn't indicated it would turn since just after the fireball hit me, but I couldn't lower my guard.

The impulses to transition always came fiercely and without warning. It would take all the effort I had left to stop them if they surfaced again.

“What do we have here?” The cheerful voice that entered the room appeared to come from a colourful figure snapping on a pair of latex gloves.

“She got burned. Do you have talismans to—?” Dad scrambled to get the words out so fast that they merged incoherently.

“Theo, come on now, stand back.” That was Sandra’s voice.

The doctor stepped so close that all I could see was her white coat.

“Goodness me, this isn’t your run-of-the-mill burn. This is deep. Do you know what caused this?” she asked.

I opened my mouth, despite the monumental effort it took, but it turned out she wasn’t even talking to me.

“It was a fire wand.” Dad’s voice broke on the word “fire.”

“The Everharts?” Sandra asked.

“Who else?”

“A regular fire wand doesn’t have the power to cause this much damage,” the doctor said. “Are you sure that’s what it was?”

“I’m positive. I saw it happen,” Dad said.

The fog in my brain couldn’t make sense of much, but one thought surfaced. Had the fire affected me more because of... what I was?

Something cold pressed to my hip and I flinched as my wound flared.

“Hold on for me a minute, chicken. You’ll be healed in no time,” the cheerful doctor said.

An icy sensation pooled around the pain, numbing it, and within moments, both subsided completely.

I blinked and rolled over onto my back, my vision slowly returning to normal. I scrabbled at my jeans to look at the wound, but it had disappeared.

“Take it easy, Maeve,” Sandra said as Dad rushed to my side. “You’ll need some time to recover from the magic.”

I sank into the bed, each muscle in my back and torso unwinding little by little. The fear that my tail would pop into existence in front of everyone simmered beneath the surface, but at least it didn’t hurt anymore.

“That should do it.” The doctor, who’s beaming face belied the concern in her eyes, pulled a blanket over me. “Get some rest. We’ll check on you in a bit.”

“No, I can get up,” I said and tried to swing my legs off the bed, but Dad grabbed them and swung them right back. “What if something happened to

Keith and Wendy?”

“What do you mean?” Sandra’s expression creased as I sat up on my elbows. “Theo, how did this happen?”

“Nigel Everhart had a fire wand and he —”

“Dad.” My tone was so sharp, he even flinched a little.

I fixed Sandra with a stern gaze. If I could help it, there wouldn’t be any misinformation gossiped from Arrowood to Arrowood.

“Keith and Wendy planned a fight with Nigel and Robert Everhart,” I said.

“Now, Maeve, we don’t know this was planned.” Dad ran a hand through his hair.

“Don’t we? What other reason would all four of them have to be in the park at the same time wearing official robes?” I asked.

Sandra’s jaw dropped. “Theo.”

“I didn’t know anything about it,” Dad said, his hand running into his hair. “If I had, I wouldn’t have let them do it.”

A vein popped in Sandra’s forehead, and she patted the bewildered doctor on the arm. “Thank you, Andy. Could you give us a minute?”

The doctor couldn’t have walked out of there faster, and Sandra was about to shut the door behind her when a boot wedged itself in the gap.

“Excuse me, Sandra.” Mallory pushed the door open and walked in, wearing what appeared to be an oversized silk top and light trousers.

I chewed my lip. Well, a fight between the Arrowoods and Everharts apparently warranted the interruption of the chief’s downtime.

Mallory looked me up and down, and then shot Dad a look that could have turned him to stone.

“Both of you, out.” She brandished a finger at both Dad and Sandra. “Right now.”

“But, but—” Dad sputtered.

“I won’t say it again. Out!” Mallory pointed her sharp finger to the door.

Sandra slipped me a look out of the corner of her eye on her way out, one that said ‘good luck.’ I pursed my lips. By the look of it, I’d need all the luck I could get.

Dad moved toward the door in stops and starts, compelled by Mallory’s icy glare.

“I’m outside if you need me!” he called to me before Mallory shut the door in his face.

“Can I trust you to be honest with me?” Mallory asked as she pulled a lever attached to my bed and eked the top half of the bed up to meet my back.

I leaned back and adjusted the blanket. If an ex-detective was trying to make me comfortable, she really did want me on her side.

“Depends,” I said. “If you want my Dad’s apple crumble recipe, I kinda promised I’d take that to the grave.”

“All right, that’s enough messing around.” Mallory sat in the nearest chair and splayed out in it, her arms drooping over the chair arms. “What happened in the park?”

“Two of my idiots had a pre-planned fight with two of their idiots.” How else could I really phrase it?

“That much I gathered. Who started it?”

“I don’t know. When we got there, they were already threatening to attack each other.” A chill racked my body and I tensed as I searched for any telltale sensation of a mermaid transition.

I pulled the blanket further over me. It was just the cold.

“Your uncle tells me Nigel Everhart maimed you with a fire wand.” Mallory looked me up and down.

I twitched. “You’ve already spoken to Keith?”

Mallory tilted her head forward, resting her chin on her chest. “Let’s put it this way, I put him in my interrogation room with one of my detectives and as far as I know, he’s still monologuing now.” She lifted her eyes to look at me. “And I get the distinct feeling that you’re the only one who will be, well... the least biased.”

High praise indeed.

“Were you hurt?” she asked.

I waved my hand. “I’m healed.”

“Were you hurt?”

Was this what having a mother felt like?

“A fireball hit me,” I said. “I’m not pressing charges.”

That wouldn’t exactly help the undercover Arrowood-Everhart investigation.

Mallory sat up and leaned forward on her knees. “I’m relieved to hear that, but it isn’t much consolation. Maeve, I truly fear that Ray’s death may have sparked something. The last thing we need is another full-blown war between your families. We’ve got Keith, Wendy, and Nigel in custody overnight, but that’s only a temporary solution.”

My brain felt like it had turned to sludge in my head.

The drama followed by Mallory's concerns had me wanting to tuck my head under this blanket and block it all out.

But she was right, and I couldn't deny it.

Keith had always been a loose cannon, trying to incite problems with the Everharts since his teens. But he had stood mostly alone in his determination to be proactive in antagonising them. With Wendy wanting revenge, he finally had someone who would see his visions through.

"Dusk hasn't forgotten the last time the Arrowoods and Everharts tried to exterminate each other," Mallory said. "We still have a section in the police handbook about how to deal with you both, for Pisces' sake."

"It won't be like last time."

Not that I had been alive to remember it, but the last war between the Arrowoods and Everharts would never be forgotten. My great-grandparents, and the long-gone generations of the Everharts, had decided to end the feud once and for all, by slaying each other at every opportunity.

Innocent locals had gotten embroiled in some of the worst attacks. Caught in spell bombs and splash back from potion battles, the residents of Dusk had put their foot down before too long. The main offenders were jailed for years, and when they were finally released, they were shunned by their neighbours.

The truce had been forged not long after, and while both families had come close to breaching it at times, it had held. So far.

I was the one who had gotten hurt and if escalating that would throw gasoline onto the fire, there was no way I would even step foot into the police station.

"You can't promise me that, and I wouldn't ask you to," Mallory said. "But I do need you to promise me that you try and calm things down on your end."

I ran my hands over my face, massaging my jaw with my thumbs. A tightness enveloped my chest. What I wouldn't have done to fall into the ocean again and turn into a mermaid...

I had barely returned to Dusk for a few days and already I needed to solve a murder and stop the feud from escalating. A longing grew in my belly to disappear under the waves.

"They don't listen to me," I said. "Not about the feud."

It wasn't as though I hadn't tried.

"All I'm asking is that you give it your best shot," Mallory said. "I can

see you don't want a war any more than the rest of us."

The feeling inside me popped and flooded my veins, leaving an icy trail in its wake.

This was all too much. I had to get out of here.

I threw back the blanket and got up, touching my feet gingerly to the ground.

"Are you sure you're all right to—?" Mallory stood, holding out a hand to me.

"Fine," I said. "I'll do what I can."

What more could anyone do?

Without another word to Mallory, I exited the room into the corridor.

"Everything all right?" Dad asked, peering through the door at Mallory.

"All good. Let's go," I said.

I headed down the corridor without waiting for him or Sandra. This time of night, I doubted Dad would drive me to the beach, but at the very least I could submerge myself in the swimming pool at home. For hours... forever, even.

The prospect brought an involuntary smile that parted my lips.

The smile slipped from my face as I turned the corner. A woman with bronze ringlets, plastered in make-up and wearing a vintage gothic coat that dwarfed her even in her too-high stilettos stood at the water cooler. Margaret Everhart rounded on me, her rouge lips curling into a tight smirk.



CHAPTER 19

She tapped her long, colourful nails against the paper cup in her hands.

For a second, we just stared at each other. But then her pupils dilated, venom seeping into her gaze.

“Didn’t hit you hard enough, did he?” she said, gesturing to the tear in my jeans. “Shame.”

“Mum.”

I jolted and took a step back as Ben slipped out of a nearby door and hurried to her side.

The icy look on his face melted away when he saw me, his mouth pulling

up awkwardly at the corners.

Wow, had we cooperated enough that he was actually happy to see it was just me?

My skin prickled in all the right ways as his gaze lingered on the burnt hole in my jeans. I touched my hand to it.

He couldn't possibly give a damn if I was okay. We might have worked together a little, but we were still mortal enemies.

"Come on, Robert's awake," he said and placed a hand on her back.

She resisted a little, tottering in her heels, but eventually gave in.

"Is he all right?" I asked as they walked away.

"Like you care!" she spat over her shoulder.

"Mum, stop it." Ben waited until his mother had turned away from me again to sneak me a thumbs-up behind his back.

Good. At least nobody was going to walk away from this stupid fight with any lasting damage.

It took me a second to start walking again, the odd, otherworldly urge in my body strangely soothed.

Weird. Well, I had too much on my mind to overthink the why.



IT WAS AFTER THE THIRD HOUR OF TOSSING AND TURNING IN BED THAT I threw back the covers and sneaked downstairs. I only had one thing on my mind, and that was water.

Sammie padded out of the kitchen upon hearing me on the stairs and followed me to the pool area. He didn't care where we went; he just wanted company.

For a moment, I stood at the edge of the pool in my pyjamas, a blue kaleidoscope swirling in my vision as my eyes glazed over.

"Don't tell anyone, Sammie," I said as I stripped down and chucked my pyjamas onto the nearest bench.

With an unneeded inhale, I leaped off the edge.

I closed my eyes and sank under the surface. Just a fleeting thought of transitioning had my body convulsing and my legs snapped together. My tail

burst into existence and I beat it once, propelling myself through the water.

I floated and spread my arms out. My shoulder muscles unlocked and released the tension in my neck and jaw.

My gills fluttered at my neck, the bubbles tickling them on their way out.

With the initial shock worn off, I had to admit this mermaid thing was really freaking cool. Diving gear had always confined me in ways I couldn't express, and now I knew why.

The desire to reveal my secret bubbled to the surface. I needed to tell Kira and Allison, at the very least, but what about Dad?

No, I couldn't talk to him about this, not while tensions with the Everharts were so high, and especially not so soon after Ray's death. It would break his heart to learn his late wife had kept such important secrets from him.

Mum. That was a subject I could broach with him. Maybe a chat about her could give me some answers.

It was his turn to man the office today, so I could corner him before I left to take dives.

Drowsiness enveloped me, and sleep pulled me deeper. No bed could have compared.

Pleasant thoughts bubbled to the surface of the quagmire of stress that had accumulated since returning home. Thoughts of William and the time we had spent together.

My mind ran away with ideas of seeing him outside of the agency—of having a coffee together, or dinner. Perhaps taking him off Dusk for the trip of a lifetime he so desperately wanted, so I wouldn't have to introduce him to the feud and all the drama that came with it.

The world felt less invasive down here. Its cloying problems and disasters couldn't reach me in the water. Could I even convince myself to surface?

A bark snapped me from my reverie and I beat my tail to rocket to the surface.

As the air hit my face, the pool room struck me as different. Golden light spilled in through the frosted windows.

I balked. Was it morning? Had I slept all night in the pool?

Sammie tilted his head and whined, padding his paws against the edge of the pool.

"Oh, buddy." I swam over to the edge and ruffled his head. "Were you worried?"

Sammie whined again and licked my face.

“Well, I guess I’m going to have to make it up to you with breakfast,” I said.

His ears perked up.

I needed to get Flora’s breakfast ready before work, too.

After a few shakes, my tail transformed back into legs, and I swam to the edge the human way. It didn’t feel nearly as fun.

As I heaved myself out of the pool, I caught sight of my ‘good luck’ arm. The mark had completely disappeared, and with it probably all the luck William had bestowed me.

Damn. Whatever crossed my path from this point onward, I would have to face without any magical assistance.

I tottered back to my room wrapped in a towel, holding my pyjamas at arm’s length. As bright as it was outside, the grandfather clock read five thirty a.m. Gods, I had slept hours in the pool.

After yesterday’s drama, I hoped the family would sleep in so I could slip out for work without seeing anyone. The last thing I needed was a confrontation, and every single one of them would want to know why I hadn’t pressed charges.

Thank the gods that Keith and Wendy were still in jail for the morning. Maybe I would beg to stay with Kira or Allison that night just to get away.

I showered and dressed in a long-sleeved summer dress and leggings and headed downstairs.

Sammie met me at the bottom, tail wagging.

Bangs in the kitchen drew my attention, and I followed the sound with Sammie at my heels.

Dad had all the burners on and all the plates laid out for breakfast. He often made it on weekends before work, even in the sheer volume our family required.

Sammie padded over to the hobs and sat to attention, staring at the sizzling pans as his nose twitched repeatedly.

Already dressed in his uniform, Dad had a potion bottle in one hand, pouring the contents into a jug of orange juice. Several more potion bottles dotted the counter.

“What are you spiking breakfast with?” I sidled up to his juice station.

“Calming potion.” Dad popped the empty vial into a plastic bag that rattled when the vial fell inside. “Everyone’s going to wake up on the

warpath today.”

“Huh.” He probably wasn’t wrong there.

I grabbed a vial, uncorked it, and downed it in one gulp. Dad eyed me as I tossed the empty vial into the bag.

After the past few days, a calming potion was long overdue. But given what I needed to talk to Dad about, it was even more necessary.

“Everything all right?” Dad asked.

“Give it a minute and everything will be just fine.”

I made my way to the window, where Flora’s live crickets and mealworms lived in adjoining plastic boxes.

“Dad, can I ask you something?” I said as I picked out a few of the juicier crickets and put them into a smaller container. “About Mum?”

“Mum?” Dad began flipping bacon on the stove. “That’s unusual for you.”

“Well...” How did I phrase this without raising suspicion? I rarely wanted to discuss Mum. I didn’t enjoy experiencing her through other people’s memories.

Unfortunately, there were few other ways to experience her anymore.

“Coming home has made me think about her a lot.” I grabbed the mealworm scooper and dumped a bunch into the container.

“What do you want to know?” Dad’s tone had an enthusiastic edge, but he tempered his volume.

Gods, did I make the subject of Mum so tentative that he was careful to handle the conversation like an armed explosive?

“I guess I’m confused about a few things,” I said. “You told me she showed up on the island with no memories. Didn’t you ever try to get them back with a spell or something?”

“She didn’t want to.” Dad poked the eggs with a spatula. “Whatever she had forgotten, she clearly thought it was worth keeping that way.”

I put a lid on the container and closed the boxes.

Hadn’t Mum had any curiosity about her memories? Why had she turned down the possibility of regaining them?

“Personally, I agreed,” Dad said.

I made my way over to the island counter with Flora’s breakfast. “Why?”

Dad put down the spatula and turned around, leaning against the counter as he folded his arms.

“I never told you this because I didn’t want you to have any... concerns,

growing up,” he said. “But I didn’t just run into your mum wandering around the island. She washed up on the beach, badly injured.”



CHAPTER 20

I dropped the container but snatched it out of the air before it could hit the ground.

“Washed up? On the beach?” I repeated.

Okay, that was a key piece of information I could have used before now.

“You’re old enough to know the truth now,” Dad said. “The night before we found your mum, my friends and I were playing around on the rocks at night.”

“Tut, tut.” I adopted the most disapproving look I could muster.

My entire childhood rang with the same life lesson: don’t go swimming

in the sea at night. Now at least I knew why.

“Yes, I know.” Dad pulled his arms in tighter. “I jumped in and banged my head on the rocks. The next thing I knew, I was being pulled up on the beach. Probably by one of the merfolk.”

One of the merfolk. Or... Mum?

“I went back the next night in case whoever saved me was there so I could thank them,” Dad said. “To be honest, I don’t remember much about that night, but I remember finding your mum in the water. We don’t know where she came from or how she got injured, but your mum...” His eyes glazed over. “I’m not sure, but she seemed familiar to me, somehow. We brought her back home and nursed her back to health, and, well... she never left. She didn’t want to, and I certainly didn’t want her to. I loved her almost as soon as I saw her.”

My eyes burned suddenly.

“What about the merfolk that saved you?” I asked. “Did you ever find them?”

Dad shook his head. “No, but whoever they were, they may have saved Celeste, too.”

My sight went blurry as my eyes glazed over.

There was no doubt in my mind that Mum had saved Dad that night and somehow gotten injured before he found her. What if she hadn’t lost her memories? What if she had just not wanted Dad to know she was a mermaid?

Thoughts of her alleged hydrophobia surfaced. What if the water didn’t scare her, but what lurked in it?

“She had no name and no memories,” Dad said. “So she started a new life with me. Even if it was only for a short time.”

All the will drained from my body, and I placed the container on the island counter as my fingers relaxed.

This was a lot to take in.

“Are you all right, sweetheart?” Dad asked.

“Just... processing.”

If that was even possible. My brain pulsed, as if ready to explode with all this new info.

“Do you want to know anything else?” Dad asked.

“No, I’m good.”

“Okay, well... I’d really like to talk about your mum with you whenever you want. So, don’t hold off on bringing her up, okay?”

“Sure.” I headed for the door, Sammie choosing to stay and stare up at Dad in the hopes of scraps.

“Anything’s on the table,” Dad added. “If you need a recap of the birds and the bees talk, I can —”

“No! Jeez, Dad.” I dashed into the hallway, his laughter following me.

I should have known he would try to diffuse the tension with some dumb joke.

As I took Flora’s container to Dad’s study, I collected my thoughts. Dad had as good as confirmed that Mum was a mermaid, even if he hadn’t known it.

I froze in the middle of the hallway. Even if he hadn’t known, there may be people on—or around—this island who did.



I WORKED THE AFTERNOON SHIFT ON SATURDAYS, SO I HAD ENOUGH TIME TO do some investigating before work. As soon as I finished breakfast, I took the car down to the south coast of the island and made my way to the merfolk boat.

My mother had a good relationship with the merfolk around Dusk, much to the bemusement of our family. Well, to everyone, really. Surely, she must have told them something—shared her secret with them even?

Dad only had a handful of the answers I needed. If anyone on this island would know, surely Janeira would. Perhaps she had even known that Mum was a mermaid.

I clambered inside and waited.

My phone vibrated against my leg, and I slipped it out of my pocket to check who was chasing me. Kira wanted to know where I was.

Shoot. I really needed to tell them what was going on. But I had to do this before anything else.

Another five minutes went past, and nobody appeared. I leaned over the side of the boat in search of movement, but nothing.

Had I offended them, somehow? Had I done something to blacklist me from the good graces of the merfolk?

Mylania popped out of the water and stared up at me, no smile.

“Hey,” I said. “Is everything okay?”

She didn’t answer me, her face stony. Instead, she glanced at the gem in the boat’s helm before disappearing under the water again.

I leaned over the edge in time to watch her disappear with the flick of her tail.

What was that all about?

I looked at the gem. Had she meant something by indicating it to me?

Then it hit me. Did she... want me to operate the boat? Could I?

I reached toward it with a shaking hand, and the moment my fingertips brushed the gem, it glowed. The boat lurched forward and with a squeak, I tumbled into the footwell.

For a second, I lay there, listening to the waves lapping against the boat.

The merfolk knew I was a mermaid too? Okay, this brought up a whole new encyclopedia of questions.

I clambered back onto the bench and held on to the edges as the boat took me to the island. Before it had properly washed up on shore, I jumped into the shallows and waded onto the beach.

Janeira watched me, in her human form, from the top of the beach among the reeds, almost as if she was waiting for me. The sideways glances of the merfolk lounging on the beach burned into my back as I strode across the sand.

“I wondered how long it would take you to visit again.” Janeira smiled with one side of her mouth. “We should talk in private. Come.”

She linked her arm through mine, and we strolled along the verge where the sand met stone.

Janeira didn’t say a word until we reached an outcrop of rocks and she climbed up on top of them, patting the space next to her.

I clambered up next to her and looped my hair behind my ears as the wind teased my strands.

My skin prickled, but not with the breeze. Why did I feel like I was about to get a dressing down?

“Did you know you were a mermaid?” Janeira asked, leaning her chin into her palm.

I scratched my neck. How had she found out when I barely knew it myself?

“I literally just found out the other night,” I said.

“The same night my scout saw you swimming around in the sea, by any chance?”

So that was how she knew. Her scout must have seen me the same night I had transitioned for the first time.

“Almost definitely,” I said.

“You were unconscious, according to my scout,” Janeira said. “She approached out of concern, but you woke up before she could get to you. Is there something you’d like to share about how you ended up in the ocean that way?”

I hesitated. I hadn’t planned on telling anyone except Kira and Allison what had happened that night to keep the peace between the Arrowoods and the Everharts. Or at least to prevent all-out war.

“Your secret is safe with me,” Janeira said.

That I could believe. For once, I actually felt grateful for the division between the merfolk and the land dwellers.

“You know about our family feud with the Everharts?” I asked.

“Everyone does.”

“Adrian Everhart cornered me after work the other day and I fell off a cliff trying to get away from him. When I woke up, I was... like that.”

I still couldn’t quite say the word ‘mermaid’ out loud.

Janeira squeezed my elbow. “That silly feud is going to get you all into trouble one of these days.”

Silly? That was the understatement of the century.

“Your mother must have been a mermaid,” Janeira asked. “Your father’s family are witches, no?”

“All of them. But if she was a mermaid, nobody in my family knew, not even my dad.”

“Your mother did have quite a lot of insight into our ways.” Janeira stared out across the sea, longing in her eyes.

How long did it take a mermaid on land to wish for the sea? Not long at all if the past few days were anything to go by.

“But she told you she was one?” I asked.

I already knew the answer before Janeira looked at me with sad eyes.

“No, Maeve. She never breathed a word.”

I rested my chin on my knees. So much for that.

“Why would she hide it?” I asked. “Being a mermaid isn’t something to be ashamed of, not on Dusk at least.”

“Merfolk only retreat to land when they are running from something,” Janeira said. “Perhaps she was... I had heard stories.”

“What stories?” I sat bolt upright.

Even if she had only whispers, I needed to hear them. I needed something to help me put this puzzle together.

“Years ago. Decades, in fact. I had heard of a mermaid coven out in the far reaches of Dusk’s waters who had one of their young mermaids disappear.” Janeira cast her gaze across the water again. “Around the same time your mother arrived on Dusk.”



CHAPTER 21

I tensed up, my chin digging into my knees. If the timing worked out, maybe it was Mum who had disappeared from that mermaid coven.

But why? Had she gotten into trouble and separated from them involuntarily? No. If that was the case, she would have returned to them after she recovered.

Were they the reason she got hurt? Had she spent her life trying to avoid them by never going back into the water?

Of course, it might not have been her at all.

“Did this coven say what she looked like?” I asked.

“Actually, there was very little divulged about her,” Janeira said. “The coven’s efforts to find her seemed half-hearted.”

“Maybe I should speak with them.”

If Janeira wasn’t sure, this other merfolk coven would surely have more information.

“No, child.” Janeira laid a hand on my arm. “There are good reasons we don’t interact with them.”

“Like what?” The wind whipped my exposed forearms, but something told me that wasn’t why the hairs on them stood up on end.

“Some merfolk covens, including that one, partake in a practice known as ‘voice-binding.’ We don’t associate with covens like this.”

“Why? What is ‘voice-binding’?”

Janeira touched a hand to her throat and swallowed. “Until a member of the coven turns twenty-one, their voices are bound so they cannot speak. It was a practice designed to stop young merfolk abusing their vocal powers to lure people into the ocean.”

I raised my head. The idea of not being able to speak, especially as a child, gave me the chills. From Janeira’s guarded reaction to the practice, I wasn’t wrong to feel that way.

“Does it work?” I asked. “Does it teach merfolk restraint?”

“Restraint, no. Compliance, yes,” Janeira said. “When a coven has that much control over its people, they can abuse it. Some merfolk don’t have their voices released until well after their twenty-one years as punishment for not conforming to the will of the coven. The intentions of the practice may have been good, but the reality is quite different.”

“My mum...” I almost couldn’t say the words. “...she knew sign language.”

An essential for someone who couldn’t use their voice, surely?

“Maeve, I’m sure your curiosity is a powerful force in this case. I know I would have trouble fighting it,” Janeira said. “But if they partake in this practice and didn’t look too hard for your mother, there may be some cutthroat politics operating in that coven. Do not go looking for them.”

I squeezed my arms tighter around my knees.

She was right, but the curiosity ate at me like acid through wood.

At the very least, I had to research this coven from afar. If my mother had been a part of that coven once, it explained why she was so terrified of the water.

“That thing you can do with your voice... you know, the luring,” I said. “Do you think... I...?”

“Almost certainly. This must all be very confusing for you, Maeve.” Janeira patted my arm. “I would love to support you in your self-realisation. You’re more than welcome to move to the island for a time. You are one of us, after all.”

“Thank you, I’m honoured, but... I haven’t told my family yet,” I said.

Disappearing to a merfolk island for an indeterminate time would raise some questions.

“Of course,” Janeira said. “If you have questions or if you need help with anything, please come to us.”

“Thank you, I really appreciate that.”

“And as my first piece of advice, unsolicited though it may be, the practice of voice-binding has one thing correct. Our singing voices are dangerous weapons when utilised incorrectly,” Janeira said. “Be wary.”

Another illusion shattered in my head. Something about singing had always felt unusual to me. Had I been inadvertently using mermaid magic on the people around me whenever I sang?

I sealed my lips. For now, I couldn’t sing. Not even if Dad wanted me to. I had to figure this out before I went near that activity again.

“Janeira, I know I’m asking a lot. But could you please keep this between us until I’ve told my family?” I asked.

“Of course, Maeve. Your secret is safe with me.”

As Janeira patted my arm again, my turmoil eased a little. Not until that moment, after baring my secret to her, had I realised how alone I had truly felt.



MY MIND BUZZED UNCOMFORTABLY, LONG AFTER I LEFT THE ISLAND AND returned home to dress for work. I needed a serious vent with the girls to release this pressure.

But as I drove out of the driveway of the Arrowood estate, a thought occurred to me; I had the ultimate distraction on hand if I had only

remembered to use it.

“You’re trying to solve a murder, remember?” I said to myself. “Maybe focus on that for a minute instead of your own crazy problems.”

I could afford to sweep my mermaid heritage under the rug for a while. At least until I could speak to Kira and Allison.

What had happened to Tyler definitely took precedence.

I checked the clock on the dashboard. A detour wouldn’t cost me much time, and I had wanted to visit the site of the murder for some time now.

A car park on the north coast of the island was my best bet, only a stone’s throw from where Tyler had fallen. It was the hub for a few of the lesser known hiking routes, and with any luck hadn’t seen much traffic since Tyler’s death.

I parked up on the cliff top and set off along the path.

The area at the bottom of the cliff had gotten the most attention from the police because that was where Tyler had fallen. But with the entire force believing this was an accident, how much exploration had they done on the ledge he had toppled from?

I kept close to the edge, peering over every so often to calculate how close I was to where Tyler’s murderer had pushed him.

What did I really expect to find up here? Looking for footprints would be a bust since the police had never even closed the hiking trail after the incident. Still, if the killer had dropped his watch off the cliff, maybe they had been clumsy enough to leave something else at the top of it.

Footsteps up ahead had me stopping in my tracks. A tourist having a walk, perhaps?

I edged down the path, careful to avoid fallen branches and leaves. But I froze completely at the sight of George Bakewell standing at the edge of the cliff.



CHAPTER 22

What in the hell was he doing here?

I slipped behind a thick-trunked tree and peered around it. George stared down at the edge of the cliff, massaging his hands. His large jacket sleeves enveloped the heel of his palms, completely obscuring his wrists.

Damn it.

I pressed my hands to the tree to steady myself. Even the smallest crinkle of the bark under my fingers made my skin prickle.

George didn't so much as look up. His head tilted away from me, so I couldn't see his expression. But he stood rigid, shoulders hunched.

I leaned nearer, my cheek grazing the bark.

George had been bouncing up and down my suspect list since I learned about the life insurance. But to find him at the scene of the crime had skyrocketed him right to the top.

That was what murderers did, wasn't it? Return to the crime scene out of guilt or to get a hard-on over what they'd done. Hopefully, it was the former, or Dusk was about to get its very first serial killer.

Second, if you counted that druid who went on that sheep-killing spree back in the '80s.

My sweaty palms slipped on the bark, and I tumbled against the trunk, straight into a stubby branch that dug into my solar plexus. A grunt burst through my lips and I slapped a hand over my mouth to keep it contained.

But George's head snapped up just as I managed to shift back out of sight.

Gods. Would he push me off the cliff if he found me? Transitioning into a mermaid wouldn't save me from the rocks that had killed Tyler, especially not without a good luck charm.

Every muscle in my body tensed, the corner of my eye spasming with every creak of a branch in the wind or rustle of leaves.

Maybe half a minute passed before the sound of footsteps had my heart hammering. But the closer I listened, I realised they were moving away at a fast pace.

I peered around the tree trunk in time to watch George's back disappear down the trail.

I narrowed my eyes. Returning to the scene of the crime and then running away from it? Could this guy look any sketchier?

Rubbing the sore spot on my torso, I remembered that Ben and I were scheduled to break into his house tomorrow morning.

We would have to find something if we were going to prove George had something to do with Tyler's death.



I SHUFFLED FROM FOOT TO FOOT, HANDS IN MY CARDIGAN POCKETS AS I stood behind yet another tree, but this time just outside the garden of the Bakewell property.

Their overgrown garden had all but hidden the picket fence, with the odd five-foot thistle swaying above the tall grass. As stakeout locations went, I could have done worse.

The sunrise had brought a cold snap with it, breaking the illusion of spring. As my shoulders trembled, I wished I had worn something warmer to stake the place out in.

I checked my watch. The island's thirteen temples all held services at nine a.m. on Sundays, and it was half past eight. Where was Ben? I had stood just outside the Bakewells' property for fifteen minutes already, wanting to get a jump on things.

Had he chickened out or set me up to get me into trouble?

The sound of the front door opening made me flinch, and I peered a little further around the tree.

George, with his arm around Michaela's shoulders, led her toward the car. Morty followed them, dropping the house keys into his jacket pocket.

Once the sound of the car engine had disappeared into the distance, I stepped up to the fence and looked around. Still nothing.

Either Ben had overslept or this was a trap. The urge to turn around and go home was strong, but the compulsion to look for answers just about outweighed it.

Movement across the backyard caught my eye. Ben, dressed in a hoodie and tracksuit bottoms, hopped the fence and waded through the grass to the back door.

I rolled my eyes and clambered over the fence to join him.

"Any reason you're late?" I asked as he rummaged through a weedy flowerbed.

"Overslept."

"And you were just going to go in there without me?"

"Didn't want to waste any time."

"Saving time is a lot easier when you set an alarm."

Ben glowered at me over his shoulder before returning to his rummaging.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"Back door key Tyler hid out here," Ben said. "So he could sneak in after a rager."

I peered over Ben's head at the tangle of weeds.

How in the hell could anyone find a key in that mess sober, let alone after a night out partying?

Suppressing the urge to snipe at him, I squatted down next to Ben and helped search.

"Are you all right? After the other day, I mean." He didn't look at me while he asked.

"Why do you care?" I asked.

"I'm trying to talk my uncle out of pressing charges against Keith Arrowood," Ben said. "If I can talk up your injury a bit, I might stand a chance."

Well, in that case...

"I got burned with a fire wand pretty bad," I said. "But I'm not pressing charges. You can tell him I'm the bigger person, if you like."

Ben wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, leaving a slight trail of dirt above his eyebrows.

"How do you get into so much trouble?" he asked. "First with Adrian, now this?"

"Not to point fingers, but I didn't start either of those things." I shrugged.

"Neither did we." Ben shot me a dark look.

I chewed my lip to stop myself answering. Neither one of us would take responsibility for the things that went down between our families. It was a waste of energy arguing about it.

Time to change the subject.

"I looked along the cliff above where we found Tyler yesterday," I said. "And there's something I think you should know."

Ben scowled at me. "Why were you up there?"

I tugged up a patch of long grass and tossed it to one side. "Well, I found clues in the water. I wanted to see if there was anything on the cliff that could help us."

"And was there?"

"I didn't have time to look. George was there."

Ben stopped in his tracks. "George? What was he doing?"

"Nothing really. Just... looking," I said, wincing as a bramble caught my thumb. "I know it isn't much, but something about it just felt weird. Like he was back there for a reason."

Ben dug his hands under a tangle of grass and felt around. "Actually, I

found something out, too.”

“If it’s about his life insurance policy, I’ve all but ruled that motive out. Tyler implemented it.”

“No, it’s not that.” Ben extracted a rusty key from out of the weedy mess and stood, dusting his tracksuit bottoms off.

I stood up, frowning at him as he watched me out of the corner of his eye.

“What?” I asked.

“I just want to know that you’re not going to... somehow... use this against me if I tell you,” Ben said.

Oh, for goodness’ sake.

But then, hadn’t I just worried that he was going to set me up? When actually he just had really poor time management?

Gods. We really had to calm down if we were going to investigate this.

“Okay, can we pause for a second?” I asked, holding out my hands in surrender. “We need to remember why we’re doing this. It’s not about us, and it’s not about our families.”

“It’s about Tyler,” Ben said.

“Exactly. So, we’re at a truce, right? I won’t pull anything, and you’ll do me the same courtesy, okay? If we really want to go back to acting like our families when this is all over, it’s fair game.”

Ben snorted. “Like I’ve ever done anything to you.”

“Your brother ran me off a cliff, so don’t talk to me about personal attacks.”

Ben’s eyes widened. “I thought you said that didn’t happen?”

Oh crap.

Before my cheeks could flush, I grabbed the key off Ben and headed for the back door.

I gasped as he grabbed my arm and jerked me around. It didn’t hurt, but his grip was firm. His face was just inches from mine, but there was no anger there, only concern.

“I thought you said that didn’t happen,” he repeated.

“What’s it to you?”

“You could have told the police, and you didn’t. Why?”

I stared at him, careful not to blink too much. Didn’t want him thinking he was intimidating.

In fact, he didn’t instill any fear in me at all. I might have mistaken his concern for care if he wasn’t an Everhart.

“It was a dumb confrontation,” I said. “They all are, don’t you think? Adrian went after me because he was worried about you, and my family would have freaked out and gone after your family because they were worried about me. I just didn’t want to see this spiral, like it always does.”

I mean, I wasn’t lying. It was just a close second to not wanting to tell my family I was secretly a mermaid.

Ben released my arm and heaved a sigh. He beckoned for the key and I reluctantly handed it to him.

You’re welcome?

Without another word, Ben unlocked the door, and we slipped into the kitchen.

The scent of old food and garbage filled the air. I wondered if they had even opened a window since Tyler’s death.

“Where shall we start?” I asked.

“Tyler’s room.”

He sounded certain. Almost as if he suspected something was awry up there.

“So, what were you going to tell me?” I asked as I followed him up the stairs. “What did you find out?”

“It’s about this house.” Ben didn’t turn around to talk to me. “I don’t think Tyler knew.”

“What?”

“There’s a vein of red diamond running under this property. Crystal manufacturers have been contacting Michaela for years, trying to get her to sell, but she turns them down every time.”

“Really? Why?”

“Tyler’s dad built this place,” Ben said. “Michaela would never leave here, especially not to give it to people who would destroy it.”

“Do you think that’s why Tyler thought his mum was in danger? Did someone want her out of the way so this place would have to go on the market?”

“That’s my running theory.”

I swallowed hard as we walked along the upstairs landing.

Getting rid of Michaela and Tyler was the only surefire way to clear the property. The real question was, did George have any ties to the manufacturers desperate to get their hands on this place?

That was the next thread to unravel.

Ben led the way into Tyler's room.

Tyler's pyjamas lay on his unmade bed. An eclectic selection of shirts and trousers hung in the open wardrobe, alongside what looked like a bunch of party costumes.

He and Ben must have had some pretty fun ragers.

An askew laptop sat on top of his desk, a notebook, and a pen next to it. Truly, it was the snapshot of a room Tyler had expected to return to. Michaela couldn't have touched it since he died.

As Ben started looking in many nooks and crannies, I walked up to the corkboard above Tyler's desk. Apart from the dentist appointment reminder, the board was a collage of photos. Tyler, Ben, and their many friends at the beach, on nights out, and at birthday parties, at various stages of their lives.

Some of the baby-faced versions of them even wore school uniforms.

"You two were close," I said.

"Yeah? What's it to you?" Ben poked his head over the top of the bed, interrupting his rummaging around underneath it.

I held up my hands in defeat. Apparently, I couldn't even make a heartfelt observation without it being construed as an attack.

"I was just trying to be nice," I said. "I won't bother next time."

"Good." Ben disappeared back beneath the bed.

"What are you looking for, anyway?" I asked.

I daren't touch anything, but Ben seemed more than happy to.

"Checking all his valuables are still here."

I opened my mouth to ask why, but decided against it.

Whatever Ben's concerns were around Tyler's belongings would have little bearing on why someone killed him. But something told me it was more personal than that.

Sure enough, when Ben emerged, I pretended I hadn't seen him slip something into his pocket.

My heart sank. I had focused so much on the investigation and trying to get along with Ben that I had forgotten he had lost one of his best friends.

Regardless of his crappy attitude, maybe I could have been a little nicer to him.

I grimaced as I looked inside the bin. Someone had been sick in here.

"Was Tyler ill before he died?" I asked.

"Perfectly healthy. Why?"

I nodded at the bin. Ben all but pushed me out of the way to look.

“Michaela,” he said. “She’s been spending a lot of time in here.”

“Is she sick?”

“She just lost her son. What do you think?”

I turned my back to Ben to look around the room some more. The urge to remind him I knew a great deal about losing family simmered just beneath the surface of my patience.

“There’s nothing different about Tyler’s room,” Ben said, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Wonder why George didn’t want me coming up here?”

“Unless it wasn’t Tyler’s room he didn’t want you to see,” I said.

Realisation crossed Ben’s face, and he hurried out the door without another word. I followed him through the door across the hall into the master bedroom.

Dirty bowls, plates, and empty potion bottles occupied every surface. The bedding hung off the bed, stained.

“I take it this is unusual?” I asked as Ben went off to look in the wardrobe.

“Very. She kept a tidy house before this. Reasonably, anyway.”

I picked my way across the room to the bedside table and took an empty potion vial between my thumb and forefinger. I looked down the neck of the vial. Some residue slipped around the bottom, shimmering a silvery blue in the morning light.

“Ben,” I said. “Come and look at this.”

To my surprise, he actually did as I asked and peered at the vial.

“Do you know what potions these are?” I asked.

Ben shrugged. “She’s on a lot of antidepressant and calming potions right now.”

“Yeah, but that’s not what these are. Look.”

I handed him the vial, and he closed one eye to look inside.

“I’ve never seen a potion that colour,” he said. “What do you think it could be?”

“Beats me.”

Potions had never been my forte, and I had only scraped a passing grade in school. But I knew enough about everyday potions to know that this wasn’t a normal brew.

The front door slammed, and I flinched. Ben nearly dropped the vial. He put it back on the bedside table as angry voices rose up the stairs.

We shared horrified looks. They had returned home already.



CHAPTER 23

I swore under my breath. How were we going to explain being in their house uninvited?

I snuck over to the door and onto the landing, Ben close behind me. We crouched at the top of the stairs, careful to stay a little way back to avoid anyone seeing us.

“It’s disrespectful, George! All I needed was for you to come to Temple with me, and you can’t even do that!” Sobs broke up Michaela’s words.

“I just don’t feel comfortable going inside at the moment, Mickey.” George had the sound of a schoolboy being told off.

I pursed my lips.

Why would anyone feel uncomfortable inside a temple unless burdened with guilt and they didn't want the gods' eyes on them? What was he worried they would judge him for?

"It's the only place I can feel close to Tyler anymore. Being in his room doesn't even help now!" Michaela cried.

I looked at Ben out of the corner of my eye. He had called it. Michaela must have been ill while spending time in Tyler's room.

I furrowed my brow as a thought struck me.

Those unusual potions she had been drinking... were they making her ill? Had George been giving them to her?

"Mickey—"

"I don't want to hear it, George!" Michaela's footsteps turned into stomps the closer she got to the stairs.

"Go, go!" I whispered, pushing Ben back down the corridor.

We dashed as quietly as we could back into Michaela's room, and after a second of looking around, Ben dove under the bed. I slid under after him, and our shoulders pressed together as we fought each other for room.

"Move over!" I hissed. "I'm sticking out!"

"If I move over, I'll stick out," Ben muttered.

I gave him a shove, and he slid over an inch, allowing me to shuffle under the bed just as the door flew open.

The mattress bowed as Michaela threw herself onto the bed, and I lowered my chin to the dusty carpet to avoid banging my head.

Gods above, how did we end up here?

Mine and Ben's bodies pressed together down the centre under the bed. He was much warmer than me, and the curve of his muscles against my skin should have repulsed me. But I could admit, only to myself, that I kind of liked it.

The bed shook with every one of Michaela's muffled sobs.

I tilted my head gingerly to look at Ben.

"What do we do?" I mouthed.

Ben tried to shrug, but with his arms pressed to the ground in front of him, the gesture was barely noticeable.

I rested my chin on my folded hands. We didn't exactly have much choice. We had to wait this out.



EVERYTHING ACHED. STIFFNESS HAD SET IN MY MUSCLES AND EVEN STAYING still made them hurt. I hadn't dared reach into my pocket to check the time on my phone, but we must have lain there for hours.

Michaela had eventually fallen quiet, perhaps to sleep. But I wasn't foolish enough to peek out and check.

Ben had dozed off a few times, but the second his breathing had deviated into pre-snoring territory, I had elbowed him awake.

I had spent much of the time pressed against Ben, pretending he was anyone else. Ideally, my date.

With nothing to do but wait, I whiled away the time thinking about William and our next date, and mulling over what could have been in Michaela's potion vials.

Why did my life have to be so complicated? Couldn't I come home and go on dates without having to do something crazy like solve a murder between them?

There was a knock on the door, and Ben stiffened beside me.

"Mickey?" George walked into the room, only his shoes visible. "I made you some lunch downstairs."

"I'm not hungry." Michaela's voice was so thick, I could barely make out what she was saying.

"Come on now." George walked out of my line of vision and the bed sank above me under his weight.

Ben grinned at me as I grimaced.

"Tyler would want you to take care of yourself, wouldn't he? He wouldn't want you to starve yourself," George said.

"No..." Michaela shifted above us, pressing the mattress into Ben's lower back.

This time, I grinned.

"Here, have one of your potions," George said.

The humour drained from my face, and the irritation from Ben's, at his words.

He was making her take those potions. While we still did not know what

they were, I couldn't help but feel wary. With a metallic colour like that, I doubted they were vitamins.

A muted gulping sound had me closing my eyes. Michaela had drunk one.

"I miss him so much," she murmured.

"I know, baby. Come on. Let's have some lunch and we'll talk."

"Okay..."

The mattress rose off us, and it was all I could do not to exhale in relief.

Two pairs of feet came into view at the end of the bed, and George and Michaela walked out of the room, closing the door behind them.

I waited until I couldn't hear their footsteps anymore before rolling out from underneath the bed.

My mouth opened in an unrealised scream as I stretched, agony rocketing through my muscles as they finally unclenched from their fixed positions.

Ben appeared on the other side of the bed, stretching his arms high above his head as he bent to the left and then the right.

I rolled onto my front and arched my back into a hedgehog-like ball. Sweet relief blossomed across my back.

"I thought we'd never get out of there," I muttered.

"We won't if you keep hanging around." Ben snuck over to the door and I scrambled to my feet.

He would definitely leave me there if I didn't get a move on.

Ben peered out of the door and tiptoed across the hallway to Tyler's room.

"Where are you going?" I whispered.

"You want to try walking out the back door while they're down there?" he snapped over his shoulder.

"I was just asking, jeez."

We slipped back into Tyler's room and I closed the door behind us as Ben jimmied the window open.

He looked around outside, hopped out the window, and disappeared from sight.

Crap. He really had left without me.

I dashed to the window and leaned out. Ben was getting to his feet, dusting his tracksuit bottoms off as he turned to look up at the window.

"Come on, then." He beckoned to me.

"Are you crazy?" How had he jumped from the first floor unscathed? I

stood no chance.

“It’s not that far. Come on, or we’ll get caught!”

“I thought I was your scapegoat?”

Ben massaged his temples, eyes closed. “Just get down here.”

“I can’t jump that far.”

“I’ll catch you.” Ben waded through the grass with his arms out until he positioned himself right beneath the window.

Was he insane?

“Like hell you will.”

“Weren’t you the one advocating for cooperation so our families don’t get all riled up? Just trust me.”

I could fall farther than I trusted him. But I didn’t exactly have much choice.

I clambered out of the window and hung on to the ledge for dear life. As I lowered myself down to just my fingertips, I dared to look down.

Ben reached up, almost able to touch my shoes.

I could only hope he wouldn’t step aside and let me break my neck.

“Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap.” My fingertips gave, and I plummeted toward the ground.

I tumbled into Ben’s outstretched arms, but the force of my descent knocked him backwards and we tumbled into a heap in the grass.

For a second, I blinked, dazed. A pleasant cologne teased my senses, which seemed almost familiar. I lay on Ben’s chest, my hand splayed on his exposed hip.

The feel of his skin sent sparks through my fingers.

One of his palms heated the small of my back, while the other grasped my arm. As I looked up, our eyes met and my heart jolted. My body flushed with heat and the urge to burrow into him ripped through me.

I rolled off him at the same time he pushed me off. Scrambling to our feet, we dashed for the fence, hopped it, and melded into the tree line.

“Um, thanks,” I said, running a hand through my hair as we slowed to a jog.

“Don’t mention it.”

I wouldn’t. Not to anyone.

“That was a waste of time.” Ben looked back at the house, his eyes shining.

“Not if we can find out what’s in those potions,” I said.

Ben snorted. “I’ve never seen a potion even close to that colour before, have you?”

“No, but I’ll do some experimenting and keep you updated.” My potion skills weren’t all that great, but Kira’s were fantastic.

“How’re you going to do that?” Ben threw his hands in the air. “We aren’t exactly on each other’s speed dial.”

I folded my arms. “And I think we can both agree that showing up at the scuba shop is a poor plan. Give me your phone.”

“Why?”

“Just hand it over.”

Ben took it out and handed it to me, staring as I worked.

I punched my number in and gave it a fake name.

“Jason?” Ben asked as he took his phone back.

“Would you prefer I put Maeve Arrowood?”

“Gods, no.” Ben held his hand out. “Give me yours, then.”

I handed him my new phone, and he put his contact in as... Will. Weird coincidence.

“Don’t drunk dial me,” he said as he handed it back.

“Don’t butt dial me.” I pocketed my phone. Actually, if he was going to call me with anything...

I pinched my arm to snap myself out of it. What was wrong with me? I couldn’t get the butterflies for an Everhart.

“Fine, then.” Ben ran a hand through his hair. “Just tell me if you come up with anything.”

“Sure. Um, see you.” I took off between the trees, glad to turn my flushed face away from him.

I didn’t know what had just happened, but I was more than happy to forget all about it.



“WHY EXACTLY ARE YOU TAKING US HERE?” ALLISON ASKED AS SHE CLUNG to a rock on her way down the cliffside. “Don’t forget, we’ve got dates in a few hours!”

The sun hung low in the sky, casting its brilliant oranges and golds over a dark sea. But the waves were gentle, and for that reason, I had chosen this secluded cove along the north coast of the island to bring them.

Sure, it might cut it close for our dates, but I didn't want to wait to tell them my newly discovered secret any longer.

Kira fluttered nearby, holding her hands out every time one of us looked like we would slip.

"You'll see," I said.

"Pretty rude of you to keep us waiting," Kira said, grabbing Allison's hand as she reached out for help. "After all that ghosting you did."

I hadn't exactly ghosted them, but not meeting up with them in the past few days had irritated Kira to no end.

"You're about to find out why," I said.

"She's been keeping secrets from us." Allison tutted. "We're both very disappointed, Maeve."

I ignored them, harbouring a secret smile. They'd shut up soon enough.

We made our way down to where the water met the rocks, and I slipped my sandals off. I had picked out a dress to wear to this big unveiling, being as the last time I had worn trousers during a transition, I'd never found them again.

"Right." I sat down on a rock at the edge of the water. "You're not allowed to tell anyone what you're about to see."

"This is getting scary." Kira fluttered around to my left. "You know I'll take your secrets with me to the grave, but you don't keep secrets full stop. What's going on?"

I stroked a lock of my hair. I didn't want to keep this to myself anymore.

"Watch," I said.

I lowered myself into the water and turned around to face them. Planting my legs together, I let them meld into my tail and I flicked it up to the surface. Seawater showered down on my friends' gobsmacked faces.



CHAPTER 24

Allison squeaked, her arms windmilling as she struggled not to fall. Kira grabbed her arm at the last minute and yanked her back upright, but her open-mouthed face didn't look away from me.

I grinned sheepishly.

“What the hell, Maeve?” Kira asked. “Are you a freaking mermaid?”

“Apparently.” I swished my tail back and forth, the evening light rippling across my scales.

“How long have you known?” Allison asked, clinging to Kira's arm.

“Since a couple of days ago, when Adrian Everhart chased me off a cliff.

I woke up in the sea like this,” I said, gesturing to my tail.

Kira squared her shoulders, her bottom lip pouting out. “You told everyone that wasn’t true!”

“Did you really think I was going to tell my family that’s what happened? When half of them would have jumped at the chance to retaliate?” I asked.

“Well... that’s a legitimate concern, I suppose.” Allison scratched her chin.

“Don’t let her off the hook,” Kira said, poking Allison in the chest. “She should have told us straightaway.”

“How is this possible, though?” Allison asked, her gaze following my tail. “I thought you were a witch?”

“I am... I think. But after a little digging, I think my mum was a mermaid, and she didn’t tell anyone,” I said.

Kira’s face fell. “She didn’t even tell your dad?”

“I don’t think so.” If she had, Dad kept her secret better than she had.

Allison picked her way across the rocks to sit down and dangle her legs in the water. Kira fluttered behind her and perched on an opposite rock.

“Can I touch it?” Allison’s eyes were as wide as saucers. Her hand half reached out to my tail. “It’s so beautiful.”

I chuckled. “Go on, then.”

Allison ran her hand over my scales. “Wow. They’re so soft and shiny.”

“Oh gods. She’ll take you home as a collectible if you’re not careful,” Kira said. “Are you going to tell your dad?”

“Not yet. I haven’t gotten my head around it yet, and besides... I’m not thrilled to tell him that his wife was keeping something this big from him,” I said. “I just needed to tell you guys, you know, while I work it all out.”

Kira grinned and leapt off the rock, into the water next to me, sending an enormous wave of water lapping over my head.

Good thing I could breathe underwater.

“What are you doing, you maniac?” I asked as Kira popped up beside me.

“Oooh, me too!” Allison slipped into the sea with much less splash and floated over to us buoyant as ever.

“What? We should get used to it,” Kira said, shrugging. “Something tells me we’re going to be hanging out in the water a lot more now.”

I pulled them both into a group hug, beating my tail to keep us all afloat. In what universe could I have gotten friends better than them?



TELLING MY FRIENDS MY SECRET HAD LIFTED A COLOSSAL WEIGHT FROM MY shoulders. We prepared for our dates in my room, as usual, and for the first time in ages, I looked forward to it unburdened with anxiety.

That night, I would forget there was a murderer on the loose and focus on me and William.

My hand nearly slipped doing my lipstick when I remembered that tonight was the night we would find out each other's identities.

"Anyone else worried they're going to find out they've been flirting with someone from high school?" I asked, screwing my lipstick back in its holder.

"Nope, and you shouldn't be either." Kira twirled another thick lock of hair around my curling iron. "We're different people now, aren't we?"

I mean, if we weren't, we were doing something wrong.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach, free from dread. Whoever William really was, I couldn't deny we had a connection. I had to give that a chance no matter who he ended up being.

His identity and the kiss we had shared infiltrated my thoughts whenever my mind wandered. I only hoped that after tonight, we could make more memories like the dates we had shared so far.

How had this weird dating agency adventure turned into a yearning for a man I didn't even know?

I drove us down to Dawn in a pair of flip-flops and slipped my heels on once we'd parked.

"Okay, can we agree not to panic if one of us doesn't show up after?" Allison asked, her eyes gleaming as we walked arm in arm to the door of the dating agency.

"Agreed." Kira and I said it in unison and grinned at each other.

Mervyn met us in the waiting room as usual, gave us our masks, and escorted us down a different corridor this time. In fact, this time, I was the first one to reach my room.

"Good luck!" Allison pulled us into a group hug, squeezing all the air out of me.

I waved them goodbye and waited until they were around the corner

before I went inside. My palms were slick on the door handle and slipped off on the first attempt.

“Can you be smoother when we get in there?” I asked myself. “Please?”

Usually requests like that went unanswered.

I stepped inside and, as ever, William waited for me. But this time seemed different.

He stood by the coffee table, bolt upright, no drink to be seen. His eyes brightened as he laid his gaze on me.

I shut the door, and only a split second passed before we moved at the same time. I sank into his arms and pressed my lips to his.

Sparks sizzled under my skin, following wherever his hands touched me.

I fell against the wall under his weight and banged my head.

“Ouch,” I said, the moment our lips broke apart.

“Oh gods, I’m so sorry.” William tilted my head a little to look.

“It’s fine. I’m okay.” My pride was more damaged than my head. So much for being smooth.

“Are you sure? I can ask them to bring a healing potion.”

“No, really. I’m okay.” I looked up into his eyes and melted at the concern there.

I really wanted to take that mask off him.

His hand travelled up to cup my cheek, his thumb grazing my mask. Maybe he wanted to take mine off, too.

Out of the corner of my eye, the new instructional paper glowed green.

Damn it. I had almost forgotten we had a schedule to follow.

“Have you seen what it says yet?” I asked.

“I tried to read it before you got here, but I guess it won’t show me anything until you’re here, too,” William said.

I slipped my hand into his and reached up for another kiss. He gladly met my lips.

The moment I wanted him to slam me against the wall again, I pulled away and led him over to the coffee table.

We sat down on the sofa, our hands still entwined.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Have been since our first date.”

I smiled. Me too.

We reached for the paper at the same time and picked it up together. The moment we touched the paper, two words inked onto the page.

Anything goes.

Oh, hell yes.

Whatever barrier had held back my hormones disintegrated in a split second. I dropped the paper at the same time he did.

One of his hands gripped my hip, and the other snaked up my neck, both drawing me closer.

Nope. Not quick enough for me.

I threw my leg over his lap and straddled him, pressing our bodies together as we descended into a kiss.

William moaned against my lips as his hips bucked.

“Glad we agree,” I whispered as his hands slipped under the hem of my dress.

His fingers ran up my back, leaving an electric trace in their wake.

“Oh, I hope we do,” William said.

His grip on me tightened, and he rolled me onto my back. We tumbled onto the floor between the sofa and the coffee table, and for the second time that night, my back slammed against the surface.

But it didn’t even faze me.

“Gods, I’m sorry.” William tried to clamber off me, but I wrapped my legs around his waist and yanked him back.

I grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him into a kiss—gentle, careful, as reassuring as I could make it.

“No stopping this time,” I murmured.

With that, I tore his shirt open from top to bottom. A few buttons tinkled onto the coffee table.

“You’re the boss,” William said, but his eyes turned steely as he hitched my dress up around my hip. “This time.”

Oh, gods above.

My hips arched without my say so, and William seized the opportunity to yank my panties down my legs.

A shiver ran across my skin. I felt vulnerable, and I liked it. Somehow, even after only two dates, I felt I could trust him.

William threw my panties aside and resettled between my legs. A natural pause befell us, and our gazes met.

Silence fell between us, with only our still ragged breaths audible. He asked me with his eyes if this was what I wanted.

What a sweetheart. I’d change that before we walked out of here tonight.

His eyes rolled back a little as I ran a hand over the stiff bulge in his crotch. “I wanted to do this on the first date.”

“We should have ignored that stupid paper. How was it going to stop us?” I asked.

“Might have been awkward on the second date with the bartender watching,” he breathed.

I gasped as he stroked a finger through my folds, and my back arched as my body yearned for more.

“I thought that was your fantasy?” I cried out again as he grazed my clit.

“You’re right.” William kissed up my neck. “He’d have had to deal with it.”

My breath left me as his tip grazed my entrance. Gods, I needed him.

Wrapping my legs back around his waist, I pulled him in, easing him inside me.

I lost all sense of the place. He filled me inch by inch, and I felt like I was floating.

William kissed along my jaw, finally finding my lips.

“If you’re going to be as gentle fucking me as you are kissing me, we’re going to have a problem,” I said through gritted teeth.

For a split second, I wondered if I had been too aggressive. But all that vanished as he slammed into me.

Stars peppered my vision, and I grabbed his shoulders, revelling in the rippling of his muscles with each dizzying thrust.

I ran my hands up to the back of his neck and pulled him to my lips, making him lose stride. Which was exactly what I wanted. Like he said, I was in charge this time.

Taking advantage of his pause, I jerked my hips and rolled him onto his back. The coffee table legs screeched against the floor as we knocked it against the wall.

“You’re a piece of work, aren’t you?” William said as he grabbed my hips.

I groaned as he ground himself into me from below. “If that isn’t what you wanted, why did we match so well?”

He grinned as I descended for another kiss, rocking my hips.

We kept rhythm, meeting each other’s timing in perfect harmony. His touch electrified my skin, and he ran his hands over wherever he could reach. The parts of me he couldn’t touch burned with envy.

I arched my back as pleasure swelled in my core, exploding within me like a firework. It cascaded up into my chest, shoulders, and down my back, like the burst of a wave against the rocks before receding into the sea.

William trembled between my thighs, and his grip tightened so hard on my hips it was almost painful.

He expanded within me in rhythm, and he only expelled his long-held breath when his grip on me relaxed.

But I didn't have time to sink down to him before he sat up in one fluid movement and wrapped his arms around me. I slipped my arms around his neck and met him in a gentle, warm kiss.

"I have an inkling you could go again," I murmured against his lips.

William grinned. "I'm ready when you are. But..." He cupped my cheek with his hand, his thumb grazing my mask. "...I think I'd like to see you first. The real you."

I swallowed hard.

Until recently, I thought I knew who Maeve Arrowood was. With so much of me a mystery, how much could I really reveal to him?

"What if you don't like the real me?" I muttered.

William pressed another kiss to my lips. "You might not like me either, but there's only one way to find out."

My heart skipped a beat as he grasped the edge of my mask between his thumb and forefinger. "Together?"

With shaking fingers, more from exertion than fear, I grasped his mask, too. "Together."

I held my breath in the split second before we took each other's masks off. Who was this person I had connected with so strongly, who had apparently lived alongside me on Dusk this whole time?

I slipped his mask off at the same time as he pulled mine away from my face.

The magic facade disintegrated, and I found myself face-to-face with Ben Everhart.



CHAPTER 25

I nearly tripped over the sofa scrambling away from him. Ben *did* trip over the coffee table doing the same and landed hard on his back.

His head popped up on the other side of the table and we stared at each other, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

This wasn't happening. This was literally impossible.

I had slept with Ben Everhart.

"Did you... did you know?" he snapped. "Did you know it was me?"

"Gods, no!" I snatched up my handbag and jerked the hem of my dress as far down my legs as it would go. "I would have run out of here on the first

date if I had!”

Where the hell were my panties?

I snatched them up from under the coffee table and shimmied them back on.

My face flushed as Ben watched me do it.

“What is wrong with you? Look away!” I snapped.

“I wasn’t trying to look, I just— Gods, how did this happen?” Ben seized a fistful of his hair.

How *did* this happen? I thought, as I looped my handbag onto my shoulder.

The dating agency had said we were more compatible than most couples. They had messed up, they must have. There was no way in this world or any other that an Arrowood and an Everhart were compatible in a relationship.

He was supposed to be one of my worst enemies. How could they have gotten it so wrong?

I slipped my shoes back on and dashed over to the door. I opened it, but paused before I ran out.

Looking back, Ben had planted his forehead on the coffee table and was repeatedly banging his head against it.

Ugh, why hadn’t I thought of that? Head trauma was my best chance of forgetting all this ever happened.

Without another look back, I ran out the door.



I SHOT THE GIRLS A TEXT EACH ONCE I GOT IN THE CAR TO DRIVE HOME, TO let them know I was going home and I would speak to them tomorrow.

Until then, I didn’t know that I even had the words to explain what had happened.

Once I’d parked the car in the garage, I peered in through the front door to make sure there was nobody around before I dashed up the stairs to my room.

The last thing I needed was an inquisition.

I shed what few clothes I had on and jumped into the shower, hoping to

wash away any trace of what had just happened.

But no amount of soap would remove the memories he had left, not just on my mind, but on my skin. The ghost of his touch left invisible marks that no loofah could scrub away.

Once I had dried and I clambered into my pyjamas, a thought occurred to me. Soap might not do the trick, but alcohol might.

I wrapped myself up in my dressing gown and headed back down the stairs. Voices travelled along the house's old, rickety corridors, but when I entered the kitchen, I found it empty but for Sammie, who was sniffing at the closed bin lid.

His tongue lolled out of his mouth, and his tail wagged as I patted him in passing on my way to the fridge.

I pulled out the first bottle I found and poured myself a glass. It was half-finished before I slid down the fridge door to sit on the floor.

Sammie padded across the tiles to join me and sniffed at my wineglass.

"You can be my drinking buddy, but you're not having any," I said, moving the glass away from him.

Resigned to my words, Sammie flumped down next to me and laid his head on my lap.

I stroked his head, staring at the breakfast bar opposite. The sight wavered in and out of focus as I downed my drink.

"How stupid am I, Sammie?" I asked. "Now I've got another secret to keep. Dad might just kill me if I tell him what happened tonight."

Why had it not crossed my mind that the agency could pair me with an Everhart? It had just seemed so improbable that I hadn't registered the possibility that an Everhart would be my date.

I stiffened.

Those hours we had spent pressed together under Michaela's bed. Something had felt off. Was that even the right word? Something had felt... unusual.

Being in close proximity had felt natural, good even.

I downed the rest of my wine as I remembered falling out of the window.

Why hadn't I seen it at the time? Of course, it had been Ben. Even when we knew we had to hate each other, we felt connected. Or at least, I felt connected to him.

The wine burned its way down my throat as something else dawned on me. Ben had given me good luck with his power. He must have cared enough

to want to keep me safe. Did me being an Arrowood change that for him?

I banged the back of my head against the fridge. "Ouch."

I stopped petting Sammie to rub the already sore spot on my head, and he looked up, tilting his head as if to ask, "Why?"

Drama queen.

I sighed and dropped my hand onto his head again.

Should I have stayed? Should we have talked about this? The shock had made me flee, but in hindsight, we shouldn't have left things the way we did.

I rolled onto my knees and felt around on the breakfast bar for the wine bottle. Sammie got up and wagged his tail, as if expecting a treat. When I was drunk enough, I'd let him gorge himself on dog biscuits.

As I poured myself another glass on the kitchen floor, I heard voices in the corridor. I scrambled to my feet, spilling a little wine on Sammie's head.

"Sorry, boy," I said as he shook himself dry.

I didn't want anyone finding me drinking on the kitchen floor. Nobody else had to know I'd hit rock bottom.

"Sandra, I don't know what to do. They said they don't know what's wrong with her." That sounded like... George?

I hurried to the kitchen door and peered through the crack in time to see Sandra, still in her scrubs as usual, guiding George into the living room.

What on earth was he doing here?

Once they had gone into the living room, I sneaked out into the hallway with Sammie at my heels.

"Not a sound, and I'll give you a treat later," I whispered.

Sammie instantly sat at hearing the word 'treat' and licked his lips.

Good, that'd keep him quiet for a minute.

I opened the living room door just a crack and looked through.

"Come on, George. Take a seat. I'll make you some tea," Sandra said.

George waved a hand at her and paced back and forth along the fireplace.

"I can't stay for tea, Sandy. They're saying if she gets any worse, she'll have to go on life support!" George said.

She? Did he mean Michaela?

"We've run every test we can, magical and otherwise, and we can't find what's wrong with her." Sandra placed a hand on his arm. "You know as well as I do that we'll just have to wait and see. Grief is a powerful thing."

"Grief?" George snorted. "She's let it destroy her."

"This wasn't her choice, George," Sandra said sharply. "All we can do

now is wait, and you'd do well to get some sleep.”

George linked both his hands together at the back of his head as he found a point at the wall to stare at.

Both his sleeves slipped down to his forearms. He didn't have a watch on.



CHAPTER 26

Gods above. If Ben was right about that being George's watch, then George had pushed Tyler off that cliff.

And Michaela. She was suddenly ill. All those unusual potions she had taken... did she even know what they were?

Had George given them to her and was now playing the concerned husband? Maybe so he could get his hands on the property and, with it, the veritable goldmine sitting underneath it.

The wine curdled in my stomach. I was fast running out of time to prove someone had murdered Tyler, and if I didn't before something worse

happened to Michaela... I didn't dare think about it.

"I'm so tired, Sandy," George said. "I'm... exhausted."

Sure. Murdering people probably took it right out of you.

"I know, George." Sandra patted his arm. "Sit down, take a nap if you need to. I'll make you that tea."

I jolted as Sandra walked toward the door and spilled yet more wine down myself. My gaze darted around, looking for a place to hide. I caught sight of the downstairs bathroom door and bolted toward it.

I slipped inside, with an excitable Sammie along with me, and I pulled the door to the tiny room closed, sitting down on the toilet seat.

I put a finger to my lips as Sammie panted, gazing up at me.

But the second he heard footsteps outside the door, he let out a guard-dog-style bark.

"No, shhh, Sammie!" I tried to grab his muzzle, but he scrabbled at the door and barked some more.

I grabbed his collar with one hand just as the bathroom door opened.

Sandra stared down at me, brow furrowed. No doubt the sight of me on the toilet in my dressing gown with a glass of wine while wrangling the dog wasn't one she had expected.

Sammie wagged his tail, satisfied.

It's a good thing he was cute.

"What on earth are you doing in here?" Sandra asked.

"Uh... would you believe me if I said I was sleep-drinking?" I said.

"Probably not."

"Well... then I guess I'll just bid you good night."

With that, I got up and slipped past her, not looking back as Sammie padded after me. As soon as I was up the stairs, I smacked my forehead with the heel of my palm.

So, a day in which I slept with my worst enemy *could* get worse. At least I no longer needed to wonder.



"HOW BAD COULD IT HAVE REALLY BEEN?" KIRA ASKED.

She flitted above me and Allison, her wings brushing the underbelly of the canopy as we made our way through the Moran forest.

We had agreed that we couldn't use my house to replicate the potion Ben and I had found in Michaela's home. Too many of my family used the spell room and they would no doubt walk in on us.

Kira's coven had a way better arrangement, and I hadn't visited for years. The living space of the Dusk fae was out of this world.

"I promise you it was horrifying," I said as I stepped over a large tree root.

"So bad you can't tell us?" Allison asked.

She leaped from root to root, barefoot and with the grace of a swan. Since becoming a mermaid, I realised how clunky I was on land, especially compared with Kira and Allison.

When I stopped to think about it, I couldn't believe I hadn't realised I was a mermaid for so long.

"I will tell you," I said. "Just not where anyone can hear us."

If I could refrain from being physically sick while I told them, anyway.

"Good, because I don't like secrets." Allison stopped to let me catch up. "It's bad enough you kept the fact you're a mer —"

"Shhh!" I picked up a pine cone and threw it at her.

It bounced off her bum and landed among the roots.

"Ouch!" She rubbed her rear and shot me a venomous look. "Nobody's here!"

"How am I supposed to know that? Dryads literally are trees."

"It's not nearly as simple as that and you know it." Allison flipped her hair at me.

"Stop bickering, both of you." Kira flitted down and reached a hand out to me to help me over a large log. "She'll tell us even if we have to slip her truth potion."

"Or beat you with switches." Allison jabbed a pointy finger at me.

"I'm so privileged to have such loving friends," I said.

"Glad you know it," Kira said.

A wall of blackness met us, and a shiver skittered across my skin. This was where it got good.

The very centre of the forest housed a Tree of Life— a tree born and grown with concentrated magic.

"Gods, you look like a kid on Yule," Allison said and jumped down next

to me.

“It’s been ages. I’ve missed this place,” I said, linking my arm through hers as Kira landed next to us.

“Wait.” Kira put her arm through mine and pulled us back as we stepped toward the dark veil. “While we’re on the subject of secrets, there’s one you guys have to keep if you’re coming in.”

“Oooh, dish,” Allison said.

“You’ll know it when you see it, but don’t say a word to anyone, okay?” Kira said. “Or I can’t invite you back.”

I mimicked zipping my lips shut.

Satisfied, Kira pulled us through the black wall.

We stepped into a bioluminescent wonderland.

The pitch blackness was lit up by the all-encompassing Tree of Life, its luminous branches stretching through the canopy and sprouting vivid, multicoloured leaves that shimmered with iridescent light. Thick veins of white light snaked through the bark, beaming ethereal brilliance into its surroundings.

“I’ll never get sick of this.” I took in a breath that almost felt laced with magic.

Everywhere we stepped, light blossomed beneath our feet.

“I forget you haven’t been here in forever. I am kinda sick of it,” Kira said. “Gives me a headache sometimes.”

“Ungrateful.” I elbowed her in the ribs.

We walked among the luminous brush and around the giant trunk.

Its beauty had me awestruck, but it sometimes left a bitter taste in my mouth. The tree was how the Arrowwood and Everhart curse had begun.

On the other side of the tree, many wooden houses stood, picturesque murals painted onto their walls with bioluminescent tree sap.

Fae flitted about, holding baskets of food or wrangling bored children. The streets were paved with huge radiant leaves, bursting into glaring light if anyone brushed against them.

“Come on, this way.” Kira pulled us down the mossy street toward the tree trunk.

Between two buildings, a few fae herded a group of children away from the tree. We waited for them to pass before Kira yanked us through the gap.

My mouth fell open.

Nesting in a small hollow in the Tree of Life was a bird. Tiny flames

flickered at the end of its red plumage, but the feathers on its wings shone with multicoloured splendor. A peak of feathers on the top of its head had the look of a tiny blue flame that appeared to dance in the forest's spectacular bioluminescence.

It didn't stir as we approached, resting its head on its wing, fast asleep.

"Is that a phoenix?" Allison whispered.

"Not to brag, but I saved her." Kira beamed. "She showed up on the island injured last week, and now she's roosting here."

I spluttered.

The arrival of a phoenix was good luck in some cultures and bad luck in others. But why would anything, phoenix or not, have its offspring in a place it intended to magically spread bad luck? Although, in all likelihood, the whole concept was superstition.

"Anyway, I just wanted to show you guys. No telling anyone!" Kira waggled a finger at us.

I couldn't take my eyes off the phoenix until Kira had dragged us both away.

"Aw, five more minutes?" Allison pouted.

"Are you telling me you can wait five minutes longer to hear about Maeve's night?" Kira asked.

Allison's eyes widened. "Never mind, let's go!"

I grimaced as we made our way down the rest of the street. They were enjoying this far too much.

On the other side of the village was a meadow of gigantic flowers, each big enough to hold several people. In the centre of each stood a cauldron.

The fae potion pods were out of this world, like everything else here.

We stepped into the centre of a big red flower, and as soon as we were inside, the petals folded up around us, enclosing us inside.

As the petals came together, potion ingredients in brown paper bags hung down on strings from the ends of the petals.

"Okay. Dish. Now." Kira grabbed a bag from above and tugged it off the string.

I sighed as I sat cross-legged next to the cauldron. Allison followed suit, scooting up to me and thrusting her face close enough to mine that I could tell she had recently had a breath mint.

"It's... about who my date was," I said, massaging both my hands together.

“Yes, we gathered that. Who is he?” Kira asked.

I opened my mouth, but I couldn’t make the words come out. Spilling this secret was harder than I expected, even to my friends.

“Maeve!” Allison shook my arm. “Who is he?”

“Ben Everhart.” I covered my mouth the second I spat the words out.

“No!” Kira dropped the bag she was holding. “You didn’t... you didn’t sleep with him, did you?”

I squeezed my hands over my mouth even harder. Now that I couldn’t say, but my silence spoke volumes.

“Gods above!” Allison shook me harder. “You had sex with an Everhart?”

“Will you keep it down?” I snapped.

I didn’t know how soundproof these petals were.

Fae weren’t exactly known for keeping other people’s secrets, just their own.

“That’s insane,” Allison whispered. “I thought you had the closest match of any couple yet?”

“Allegedly. I wonder what kind of cockamamie magic they’re using to draw that conclusion,” I muttered.

“Unless it did work properly. Have you thought of that?” Kira asked, rummaging around under the unlit cauldron for her dropped ingredient.

I pressed my fingers to my lips again. “Yeah, I did. But how cruel is that? We’re supposed to hate each other.”

“Or are you supposed to want each other?” Allison asked. “Do you think... maybe the curse...? Would that break it?”

My eyes widened. Now that I hadn’t thought about.

The curse had come about from an Arrowood and an Everhart killing each other. Would the opposite break it?

Oh great. If there was even a chance that could happen, I couldn’t just chalk up my rendezvous with Ben to some horrific mistake. Damn it.

“How did it end?” Kira asked. “Did you shake hands and call it a day amicably?”

“Shut up. I ran out of there the second he took his mask off.”

“Oh, Maeve!” Allison punched me on the arm.

“Ow! What?”

“You have to talk to him!” she said. “If you guys really are so connected and it might break the curse, you must talk this out.”

“I know. I will. Promise.” Just as soon as I could work up the nerve to call him. Text. Text would be better. When the shock had worn off. In a week or two. Maybe a month.

“Can we focus on more important matters, please?” I gestured to the cauldron. “I was counting on you guys to help me figure out what that potion was that we found.”

“You and your boyfriend?” Kira popped up on the other side of the cauldron, grinning wickedly.

“I swear to the gods, I will upturn this cauldron on your head.” I grimaced.

“Okay, calm down.” Kira shuffled onto her knees with the ingredient packet in hand. “What colour was this potion, then? We can guess at a few ingredients if we know that.”

“It was a really dark blue, almost black, and it had some silvery tones, metallic maybe.”

Kira’s face fell. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, why?”

Kira put the ingredient down. “Maeve, I don’t need to make anything to know what that potion is. Most metallic potions point to one thing.”

“What?” My bicep tensed under Allison’s spindly fingers.

“Poison.”



CHAPTER 27

“Are you sure?” I asked.

The colour hadn’t exactly looked healthy, but poison hadn’t jumped to mind.

“The potions we use to kill off the non-native plants in the forest are that colour,” Kira said.

“Oh, my.” Allison cupped her cheek with her hand. “Does that mean Michaela has been drinking weed killer?”

“Strong weed killer,” Kira said.

I swallowed hard.

No wonder she was in the hospital. How had George had the nerve to show up at our home asking for help when he knew what he was killing her with?

“We can’t assume that’s what it is,” I said. “We have to make it to be sure. Kira, do you know how?”

Kira interlocked her fingers and cracked them, making Allison wince.

“I think I know where to start,” she said, reaching for another ingredient above our heads.



HOURS LATER, DOZENS OF POTION VIALS SURROUNDED US, ALL VARYING shades of blue. I held two in my hands, holding them both up to the light. They were both so similar in shade.

All of them, bar one, which was a smokescreen potion, was a poison of some description.

Allison was curled up against a petal, dozing. Kira stirred the cauldron, leaning her chin on her hand.

“I think it’s more like this one,” I said, holding up the one in my right hand.

“It’s got to be close enough,” Kira said.

“Is that enough to go to the police with?” I asked.

The police would want hard proof that Michaela was being poisoned, and if I couldn’t give it to them, she could die, too.

“It’ll have to be, because you won’t remember exactly. It’s impossible,” Kira said.

It would. If only I had had the memory potion Ben had brewed for me before we dove under that bed together.

“I hope this works. Thanks, Kira,” I said.

“I’d say anytime, but please don’t ask me to do this again soon. The High Priestess will have my ass if she learns I used all these ingredients.”

“At least you have plenty of weed killer now,” I said.

“Just call me if you ever get a bad case of strangulating knotweed.”

Ah yes, the knotweed that strangled more people than it did plants.

“Take this one, too.” Kira picked up the smokescreen potion and handed it to me. “Last time a smokescreen went off in here, we had to move in with the dryads for a week.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” I said, taking the potion from her.

Kira pursed her lips. “It *was*. They wouldn’t let us put hammocks up in the trees so we had to sleep on the floor.”

Hashtag fae problems.

We woke Allison, and the flower opened up for us. I walked stiffly down to the leafy street and pocketed the potions while I took my phone out with the other hand.

I was almost disappointed when I saw there were no messages. What had I expected? For Ben to text me?

Shoot. Had I hoped he would text me?

“Checking if your boyfriend texted you?” Kira asked, yawning as we made our way down the street.

“Shut up.” How had she known?

“You need to talk to him, anyway. He was there to see the potion, too. You need to coordinate how you’re going to approach the police.” Kira wrapped an arm around Allison’s shoulders as she rested her head on her shoulder.

“Damn it, you’re right. I’ll try now.” Not that I was eager or anything.

My fingers shook as I called Ben. I held the phone away from my ear a bit as it rang. But after three rings, the call ended.

I sighed, a weight in the pit of my stomach. “Doesn’t look like he wants to talk to me.”

“Text him. He can’t ignore that,” Kira said.

I punched out a quick text that I needed to talk to him about Tyler. But the message didn’t send.

“Son of a bitch, he blocked my number,” I muttered through gritted teeth.

How the hell was I going to approach the police about Tyler’s death and Michaela’s illness now?

Without Ben, it was just my word against George’s, and that would mean so little, even with a potion in tow. Was this thing between us worth letting his best friend’s killer escape?

“Next time I see him in town, I’m throwing a pine cone at *him*,” Allison said sleepily.

“I don’t know, I’d rather do your switch idea,” I muttered.

“Kinky.”

“Kira, shut up.”

One way or the other, I had to contact Ben soon, or Michaela would be in real trouble.



AS SOON AS I STEPPED INTO THE HOUSE, THE SCENT OF MONDAY NIGHT dinner reached me. After half a day of helping Kira make those potions, I was starving.

“Where have you been all day?” Dad asked as I trudged into the dining room.

“With Kira and Allison.” I slouched into a seat next to Isadora. “You know, just hanging out.”

Dad and Keith dished up as I poured myself a glass of wine. It was required after the few days I’d had.

“Where’s Sandra?” I asked once I’d taken a swig.

She had every Monday night off just so we could all have dinner together.

“At the hospital helping with Michaela. Did you hear she’s in hospital?” Dad asked.

“I...” Nope, I wasn’t supposed to know that. “...didn’t. What’s wrong with her?”

“Multiple organ failure, and apparently no amount of angelic magic is working,” Dad said. “They think she’s only got a matter of days if she keeps deteriorating.”

Days?

I’d thought that in the hospital, Michaela would have been able to hold steady until Ben and I had our evidence. What if she didn’t have that time?

“Is George with her?” I asked.

“He’s sorting things out at home, but Morty is with her in his stead.”

Shoot. If George got back to the hospital, Michaela might just die before the night was out. I was going to have to accost Ben... right now.

“Be right back.” To my stomach’s annoyance, I turned my back on the cottage pie sitting on my plate and dashed back out to the car.

“What the hell are you going to do?” I asked myself as I drove out of the gates. “Drive up to the Everhart house and knock on the door?”

I wouldn't make it across the threshold before someone attacked me. Considering that the Everhart family was about as big as the Arrowood family, the chances of Ben answering the door were pretty slim.

Okay, so knocking was a bad plan. But I had to do something.

I tapped the steering wheel with my thumbs in rapid succession.

This time of night, surely Ben would be at home for dinner. Did I wait outside and take a chance on him going out with his friends later?

After the revelation we'd just had, I fancied getting off my face on booze. But would he?

He'd had enough ragers with Tyler in the past, apparently. But would he indulge in that pastime so soon after his friend's death?

How did I not know the man well enough to know this and yet I'd still...

I wanted to shudder, but the space between my thighs warmed.

I pinched myself on the neck and winced at the sting. “Do not think about that.”

The closer I got to the Everhart home, the stronger the urge to flee back to my house grew. I pulled the car in between an outcrop of trees off the road a ways down from the Everhart gate.

I was well into enemy territory, even parking this far from the house.

Possibilities flooded my brain as I sneaked through the trees to the stone wall that surrounded the Everhart estate, none of them helpful. But I had to choose one if I was going to save Michaela.

“Scouting out the house until I can find Ben and get his attention,” I muttered.

That was actually the best idea I had come up with so far. It would have to do.

I climbed up a nearby tree and crept along a thick branch until it bowed under my weight.

A litany of swear words passed my lips before I launched myself at the wall. My stomach slammed into it as I clenched my arms over the top. My legs flailed for a moment as I hung there.

Why hadn't I bothered learning parkour or something in London?

With much huffing and puffing, I shimmied over the top of the wall and dropped on the other side, landing in a bush.

“Gah.” I tried to roll out of it, but my jacket snagged on the many tiny

branches.

It was official. I was a graceless oaf on land.

I tugged my jacket free and ducked down behind the bush. Over the top of the bouncy greenery, I spied the house about ten yards away.

It occurred to me I had never actually seen the Everhart house before, although I knew the location. Made entirely of stone, the house was two storeys but stretched out across several acres.

Exotic plants dotted the grounds, and a fountain stood out front, though it wasn't on.

I rolled my eyes. Who was that even for?

Some windows were lit, so I snuck to the wall underneath an unlit window and pressed myself against the stone.

This was insane. Why hadn't I called Kira and asked her to shrink down and find Ben in his house while tiny-sized?

I slapped a palm to my head.

Now that would have been a better plan.

Still, I was already up to my neck in it. There was no turning back.

I crept along the wall, ducking underneath all the windows until I got to the first lit one. I peered inside, grasping the windowsill with both hands.

An older man I knew as Dorian Everhart, Ben's grandfather, was sitting at the dining room table eating a slice of cake and custard.

My stomach rumbled. Dinner had looked so good...

I ducked under the window and crawled underneath the next one before peering inside.

Brenda, Ben's aunt, was curled up in a drawing room reading with a blanket and a glass of wine.

Woman had the right idea. At least she wasn't drinking it in the bathroom.

Without warning, her head snapped up, and I almost fell on my butt trying to get out of sight.

I scrambled to the corner and dove around it as the sound of the window creaking open reached me.

I didn't dare look around the corner again until I heard more creaking. Then I peeked just in time to see the window closing completely.

Gods, that was close. I had to find Ben before someone else found me. If another Everhart discovered I was here, there would be no stopping the conflicts that would follow.

I carried on past the back door, toward the next window. But as I passed it, the door swung open, and a hand seized the back of my jacket.



CHAPTER 28

The hand flung me, and I slid across the stone floor of the kitchen, headfirst. My heart leapt to my throat, pounding so hard as it urged me to get up.

I tried to scramble to my feet, but something struck me hard in the back and I hit the floor again, my breath whooshing from my lungs.

“We’ve got an Arrowood!”

My skin prickled with danger as I rolled onto my back to see my attacker.

Adrian Everhart loomed over me, the ceiling light above silhouetting him. He laid his hand on the kitchen counter next to him, where a selection of

fancy knives stood in a collective holder just inches away.

My stomach rolled, and it was all I could do to hold back the nausea.

Footsteps hurried into the room behind me and I jerked around. If Ben was among them, I stood a chance at getting out of here alive.

But no such luck. Both his parents, his aunt, two uncles, and his grandfather crowded in through the door together.

“What in the name of the thirteen...” Samuel Everhart, Ben’s father, trailed off as our gazes met. “We’re being invaded! Maggie, call the police!”

“No!” I threw my hands up in surrender. “This isn’t an invasion, it’s just me!”

“Good. That should make arresting you much easier.” Margaret snatched her phone out of her blazer pocket and dialed.

“Wait.” Brenda grabbed the phone off her and put it on the kitchen counter. “This is no matter for the police. This is personal.”

I swore under my breath. Who would know if they killed me, cut me up into little pieces, and hid me under the floorboards?

“Listen, I’m here because I need to talk to Ben about something urgent,” I said.

Samuel scoffed. “This is clearly some trick. Ben would never speak with an Arrowood.”

“Wouldn’t he?” I turned to Adrian. “You saw us talking, didn’t you?”

“I saw you following him and trying to attack him down an alley,” Adrian said. “I wouldn’t call that talking.”

Ugh. That was not what happened, and he knew it.

“This is a matter of life or death,” I said. “Please —”

My words died in my throat as Adrian seized my top and yanked me partway off the floor. The potion bottles in my pocket clinked against my keys and he froze.

Apparently, Adrian knew that sound as well as I did.

“So you came here prepared to attack,” Adrian said. “What do we do with her, Mum?”

“In the basement for now,” Margaret said. “We need to have a long talk about what to do with her.”

“What in the name of the thirteen is going on?”

Adrian dropped me and my lower back smacked against the tiles, leaving a nasty stinging sensation. I rolled over onto my stomach.

Ben pushed his way through his relatives, his eyes widening as he caught

sight of me.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asked.

“It’s an emergency,” I said. I tried to get up, but Adrian plowed his fist into my back and I hit the floor again, my ribs stinging.

“Stop that!” Ben marched forward and shoved Adrian in the chest with both hands.

“What?” Adrian held his hands up in surrender. “She’s an Arrowood, and she broke into our house.”

Ben offered his hand to me. I took it, and he pulled me to my feet.

Our bodies bumped against each other as I steadied myself, and his hand shot to my elbow to help me.

Heat flared across my skin, and I took a smart step back before the feeling could escalate.

“What’s so important that you had to break in at night?” he asked.

“Michaela’s in hospital,” I said. “I need you to come with me and tell the police what we know. If we don’t, George might actually succeed in killing her.”

Ben’s face paled. “You know it’s George?”

“He came to our house yesterday, and he didn’t have his watch on. That must mean that was his watch that we found with Tyler in the ocean,” I said.

“Ben!” Margaret snapped. “Explain yourself. Have you been talking with this girl?”

“She’s been helping me find out what happened to Tyler,” Ben said. “There’s more to it than the police know.”

“Son, I know you want Tyler’s death to have some sort of cause, but trying to make someone accountable for his death won’t help your grief,” Samuel said. “It was an accident.”

“It wasn’t,” Ben said through gritted teeth. “Even if we can’t prove it yet, which we can’t, by the way,” he added at me.

I held up a finger to him. “We might, actually.”

I reached for the potion in my pocket, but my hand snapped into the air under a seemingly magical force.

My heels dragged across the tiles as my hand yanked itself through the air and pinned against the wall. It was then that I spotted Brenda pointing her finger at me.

Damn telekinesis. Witches rarely had active powers outside of potion and spell brewing, but trust her, of all people, to have one.

“Everyone stop, now!” Ben bellowed so loudly that his mother jumped back a step, but his aunt didn’t lower her hand. “This is serious. If anyone uses their powers on her while she’s here, I’ll have the police here for *you*.”

Double damn.

Warmth blossomed across my chest as he turned to me with a face like thunder.

Somewhere in him, he wanted to protect me.

Reluctantly, Brenda lowered her hand, releasing me from her magical binding. I shook my hand out a bit to get the feeling back.

Ben slipped his hand into my pocket, and for a split second, his fingers grazed my torso with a thin membrane of fabric between us. A tingle graced my skin at his touch.

He pulled the potion bottle out, and his eyes widened. “You replicated the potion we found?”

“Yes, and it didn’t take us long to figure out what’s in it—a herbicide that the fae use to get rid of invasive weeds. It’s completely untraceable in the bloodstream.”

Ben’s fingers loosened around the bottle as he stared at it, and I worried he might drop it. “How long do we have to save her?”

“Not long, is my guess. That’s why we have to talk to Mallory now, or we could be too late.”

“Ben, you can’t seriously go anywhere with her?” Adrian said. “This could be a trap!”

“Will you all get over yourselves?” Ben snapped. “This isn’t about our families. Can’t you understand that? This is about Tyler and his mum. Maybe if you all didn’t make this stupid feud your entire identities, you’d all be happier.”

I counted on my fingers... triple damn? I’d lost count.

“Come on.” Ben took me by the arm and guided me toward the back door. “You’re right. We have to do this now.”

“Ben—” Margaret stopped talking the second Ben whipped around to glare at her.

“Not another word from any of you,” he said. “And if I hear anyone’s done something stupid to an Arrowood while I’m gone, expect a visit from the police.”

With that, Ben marched me out the back door and around the side of the house.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Ben asked as we headed toward a garage on the other side of the driveway. “You risked an all-out war between our families.”

“Well, maybe you’re not the only one who thinks people should stop prioritising this feud over everything—and everyone—else,” I said. “I wasn’t about to let Michaela die over it. Besides, I wouldn’t have had to if you hadn’t blocked my number.”

Ben’s thunderous expression returned, and he reached for the door to the garage.

“I brought a car. I’ll drive us,” I said.

Ben raised an eyebrow at me. “Where did you park it?”

“Outside the wall.”

To my disappointment, Ben dropped my arm as we headed for the front gates at a jog.

“I thought you were calling about... something else,” Ben said.

“We’re investigating the murder of your friend. Why would you block the only person trying to help you, regardless?”

“I didn’t want to talk to you, okay? I was... dealing.”

Just because I understood where he was coming from that didn’t make me any less annoyed.

We walked out the front gates and to my car in silence, and it wasn’t until I had driven us back onto the road that I had the courage to speak again.

“We should probably talk about... you know... at some point,” I muttered.

“Or we could go on ignoring each other.”

“You’re happy to just forget about it?”

Ben didn’t answer for a moment. Instead, he stared, glassy-eyed, through the windshield.

“Have you wondered how we matched so closely?” he asked quietly.

“Since I found out it was you. It doesn’t make sense, does it?”

“Or does it?”

We were plunged into silence once more. I had half accepted our similarities a handful of times since running out of that dating agency.

“I guess we should talk about that later,” I muttered.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

I sealed my lips as we drove off through the darkness. Whether or not he wanted to talk about it, I couldn’t help but feel warmed that he had thought

about us, too.



WE HAD CAUGHT MALLORY ON HER WAY OUT OF THE OFFICE, AND THE WATCH and the potion were enough for her to grab a handful of off-duty police officers and march down to Michaela's home.

It was all pretty informal, but it was the best we were going to get under the circumstances.

"You two had better be right about this," Mallory said as she knocked on Michaela's front door.

"We are," Ben said.

I pulled my jacket sleeve as it rode up my arm. We definitely were. But unless we could get George to crack and get hold of those old potion bottles, we weren't exactly court-ready.

George opened the door. Thank the gods he hadn't gotten to the hospital yet.

"What's going on here?" he asked, looking at every one of us before settling on Mallory.

"Sorry for the late-night intrusion, George, but we've got to ask you a few questions," Mallory said.

But Ben had no time for questions. He stepped forward and yanked both of George's sleeves up. Just like before, no watch.

"What are you playing at?" George asked, batting Ben away.

"See? He doesn't have his watch." Ben pointed at George's bare wrists. "He's the one who pushed Tyler off that cliff."

George spluttered.

"Hang on, now." Mallory clapped a hand on Ben's shoulder and pulled him back. "You can't just go accusing anyone of murder."

"Pushed Tyler? Are you insane? And what's this about my watch? Morty has it," George said.

"Why does your brother have your watch, George?" Mallory asked.

"Because he lost his." George clapped both his hands to his reddening cheeks. "He was out collecting ingredients for the calming potions he's been

making for Mickey, and it came off in the woods.”

“Then why was his watch found at the bottom of the cliff where they found Tyler’s body?” Mallory asked.

“Wait.” I held up my hands. “Your brother has been making the potions for Michaela?”

“Yes, why?”

“Do they look like this?” I pulled the potion out of my pocket and showed it to him.

George nodded. “Yes, they look just like that. How did you know?”

Ben, Mallory, and I exchanged horrified looks. Tyler’s killer was at Michaela’s bedside, feeding her poison.



CHAPTER 29

The shock still hadn't worn off as Ben plunged his hand into my jacket pocket and snatched my keys before dashing toward my car.

"Ben, wait!" I shouted.

He didn't stop, so I sprinted after him. I dove into the passenger seat just as he started the engine, and I shut the door as he reversed out onto the road.

"Stop right there!" Mallory hurried toward the car, a hand out in front of her.

Ben ignored her and sped off down the road.

"You literally stole my dad's car," I said as I struggled to put my seat belt

on.

“This is an emergency. I’m sure he’d understand.”

I snorted. That was unlikely, considering who was asking.

“I’ll drop you off in town,” Ben said. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Like hell you are. Besides, I’m not going anywhere if you’re going to throw punches at Morty.”

“Who said I was going to do that?”

“Oh, come off it. You just said I might get hurt. If that doesn’t scream an intention to start a fight, I don’t know what does.”

Ben grunted. “Why are you so obsessed?”

“Me obsessed?” I placed a hand on my chest. “With what?”

“Me.” The cocky smirk on his face told me he believed what he was saying.

“Please. If I remember correctly, you were the one who said you couldn’t stop thinking about me.”

“And yet you were the one who instigated sex with me.”

“Yeah, well... just... keep your eyes on the road. You’re going to get us both killed,” I snapped.

Ben snorted.

Damn it, he had me there.

Police sirens filled the air in the distance. Mallory was going to catch up with us.

Ben glanced into the rearview mirror, but there were no police cars to be seen yet. Regardless, he stepped on the gas.

He zipped us through town at speeds the speedometer hadn’t seen in years, and the tyres screeched a little as he jerked us into the hospital car park.

Ben parked across two spaces without pause and killed the engine before jumping out of the car.

“You’re paying for parking tickets,” I said as I got out and slammed my door shut.

“Why? Daddy doesn’t give you enough pocket money running the bubble factory?”

I whacked my fist against his forearm as we ran around the side of the hospital to the main entrance.

Ben winced but corrected his expression immediately. “That didn’t hurt.”

I wanted to hit him again. “Aren’t we here to stop a murder?” I snapped.

“You wouldn’t think it, the way you’re acting.”

“Gods above, shut up!” Why did this make me like him more?

We dashed into the building, and Ben almost crashed against the reception desk. The receptionist nearly spilled her coffee on the other side.

“Michaela Bakewell,” Ben said as I skidded to a stop next to him. “Where’s Michaela Bakewell?”

The receptionist stood up abruptly, mouth open, but she wasn’t looking at us, instead past us.

I looked over my shoulder to see several police officers marching toward us.

Ben swore under his breath and grabbed my arm, prepared to pull me down the hallway past the desk. But the police swarmed on us.

“Hey, watch it,” I said as one of them grabbed my arm and pulled me away from Ben.

Perhaps knowing he would put up more of a fight, three of them grabbed Ben.

“Don’t let them go anywhere.” Mallory pointed a finger at us both as she marched past.

The officers sat us down in waiting room chairs and stood in a wall between us and the desk.

“Chief, please! What if you need our help?” Ben asked, trying to look past the officers.

“Thank you for your concern, Mr. Everhart.” Mallory’s tone dripped with sarcasm. “But I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

With that, Mallory marched off down the corridor with a convoy of officers in tow.

Ben slumped back in his seat, head bowed.

A pang of sorrow crackled through my heart. He had worked so hard to find who had killed Tyler, and he couldn’t even try and save his best friend’s mother. It didn’t seem fair.

“Why don’t you use your good luck power to get out of here?” I muttered.

“Sssh!” Ben eyed the officers guarding us, but they were too busy chatting among themselves to notice. “Don’t talk about that out loud.”

“Why not?”

Ben scratched his neck, the corners of his eyes creasing. “Nobody knows I have this power, not even my brother.”

“You haven’t told anyone?” Maybe me and Ben had more in common than I realised, hiding ourselves from even our families. “Why?”

“Why do you think?” Ben muttered. “The minute my mum realises I could give our family the advantage in this feud, she’d make me use it.”

Just like that, any animosity I had left toward him melted away. He had inadvertently protected both our families - but particularly mine - from total destruction all this time. Everhart or not, was there any act more noble in a war this intense?

“Besides, it doesn’t work like that,” he added. “I can’t give myself good or bad luck, just other people.”

“Why did you give it to me?” I asked.

“Because I wanted you to be safe. I...care about you.”

Did I imagine his use of the present tense?

I shuffled a little closer to him, our elbows touching. My jacket clinked, and realisation dawned on me. I still had the potions in my pocket.

Crap, I had brought literal poison into a hospital. Except, one of them wasn’t a poison.

I looked up at the officers, who had relaxed enough to be sure we would not run, and were looking around, keeping watch.

I dipped my fingers into my jacket pocket and peered into it to make sure I grabbed the right one.

“Here,” I whispered as I slipped Ben the vial.

Our touches lingered long after the vial was in his palm.

My heart skipped a beat as our eyes met.

“What is it?” he whispered.

I shrugged. “It could be a trick. Or it could be a smokescreen potion.”

Ben snorted and grinned.

Apparently, we were finally past believing we were always out to trick each other.

“Thank you.”

Warmth blossomed through my chest at the sound of his sincerity.

With no warning, Ben threw the vial at the feet of the officers. Smoke billowed into the air, and before I knew what was happening, Ben grabbed my arm and we snuck around where the officers had stood.

We ran past the smoky reception desk and down the corridor after Mallory.



“ARE YOU SURE SHE’LL BE THIS WAY?” BEN ASKED, SIDESTEPPING A NURSE bustling past.

We had zigzagged our way through half the hospital by now, but I was certain.

“Michaela has to be in the ICU if she’s that sick,” I said. “It’s this way.”

Sandra had worked here so long that even I knew this place like the back of my hand. The ICU here was small, but was more than large enough to accommodate the population. There were barely more than two or three people in there at a time, and those were at the busiest times of the year.

Ben pushed through the doors to the ICU department, and silence dawned. Only the distant beeping of machinery in the distance indicated that anyone was in the department at all.

“Is it always this quiet?” Ben asked.

“Usually.”

Despite me knowing that, an unease hung in the air, an atmosphere that didn’t feel quite right.

Then several shouts severed the silence.

Ben made to run, but I grabbed his arm and yanked him back.

“Don’t,” I whispered. “If there’s trouble, we need the element of surprise.”

Because Ben would charge on in without a second thought. Not just him, but Michaela and maybe the officers could also get hurt if we were rash.

“You’re strong for a girl,” he said as he took his arm back.

I punched him on the arm again, and he winced.

I took the lead down the corridor, holding a hand out to keep him back. The last thing I needed was him running off into trouble.

“All right, all right! We’re listening, Morty.” Mallory’s voice came out of a nearby cubicle, the door to which was wide open.

I ducked down and crept along the wall to the door. Inside, a slew of police officers, including Mallory, had their hands up in surrender. Just past them, I spied Morty holding an athamé to Michaela’s throat.

She blinked like she didn’t know what was happening, her hands waving

around as if in a trance.

Ben swore under his breath. "He's going to kill her."

"Just wait," I whispered.

"All of you back away now, or I'll kill her, I promise you that," Morty snapped.

"All right. Let's not do anything rash now," Mallory said. She jerked her chin at her officers. "Back up, all of you."

This was our chance.

"Come on." I grabbed Ben's jacket and pulled him past the door as the officers blocking it backed out.

There was a fire exit at the end of one corridor branching off from the one we were in. Perfect.

I pulled Ben toward it and slipped into another ICU room near it.

"What are you doing?" Ben whispered.

"He's going to make a break for it. I reckon he'll use the fire exit, don't you?"

Realisation crossed Ben's face. "Brilliant. Were you always this smart, or is this a onetime thing?"

"I'm smart every time. You're just too dumb to comprehend most of it."

"Savage."

I crouched down and positioned myself at the door, peering around the frame just enough to watch Mallory and the rest of the officers back out of the room.

Ben crouched at my back, watching over my shoulder.

I winced as Morty dragged Michaela out of the door, her legs squeaking across the floor.

"On the ground, all of you. Hands on your heads," Morty ordered.

"Do as he says," Mallory said when her officers hesitated.

Almost in unison, all the officers descended to the floor and put their hands on their heads.

The moment they were down, Morty dropped Michaela, who hit the floor with a heavy thunk, and he sprinted for the fire exit.

Before I could take a breath, Ben had darted out from our hiding place and lunged at Morty.



CHAPTER 30

The glint of an athamé under the iridescent light made my heart stop. I reached for Ben, but he was already out of range.

Morty spotted him and raised the athamé, waving it wildly in Ben's direction. The blade sliced across Ben's chest just as I seized his shoulders and yanked him back.

Morty's second swipe aimed lower at Ben's abdomen, but it only found air. Ben toppled onto me, knocking us both onto the ground in a heap.

I grunted as Ben's elbow dug into my stomach. That was the thanks I got. Morty darted for the fire exit as Mallory shouted at her officers to move.

He slammed through it as three officers sprinted past it, and they all disappeared into the night.

“Come on.” Ben tried to struggle to his feet, but I held him back.

“Don’t be stupid, you’re hurt.” I rolled onto my knees and yanked his bloodied shirt open.

My insides jolted at the sight of his bare chest as a flashback of the night we had spent together surfaced.

Gods above, could there be any worse time to think about that?

I placed one hand above the slice in his chest and one below and leaned in to have a closer look. Ben winced, and this time, I actually felt bad.

“It’s not deep,” I said.

“Good, then let’s go.” Ben hastily buttoned his shirt back up.

“Don’t you two go anywhere!” Mallory’s command seized our attention.

She knelt at Michaela’s side with a handful of other officers, while a few others ran back toward the reception area, hopefully for backup.

Ben’s gaze met mine.

“Are you coming or not?” he asked.

The corner of my mouth twitched into a smile. “Someone’s got to stop you from doing something stupid.”

With that, we got to our feet and ran out of the fire exit together.



THE POLICE STUCK OUT EVEN IN THE NIGHT. THEIR HI-VIS JACKETS GLOWED under every streetlight at the edge of the trees bordering the car park.

It didn’t take us long to catch up to and overtake them. The amount of gear they were required to carry didn’t add up on an island where little to no crime happened.

“Hey!” An officer reached a hand out to me as I passed him, and I tried to duck out of his way.

Ben stuck out a leg, and the officer tripped, planting face-first into the ground.

“Stop right now!” another officer shouted at us, but we breezed past them.

“Who’s looking out for whom now?” Ben asked.

“Shut up,” I said.

Up ahead, Morty had taken a lead on the officers, but he couldn’t hope to outrun two people thirty years his junior.

As we darted between the trees, the rush of water up ahead reached my ears. The river. Excellent. That would cut him off before we had to.

To my horror, up ahead, Morty leapt off the bank and disappeared with a splash.

“Where’d he go?” Ben asked as we ground to a stop at the river bank.

The brown river swelled with debris from the past few nights of rain. It dragged branches downstream at high speeds and swallowed fallen leaves completely.

Morty’s head bobbed above the surface and he took a harsh breath in as the police joined us on the bank.

He swam for the other side, but the current dragged him further down the river.

“He won’t make it,” I said.

Almost as soon as I’d finished my sentence, Morty grabbed hold of a fallen tree and inched his way up it to the muddy bank.

I swallowed. Should I have turned into a mermaid to get the jump on Morty? I squashed that thought down the moment it surfaced.

Catching Morty was important, but I couldn’t out my secret off the fly like that. Besides, it would be in all the papers if I caught a murderer while half-naked.

Ben swore and waded in after Morty.

“Don’t be an idiot.” I whacked his arm. Morty had been lucky enough, but I wouldn’t let Ben roll the dice like that. “Did you forget about the bridge?”

Morty clearly had, because the second he was free of the water, he ran down the river in its direction. Bad move, city boy.

“Ugh.” Ben’s footsteps squelched behind me as I took the lead.

Served him right for being so impulsive.

As we ran along the river, Morty veered off further into the trees. I squinted as I watched him. He appeared to be emptying his pockets, but of what?

“Are you okay?” I asked as we darted across the bridge.

Ben’s breathing had become laboured and yet more blood stained his

shirt.

“I’m fine. Keep going,” he said.

I didn’t believe him. But I believed that whatever he suffered at that point was worth getting justice for Tyler.

Morty’s wheezes drowned out the dying sounds of the river as we drew nearer to him, still throwing things out of his pockets into the woods.

They looked like little hessian bags. Potion ingredients? Maybe he wanted to ditch the evidence of him having poisoned Michaela this whole time.

The sea popped into view between the trees, and the moonlight became brighter as the trees thinned. We were nearly at the edge of the island.

Ben suddenly sped past me and seized Morty by the coat and yanked him backward, slamming him against a tree only a handful of yards from the cliff’s edge. As soon as Morty’s back hit the wood, Ben punched him clean across the jaw.

I stopped at Ben’s back and put a hand on his shoulder. Morty deserved more than that, but I didn’t know how much Mallory would let Ben get away with, even under these circumstances.

“Why did you do it?” Ben shouted. “Why did you kill Tyler?”

“How did you do it?” I asked. “You said you only came back to Dusk after you heard Tyler died.”

Michaela and George had been in the room when he announced that little fact. If he had lied, they surely would have mentioned it.

“I’d been here for months before I came to stay with George. There are things going on here I don’t want him knowing nothin’ about.” Morty spat a mouthful of blood onto the ground. “And the boy found out. He found out too much.”

“That you were poisoning Michaela?” I asked.

“He knew about that?” Morty looked from me to Ben before a bloody grin spread across his face. “Boy was more on the ball than I gave him credit for.”

“Then why did you?” Ben shook Morty, but the older man didn’t seem even the slightest bit dazed.

“Boy got too nosy. He realised I was on Dusk, found out I was distributing product and threatened to tell the police if I didn’t leave. Be damned if I was leaving this island because of that little shit. Grass is too green here.”

“What do you mean, product?” Ben demanded.

Morty didn't answer him, but realisation crossed Ben's face.

“Tyler told me you did jail time for supplying illegal potion ingredients before,” Ben said.

“Is that what you're doing here?” I asked.

Morty shrugged, still grinning. “There's a market for dark stuff just about everywhere, even your little island, kids. And I've already made a mint in just a few weeks. Imagine what I could have made if Mallory hadn't stuck her nose in.”

Dark stuff?

My lips parted as realisation dawned on me. The fire wand that Nigel Everhart had wielded the other night, and the explosive potions that Wendy had gotten hold of... not to mention the guy who had tried to poison his ex-girlfriend. Had Morty supplied them all with potions and ingredients they couldn't get anywhere else?

Had he single-handedly set up a black market on Dusk?

“That wasn't Mallory,” Ben snarled. “That was us. We investigated Tyler's murder, and we got Mallory to track you down.”

Morty's face fell. “You little shits. You mean nobody would even have known —?”

“If we hadn't stepped in, no, they wouldn't have,” I said.

Morty cried out this time as Ben punched him in the face.

“You mean this was all just for money?” Ben asked.

“Just money?” Morty snorted and prodded his finger into Ben's bloodied chest, but Ben didn't so much as flinch. “It might be ‘just money’ to a rich kid like you, but I've got loan sharks after my soul and I'll do anything to keep that intact, I can tell you.”

“Well, good for you,” Ben snapped. “Keep your damn soul. It'll be the only thing to keep you company as you rot away in a jail cell.”

Morty's gaze travelled down to the cut on Ben's chest. “Don't think you'll take me that easily, son.”

He rammed his fist into Ben's chest, and Ben cried out. I caught him as he stumbled back and Morty sprinted for the cliff.

“Ben, stop!” I shouted as Ben ran after him, wrenching himself out of my grip.

Morty launched himself off the cliff, and Ben grabbed for him. My heart stopped as he leaned over to seize Morty, too far. Much too far.

I ran forward, hand outstretched, to reach for Ben. But I got to the edge of the cliff just in time to watch them both tumble toward the black abyss of the ocean.



CHAPTER 31

“Ben!” I screamed his name as he and Morty hurtled toward the sea.

A deafening crack shot up the cliff as Morty struck the rocks. His wide, unseeing eyes stared up at me. Just like the boy he had killed.

Ben crashed into the water like a cannonball and sank beneath the surface just as quickly.

“Gods above.” I got down on my knees and leaned over the edge, fixating on the spot where he had gone in. “Please come up. Please, Ben.”

Whatever our families felt for each other, we weren’t enemies anymore. I couldn’t wish death upon him any more than I could wish it on Kira or

Allison.

The confusion between us after discovering he was my date had cleared up little by little over the past few hours. Somehow, it was all so obvious that I couldn't fight what was between us.

What should I do? Did I get the police for help? No, or I'd be pulling Ben's body out of the water tomorrow the same way I had Tyler's. That was not an option.

I scrambled to my feet and shook off my jacket. There was only one thing I could do that gave Ben a chance at survival.

Keeping a close eye on the swell of the ocean, I took a few steps back and did a running jump off the edge of the cliff.

The air bit into me as I plunged toward the ocean, and the moment I hit the water my tail burst into existence, ripping my trousers into several pieces.

I beat my tail, slicing through the rough current with ease, and I dove into the depths in search of Ben. Down below, I caught sight of him.

He flailed his arms and legs as he tried to fight the current, which dragged him down to the sea floor. A battle he was fast losing.

I swam down to him and wrapped an arm around his torso. With three beats of my tail, I propelled us toward the surface.

Ben drew in a ragged breath the second we broke the surface. The sound had relief swelling within me.

"Are you okay?" I asked, though he was facing away from me.

"I'm fine. Where's Morty?" Ben asked, looking around.

"He's dead, Ben."

Ben's shoulders sagged, his body withdrawing in my arms. I had to get him to shore.

"How the hell are you swimming so fast?" Ben cried over the laps of the waves.

I didn't answer him. There would be no hiding my secret from him, but even after our alliance, could I trust him with it?

Could I trust an Everhart with a secret so close to my heart?

I swam us to the nearest stretch of beach and pulled Ben as far out of the water as I could.

"Gods..." Ben whispered as he caught sight of my tail.

My head dipped down, and I stared at his blood-stained collar. I couldn't look him in the eye.

His fingers wrapped under my chin, and he levered my head back up to

meet his gaze.

“You’re a mermaid?” he murmured. “I... never knew.”

“Neither did I,” I said. “Not until recently.”

“When?”

“The night your brother ran me off that cliff.”

For a moment, we stared into each other’s eyes, and nowhere in his could I detect even a hint of malice. Maybe I imagined the protection I saw there, or maybe Ben really could see how vulnerable I was at that moment.

“I know we’re supposed to hate each other,” I said. “But... could you keep this between us? Just until I’m ready?”

Ben didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled me to his lips.

I sank into his kiss as his hand ran around my lower back, pulling my body against his. With a violent twitch, my tail turned back into legs. But I didn’t care.

Every worry I had melted into oblivion as he kissed me. My hands travelled up his back, revelling in every inch of him they could reach.

Suddenly, the feud didn’t exist anymore. Not between us, anyway. I had never felt so weightless before. Now I owned his secret and he mine, we had forged a trust between us that would have seemed impossible just a week prior. Somehow, that bond lifted the crushing pressure of the feud from my shoulders.

“If we’re supposed to hate each other so much,” Ben murmured against my lips. “Why did you save me?”

A tear burned the corner of my eye. Thank goodness we were both so wet, he hopefully wouldn’t notice.

“Maybe this time last week I would have saved you so our families wouldn’t kill each other,” I said. “But today I saved you because I couldn’t bear for you to die.”

Ben kissed me again and rolled me onto my back as his hand caressed my hair. My hips arched automatically, much as they had done the other night.

“You’re... missing your trousers,” Ben murmured.

Shoot, that old chestnut. Although with a gorgeous man on top of me, I couldn’t say I was as annoyed as usual.

“How the hell did you lose them?” he asked.

“Happens every time I transition,” I said.

“Come on.” Ben got to his feet and pulled me up with him. “I can fix that.”

I raised an eyebrow as he turned me around to face away from him. A moment later, his bare chest pressed to my back and his hands snaked around my waist to tie his shirt around my hips.

I leaned into him, tilting my head to one side to allow him to plant a kiss on my neck. Gods, if we didn't have a dead body to report, I would have taken him right there.

A shout shook me from my reverie. At the end of the beach, flashlights ran up and down the sand and hi-visibility jackets bobbed through the night toward us.

Ben stepped away from me, and we exchanged one last fond look before we walked toward the ensuing police.

"Here they are!" an officer shouted as we neared.

"Ben!" A shrill voice cut through the calls of the officers. A voice that sounded chillingly familiar.

Margaret Everhart pushed between the police officers and power walked toward us, moving her arms back and forth like she was on a treadmill.

I took a step away from Ben as she hurried to her son.

"Oh, by Scorpio's grace." Margaret touched a manicured hand to Ben's chest. "How did this happen? Ben?"

"It's just a scratch, Mum. It's nothing," Ben said.

But he hadn't even finished his sentence before Margaret grabbed my collar with one hand and pulled it painfully tight.



CHAPTER 32

“Did you do this to my son?” Margaret hissed.

Venom flooded her eyes, and her cloying perfume rolled off her in waves, eliminating the salty air completely.

I grabbed at my collar, but her nails dug into my fingers.

“Mum, stop!” Ben grabbed Margaret’s hands and pried them off me.

I took another step back, rubbing my throat with one hand. That woman had a wicked touch for a small lady.

“It wasn’t her, Mum,” Ben said. “Morty did this.”

“Maeve!” I whipped around at the sound of my dad’s voice.

Not just Dad, but half my family, followed by approximately half of Ben's family, tore across the beach toward us.

I hadn't seen this many Arrowoods and Everharts in one place since... ever. Thank the gods the police were here.

The moment he caught up, Dad grabbed my upper arms and pulled me further away from Ben and his mother.

"What happened? Why are you wet? Are you hurt?" Dad asked.

It was like when I fell into the sea when I was six all over again.

"I'm fine," I said.

The officers did the sensible thing and a few of them stationed themselves between my family and Ben's.

"You touch one of ours again, and there'll be hell to pay!" Keith shouted between two officers' shoulders at Margaret.

"Don't threaten my mother!" Adrian had appeared at Margaret's side. "And Ben's the one who's injured. How did that happen?"

Mallory joined the throng and held her hands up in the air, but nobody from either family paid her any mind.

"She saved my life!" Ben shouted above all the squabbling.

Suddenly, the jabbering stopped, and only the lapping of the waves shattered the silence.

"What are you talking about?" Margaret asked, twisting the rings on her fingers.

"I fell off that cliff trying to stop Morty from getting away." Ben pointed up at the cliff. "If Maeve hadn't jumped in after me, I would have drowned."

"She's a stronger swimmer than she looks," he added.

I shot him a coy smile. Bless him, trying to cover my tracks for me.

"That's what I like to hear." Mallory snapped her head back and forth to look at both families. "You could all learn a thing or two from your youngsters."

Dad wrapped an arm around my shoulders and squeezed. I enjoyed a small swell of pride in my chest.

"What happened to Morty?" Mallory asked, taking advantage of the silence.

"He hit the rocks," I said. "He's dead."

Mallory pointed two fingers at three of her officers. "Look for him. Retrieve him only if you can safely."

"Yes, Chief." The three officers hurried off across the sand.

I clutched the sleeves of Ben's shirt tighter around my waist. Something told me I'd be the one to retrieve that body, too.

"As for you two." Mallory pointed at me and Ben. "You're lucky I don't lock you both up for defying me at every turn."

Wow, she changed her tune quickly.

"You shan't press charges." Margaret clung to Ben's arm, her head barely coming up to his shoulder.

"I can hardly do that." Mallory placed her hands on her hips. "Given that they corrected such a big mistake on my part by declaring Tyler Bakewell's death an accident."

I wanted to tell her it wasn't exactly her fault. There had been nothing in the autopsy to suggest foul play, and the only witnesses had kept the information to themselves.

"Right, let's clear the beach. Ben, go to the hospital and get yourself healed. Everyone else, go back to your homes," Mallory ordered.

There was a brief hesitation from both families. Usually in this kind of proximity, calmly walking away wasn't the done thing.

But after a moment, Dad steered me away down the beach, with the rest of the family in tow.

I stole a look over my shoulder at Ben being led away by his own family. In a final shared gaze, we looked longingly at each other for the briefest of moments before our families escorted us away.



I HAD NEVER WANTED A BATH SO BADLY.

I soaked for at least an hour in the tub, switching between tail and legs at my leisure. Changing form had become easier the past few days.

Just like the night I couldn't sleep, the water helped ease the day's stress.

When I could bring myself to get out, I put on some pyjamas and flumped down on my bed. But my mind still raced with the events of the day. Sleep wouldn't come to me soon. Unless maybe I slept in the pool again.

I sat up and looked over at Ben's shirt hanging off the back of my desk chair. He would surely want it back, even torn and bloodied.

As I picked it up and ran the fabric between my fingers, a warm feeling travelled up my arm and throughout the rest of my body. Maybe I didn't want to give it back.

Either way, it needed a wash.

I gathered up his shirt and made my way down to the laundry room to toss his shirt in the washing machine, throwing a few of my own things in with it. I wouldn't hear the end from Sandra if she caught me wasting electricity.

I watched the clothes go round and round for a few moments. Our clothes had an easier time of being together than me and Ben ever could.

Pulling my dressing gown around me a little more, I made my way back toward the stairs. If I couldn't sleep, I might just text Kira and Allison with updates. I needed to get all this adrenaline out of my system somehow.

"Maeve." On the first step of the stairs, Dad's voice stopped me.

I turned around to see him poking his head out of the living room door.

"We're having a family meeting. Come and join us," he said.

A family meeting this late? Why did that feel so foreboding?

I followed Dad anyway to find everyone sitting around the living room, even Rose holding her new baby.

"Sit down." Dad gestured to an armchair, and I accepted the invitation.

All eyes were on me again, just like on the beach. Why did I feel like I'd done something wrong?

"I'm just going to come out and say it," Keith said from where he stood by the window. "Why the hell did you risk your life to save an Everhart?"

Wow. I knew this would come up at some point, but the same night?

"He isn't just an Everhart, he's a person," I said. "I could save him, so I did. There was no question of letting him die."

"What were you even doing together up there?" Sandra asked.

For once, she had a dressing gown on instead of her scrubs.

Well, I wasn't keeping this under wraps any longer. Hopefully, only half the truth would keep them satisfied.

"Ben and I both believed that Tyler was murdered," I said. "We had no choice but to cooperate if we were going to prove it to Mallory."

Keith scoffed. "Have you ignored everything we've ever taught you? You can't trust Everharts. What possessed you to collaborate with one?"

"And what if we hadn't?" I asked. "Michaela Bakewell would be dead now, as well as Tyler. Is keeping this feud intact more important than other

people's lives?"

"We have to look out for our own," Keith snapped.

"Everyone on this island is our own," I said. "Are we any good as a community if we aren't looking out for each other?"

"Not with them!"

"It's funny." I folded my arms and glared at Keith. "Without our families hissing in our ears about how much we're supposed to hate each other, Ben and I have collaborated just fine. And we both think that this stupid feud has gone on long enough. It's time we worked together to find out how to end it —"

A loud bang echoed around the living room as Wendy slammed her fist down on a side table, and the room fell silent.



CHAPTER 33

“My husband is dead because of those monsters,” Wendy spat. “And they remind me of it every single day.”

Rose uttered a small sob and held her sleeping baby a little closer.

“Nobody who’s alive today created the curse that killed Ray,” I said. “We’re suffering the consequences of choices made by people who are long dead. Why can’t we make the choice to change it so that we don’t lose anyone else for no good reason?”

I looked at Dad, hoping he would see some reason in what I was saying. But he sat on the sofa, staring at a bowl of potpourri on the coffee table.

“Every single Everhart on this island would kill any of us, given the chance,” Keith said. “Which makes you a fool for saving one.”

“Yes,” Wendy said through bitter tears. “There would have been one less to worry about tonight if it weren’t for you.”

My blood boiled.

I had left Dusk to get away from this all-consuming feud, and in doing so, I had apparently forgotten just how deep it ran in our family.

It had become both our family history and identity rolled into one. But I refused to believe that it had to be our future as well.

“That’s enough, thank you.” Dad finally spoke up. “Maeve, I’m very proud of you for saving someone’s life.” He ignored another one of Keith’s scoffs. “But putting an end to this war just isn’t an option.”

And just like that, I had no dog in this fight. Not Sandra, not even my dad could support my point of view.

I was too tired for this.

I stood up. “Was there any point to this meeting? Or was it just to roast me about doing the ethical thing?”

“Yes,” Wendy said. “We came here to reestablish our intentions as a family.”

My stomach did a flip. “What intentions?”

“That none of us are to talk to or otherwise engage with Everharts. Even if it’s saving their lives,” Sandra said.

“Especially if it’s saving their lives,” Wendy said.

“You were lucky enough to walk away with your life,” Keith said. “That Everhart would no doubt have killed you, given the chance.”

I made sure I turned my back before I rolled my eyes. “Thanks for the reminder.”



AS PREDICTED, SLEEP EVADED ME ALL NIGHT LONG, AND I HADN’T THE energy to leave my room and risk a nap in the pool. Which was just as well, because Mallory called well before breakfast to ask me to come into the station and give a statement.

Kira and Allison were waiting for me when I got there, and again when I walked out of the police station.

“How’d it go?” Allison asked, linking her arm through mine.

“Kinda awkward,” I said. “Considering I told Mallory that the autopsy showed no foul play. But at least she wasn’t angry about it.”

“You literally did her job for her. She has no right to be,” Kira said.

We walked across the car park just in time to see Ben, his mother, and brother getting out of a nearby car.

Our eyes met, and Ben froze. My heart leapt in my chest. I wanted nothing more than to go over and talk to him, but something told me I wouldn’t get within speaking distance before his mother strangled me.

Margaret could just see us looking at each other over the top of the car and she tottered around in her fancy heels to drag Ben away toward the police building. Adrian gave me the evil eye as they walked away.

“Ungrateful, much?” Kira said loudly. “You wouldn’t have thought you’d just saved his life, would you?”

“Funny you should say that, but I’m not hearing the end of it at home,” I said.

Kira glowered. “Okay, girls, it’s time to get a strong-ass coffee.”

We walked five streets to our usual coffee place, passing several others on the way. But we couldn’t think of going anywhere else. We had had our first coffees at the Bean Factory, and most coffees since.

Once we had three frothy mochas in front of us at our usual table right in the back corner, the world felt a bit more right again.

“So.” Allison looked over both shoulders before continuing. “I take it you two haven’t talked, then?”

“Not really. Just long enough for him to find out I’m a mermaid,” I said, before burning my lips on my coffee.

Allison clapped a hand over her mouth. “He knows?”

“How else do you think I dragged him out of the ocean?” I said, lowering my voice.

“Are you sure you can trust him to keep that secret?” Kira asked.

“I’m sure.” I settled for spooning foam into my mouth to let my coffee cool down. “He promised.”

Kira and Allison exchanged amused looks.

“What?” I said.

“You guys are so sweet on each other!” Allison squealed.

“Keep it down.” I stole some foam from Allison’s cup and she turned her finger into a stick and poked me.

I couldn’t have anyone my family knew overhearing this conversation. Apparently, even working with an Everhart was punishable.

“Be honest with us,” Kira said, fluttering her wings on her coffee to cool it down. “Do you like him?”

I dropped my spoon and leaned back in my seat. “I really like him.”

It was more than like. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something connected us that ran deeper than surface level attraction. Although we had spent little time together. But the time we had spent...

Allison clutched her face.

“I thought after we found out who each other was, that was it,” I said. “But when he nearly drowned... it made all of this seem so stupid. All this fighting, when I could have lost him... it’s so pointless.”

“Ooooh...” Allison rocked back and forth, her eyes glazed over. “You’re in deep, girl.”

“Poor choice of words, Ali.” Kira picked up her coffee and took a gulp. “Maeve, listen, you’ve got to go ahead with this. You can’t let your families stop you from being together.”

I balked, wrapping my hands around my coffee for comfort. “You sound really sure about that.”

“I’ve never been more sure about anything.” Kira’s wings fluttered indignantly. “Don’t you find it suspicious that you two matched so closely and that you needed each other to solve Tyler’s murder?”

I sipped my coffee. “I mean, it’s a pretty strange coincidence, yeah.”

“Are you listening to this bitch?” Kira gestured at me as she exchanged exasperated looks with Allison. “Maeve, haven’t you thought that this might be fate? That the gods might have intended for you two to get together?”

“Now that’s a stretch,” I said, grabbing a sugar packet. The coffee was too bitter.

“Is it?” Allison asked. “Your family’s feud has basically defined this island since they got here. What if it’s too much... bad juju or something?”

Kira slapped a hand to her face. “Real coherent there, Ali.”

“Oh, like you could do better.” Allison picked up her cup and hunched her shoulders. She was done talking.

I patted her back. Some days, she had the confidence of a sapling in a hurricane.

“What she means to say is that maybe this is how the curse breaks? With you two uniting the families?” Kira said.

I froze.

Nobody knew how the curse really came to be, other than the betrayal of both families simultaneously causing some sort of magical interference. What if the opposite was true?

“When Rose was about to give birth, we were terrified we were going to lose you,” Kira said. “What if someone else has a baby? What if you’re next? We can’t live like that, Maeve. You owe it to everyone to see if this is what it is.”

My heart warmed. I would have lost my mind if either of these two might die, too.

Like it or not, Kira was right. If there was even a chance that me and Ben could break the curse, we had a responsibility to investigate.

“I don’t know how we’re going to make that happen without our families finding out,” I said.

“You’ve got options,” Kira said. “Our covens would be a safe meeting space, and maybe even Janeira’s?”

“Maybe.” The idea made sense, but making it happen would take work.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I checked it. A text from Dad.

Come home when you can. It’s important.



CHAPTER 34

I hadn't wanted to return home after Dad's text, given what I suspected he wanted to talk about. I hadn't exactly left on good terms with the family the night before. But we were past the cold-shoulder teen phase. If he wanted to talk, we would talk.

When I walked into his study, Dad sat at his desk, poring over a book with Sammie at his side. Another scented candle burned in a glass jar near his pen holder. That explained the lavender smell.

"What's the emergency?" I asked as Sammie ran to greet me.

"Not an emergency, but urgent, perhaps." Dad shut the book. "Could you

close the door, please?”

I did so and sat in the nearest chair, fussing Sammie behind the ears.

“They’ve asked me to speak with you about last night,” Dad said.

Called it.

“You really upset Wendy last night with all this talk of reconciliation,” he said.

“I’m not trying to undermine anyone’s pain by suggesting it,” I said. “I’m trying to stop anyone else suffering the same thing.”

“That’s not how they see it.”

“They’re choosing not to see it that way, and apparently, so are you.”

“Not everyone’s going to agree with you always, Maeve.”

“I’m not a child anymore, Dad. I know that.”

“You’re my child, no matter how old you get. Your safety will always be my responsibility.”

I gestured at him. “Can you just get to the point of this so I can leave, please?”

I was sick of this lecture already.

Dad leaned on the desk with a sigh. “I couldn’t be prouder of you for uncovering what happened to Tyler and saving Michaela. But joining forces with Ben Everhart put you in real danger. You aren’t to go near him ever again, do you understand?”

There it was.

Despite knowing it was coming, disappointment rolled around in my gut. I thought that if anyone would want this feud to end, it was Dad. He had lost his wife to this stupid curse. Didn’t he want to avoid all that heartache for anyone else?

But the mob ruled here. They outnumbered me. I would just have to agree on the surface and do what I liked behind the scenes. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Fine,” I said.

“Don’t sulk like that. Your intentions might be good, but yesterday was proof enough that Margaret Everhart would try to kill you even after you saved her son.”

“Can’t argue with that.” I took Sammie’s ears in my hands and massaged them.

The little cutie slow blinked at me, clearly enjoying himself.

“So, is the family still out for blood? Should I skip dinner tonight?” I

asked.

Dad rubbed his cheek. “They’re still grieving.” That was a yes, then. “Wouldn’t you have been angry if I had died this time instead of Ray?”

“Yeah, Dad. I’d have been furious. But I’m angry now that we can’t stop someone else dying in the future because we can’t just sit down and talk like adults.”

“Just promise me you’ll stay away from them. Please?” Dad asked.

“I told you, fine.”

Why did he always bring out the petulant teenager in me?

“Great. Lecture over.” Dad held his hands up before he got up from his desk and pulled open a drawer, taking something out of it. “I need to show you this.”

Dad made his way around his desk and held out a thick book to me, bound in navy-blue binding and adorned with crystals. A thick metal lock fixed the covers in place.

“What’s this?” I asked as he handed it to me.

“That was your mother’s.”

I took it in my hands and placed it on my lap. Sammie gave it a curious sniff.

Mum had a diary?

“I wanted to show you years ago, but you always seemed distant whenever I talked about your mum. When you asked about her the other day, I thought maybe you were ready to look,” Dad said. “She made this herself and wrote in it almost every night.”

I turned the diary over in my hands. All I had seen of my mother was pictures and secondhand memories. But this... did it hold answers to questions I was desperate to ask her after discovering what I was?

“Do you have the key?” I asked.

“I don’t know where it is,” Dad said. “Your mum said that she would show you this when you were older, so this really belongs to you now. I’ve looked everywhere for the key, but maybe we could have a look for it together.”

I clutched the diary to my chest. I had to find the key. If she had wanted me to see this one day, that meant she might actually have prepared to tell me about being a mermaid if she died. Maybe she had put the key somewhere safe before she passed?

Everything I needed to know about my mother’s heritage—my heritage—

might be in here. If only I could get inside.

“Theo!” An alarmed shout from the corridor had us both bolting out of the room, Sammie on our heels.

We followed the sound of loud discussion down the corridors.

My heart leapt to my throat at the sight of half the family gathered around the open door to The Room.

They stepped aside as we got there to let us see inside.

The arrow stuck into the pillar glowed with golden light, pulsing like a star.

I held the diary to my chest as it glowed brighter still. The arrow that bound the curse to our family had never so much as glinted of its own accord before. Something told me that whatever Ben and I had unearthed between our families by working together, it was just the beginning.

The End

*Thank you for reading Midnight
Waters!*

If you've enjoyed Maeve's action-packed story so far, you'll be delighted to know this is just the beginning. The rest of the **Moonlight Mermaid** trilogy is coming soon and there will be more mayhem, heartbreak and underwater shenanigans than ever.

In the meantime, keep up to date with all my new releases, sales and giveaways by following me on one or more social media platforms, and join my mailing list. If you'd like special perks, early access to covers and manuscripts, and bonus content, you can also support me on Patreon.

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Thank you again for your support, as a reader you are a special part of publishing a book, and I am forever grateful for your encouragement!

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Rosie is a USA Today Bestselling author of urban fantasy and paranormal romance books.

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She highly recommends her favourite authors, Deborah Harkness, Kat Ross, and L.J. Smith, who are equally responsible for her addiction to reading.

Keep up with Rosie's latest updates, including news on sales, giveaways, and advanced reader opportunities by signing up to her mailing list:

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