

A
CAPTAIN
SO
CALLOUS
AND
CRUEL

A TWISTED HEROES NOVELLA

NY TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR

R.J. LEWIS

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Your mental health matters. For a full list of content warnings, please visit www.authorarrose.com/content-warnings.

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*To our amazing readers who have fallen in love with our
romance stories and are now willing to take a chance on our
fantasy romance stories as well.*



Captain Erickson

Lightning splits the darkening sky in two as the pelting rain comes down hard on us. Thunder cracks like a whip, drowning out the cries of my prisoners.

I stand on deck, watching my men scurry back and forth, loading the Trident to the brim with barrels of essentials.

Alcohol.

Flour.

Hard cheeses and molasses.

Dried beans and rice and more alcohol.

If there is one thing we stock more than water, it is alcohol for my officers and the rare drink for the hard-working crew.

The cries continue to cut through the air. I move to look out onto the docks, my eyes narrowing on the line of bought whores and prisoners from Morda.

Some will be bait for the monsters at sea.

Others...bait for men like me.

My eyes trail over the women, sodden from the water, skin blue, lips trembling as they sniffle and cry, the weight of reality crushing down on them.

I hate when they cry. I want to bark at them to stop. Yet my body responds in different ways to the sound, and the self-loathing returns in full force.

It's *their* fault that I feel this way.

Their fault I have no control over my senses.

It is a demon I constantly fight to vanquish, though somewhere along the way, the demon has taken command over me.

Time does that to you.

The bracelet on my wrist reminds me that time corrupts you, makes you forget that you were ever good and pure.

It's why I must take my son, James, home and keep him out of the sea. Let him live a normal life while I shoulder the weight of destruction my demon wields.

As my gaze darts from one crying face to the next, I feel a shiver run down my spine as my eyes connect to a pale woman, her body tall, yet rigid. She's wrapped in a long wool coat down to her ankles. It is not cut for a woman. It does not hug her frame like the barely clothed women standing in line with her. I wonder why Kalis, my second in command, bought her.

He is my buyer at the flesh markets, and he knows what my crew desire. She doesn't fit the typical description of the whores he selects.

As my eyes continue to run the length of her, searching for her appeal, her red hair captures my attention. Drenched and curled, it falls all around her, stark even in the darkness that's encroaching.

Unlike the others, she's not crying. Her stony face is hard to read, but I catch the way she turns to gaze guardedly at the officers as they walk up and down the line of them, scolding the others to shut up.

I'm not close enough to detect her fear.

Though, I want to be.

I want to look into her eyes, know the color of them, and if they're wide and rimmed with unshed emotion.

Now that's one we must take a closer look at, the demon inside me whispers, flooding my body with desire. My fingers itch to touch her flesh, to dig my nails into the soft skin as I—

I shut my eyes for a moment and take a deep breath. I force myself to turn away from her—from the others. Away from all of them as they finish loading up my ship for a long and arduous journey into the jaws of hell.

For now, I push the demon down, letting the image of the red-headed vixen fade from my mind as I refocus on what needs to be done before we set sail.

CHAPTER 2

Hali

The wind whips around me as I walk up the gangway, my eyes taking in the details of the ship and the angry sea it floats on.

The notorious ship's name is the Trident, and there's a bad omen that surrounds it. Faded black letters across the bow tell me this ship has been used for many sails, weathered many storms, yet it sets a shiver through me, noticing the black shadow hovering above the surface of the water, whipping around the monstrous ship.

I hold in a shaky breath as I follow the others onto a deck and into a line along the gunwale. My head dips downward, eyes cast to my feet as the rest of us board. Although I suspect the men and women boarding the Trident are no longer looked at as people, since we fetched a rather decent price.

Nausea roils in my stomach as I think about the disgusting building I snuck into after following the ship's trail to the Isle of Morda—which is no easy feat.

I exhaled a shaky breath as I peered into the room from the darkened corner I hid in. I made it just in time to watch the chief mates of every ship docked come and make their selections, stocking their vessels with whores and prisoners to do the jobs not even their crew want to tend to.

The moment I saw Captain Erickson's second-in-command step forward to make his selections, I emerged from the shadows, pulling the scarf from my hair to reveal the vivid hue beneath it.

As expected, his eyes almost immediately drifted to me, and as I averted eye contact to imitate a sign of respect, I began to hear the whispers around me as I caught the attention of others.

“Who is she?”

“Where did she come from?”

A bittersweet smile pulled at my lips, knowing I was one step closer to ridding another Erickson from this world.

“I’ll take that one. The redhead.” The chief mate had a deeper voice than I imagined him to, and he was much closer than he was a moment ago.

Someone moved behind me and pushed into my back, attaching a note to me indicating I’d been sold.

Now, the same shoes I recognize from the flesh-house stand before me.

“This is the one I told you about, Captain.” His deep voice has a level of smugness to it.

“Look at me, whore.” Another deep baritone voice commands, and without hesitation, my eyes flit upward, instantly locking with a man I’ve only heard about. A man who has haunted my nightmares.

Biting my tongue, I force myself to stay quiet, even if it burns my very soul.

He’s ruggedly handsome, his dark eyes mystical with swirls of auburn, and a fresh dusting of facial hair covering his sharp jawline. He stands tall, his frame well built and muscular, poorly hidden beneath a pressed blouse.

It maddens me how attractive he is. Someone so evil shouldn’t have the Goddess-given gift of being easy on the eyes.

Captain Erickson’s eyes rake down my body. Everywhere he looks, my skin burns like hot coals pressed against it. Reaching up, he grasps my chin between his thumb and finger, tilting my head from side to side to get a better look.

Anger seethes within, and so badly I want to rip away from his hold. Yet, I feel the familiar surge of desire ignite low in my belly. His gaze is like a separate touch altogether, warming me in places I didn't expect. It only serves to enrage me further.

"Not like the others you typically purchase," he muses as he releases me, his voice low and curious.

Swept by another flicker of desire, I bite my tongue harder, and the metallic tang of blood stings my taste buds.

"I thought you might fancy this one," the man from the flesh market, Kalis, says jubilantly. "She looks much... *cleaner*...than the rest."

"Yes. Almost like she doesn't belong," Captain Erickson replies, never taking his eyes off me.

My heart lunges into my throat at his words, fearing that the ruse may be up sooner than I imagined.

Still, I remain calm as they talk about me like I'm not there.

Captain Erickson's eyes narrow slightly, raking down my body once more. When they meet mine again, he nods once as though silently answering his own question before he says it. "You will join me tonight for dinner. Someone will fetch you when it's time."

He doesn't wait for a response. Why would he? The man didn't even ask for my name. In his eyes, he owns me like he owns the ship that is my new prison, and that's all there is to it. He rips his gaze from mine and walks away, ignoring the rest of the men and women he's summoned to this ship.

Once his back is to me, I can breathe again.

My hope of catching the captain's attention fell into place much faster than I imagined it would—a relief that settles deep in my bones.

Now, I just need to make it until dinner.



NAUSEA ROLLED through me as a crewmate grabbed my arm forcefully, yanking me out of the line to escort me below deck before pushing me into a dingy room with a threadbare cot and a bucket to urinate in. Then the crewmate smiled, all browning teeth and gums and said, "I'll be back when the Captain's ready for you."

The double entendre way he said it made me feel cheap when I should be feeling powerful.

I'm a siren. I am powerful. And my plan is falling perfectly into place.

As the man's footsteps disappeared down the corridor, and silence fell outside my door, I began to pace. The men were still moving around, but not along my corridor. I could hear the heavy footsteps above my head and the distant shouts as orders were being made, and the crew were still above deck to manage the ship on its route.

I might be able to slip out before they're brought back down.

Though risky, as quietly as I could, I snuck from my chambers to look for the one person who will ease my terror-stricken soul and reassure me we're on the right track.

I needed to know if he had made it aboard.

I couldn't bear otherwise.

Now, the worn wooden planks groan below my feet as I tiptoe through the passageway, holding my breath as I pass each door, knowing one wrong step—one noise too loud—could alert others of my presence.

If I'm caught out of my chambers, I'll surely be escorted straight to the prisoners' quarters.

It's a wonder I wasn't tossed into them with the rest of the women they brought onto this goddess forsaken ship.

My heart tugs in the familiar way it does when I think of him as I drag my fingers against the wall, willing my magic to sense him as it so frequently does.

We have a plan. If he didn't make it on board—

I can't even bear to think about it. Carrying out our plans alone is unfathomable.

A darkness settles in the passageway, the light from the sun diminishing beyond the horizon as it sets. Dinner with the captain will be within the hour, I'm sure of it, which drastically limits my time to search.

With every advancing step, the dread settles.

He's not here. I can't feel him. What if he didn't—

A cool hand slams into my mouth, the arm it belongs to curling around from behind my neck as I'm pulled through a threshold that wasn't opened just moments before. My heart seizes in terror. As the door clicks shut behind me, I'm trapped in the darkness of the room and pushed back suddenly against the door.

Dizzy, a whimper climbs up my throat. Without notice, warm lips replace the hand, a tongue sinking into my mouth as hips press into mine. I know this mouth like I know myself, and a rush of emotion surfaces in me. He locks me against the wall to keep me from moving.

Kai's scent envelops me—ocean salt and sandalwood—and I moan against his lips as I finally allow myself to relax and melt in his arms.

We kiss until air is necessary, but the moment he inhales a breath, his lips are on my neck, peppering hot kisses against me.

"We did it," he breathes against my skin. "We're both on the Trident. We're going to take Erickson down, Hali."

The hardness between his legs strains against the thin cotton fabric of his trousers, and he circles his hips, digging into the channel between my thighs. Instantly, a rush of fevered desire pulsates through me.

My nails bite into his shoulders as he hikes my petticoat up higher, hitching my leg at his waist. "I was so scared you didn't make it on."

Kai licks up the column of my neck before finding my lips. His kiss is bruising. Pulling back abruptly, his mossy, seafoam green eyes land on mine. “I did, and I’ve already heard chatter about the fire-haired beauty that has captivated the Captain’s attention. I knew the moment he laid eyes on you, the plan would be set in motion. Even in human form, you’re magnetizing.”

Tipping my head back against the wall, I allow my eyes to shut as I bask in the way his fingers rake over the skin of my thigh and over to my center.

I’m wet for him, like always, my core clenching on air, desperate to feel him inside of me. My hips roll forward, chasing his touch.

“Selfishly, I had hoped it wouldn’t work,” I tell him breathlessly as his fingers skate over my wetness. “I don’t know how I’ll be able to act as though I don’t already belong to another.”

He shifts slightly, pulling his hand away from me as he takes himself out of his trousers. The smooth, hard tip of his shaft rubs against my entrance, smearing my arousal around him. With the opposite hand, he pushes the messy tendrils of my hair away from my face, then lowers his palm, collaring my neck as he thrusts his hips upward and sinks into me.

“You’ll do just fine,” he grunts as he pistons into me. “By whatever means necessary, you will lure him into infatuation with you, Hali. Then, when the time is right, we’ll use the shift and eliminate him for good.”

He reaches down beneath my dress and his fingers find the bundle of nerves between my folds that he knows I love him to stimulate. His fingers move in time with his thrusts.

“Kai,” I moan, feeling my body take me higher as I drift toward my release.

“I know. I missed you so much. Two days without you is too long.”

“Kiss me,” I beg, lifting my head so I can reach his lips.

“We need to be quick,” he reminds me before pressing his mouth to mine.

The moment our tongues tangle, my orgasm rips through me. Kai swallows down my cries as he chases his own release, finding it just moments after.

He stills inside of me, his shaft twitching its release as he fills me. His forehead comes to rest against mine as we catch our breath, both satiated and full of hope.

“I love you, Hali. This will also be over soon. The shift is in less than a week. We can do this. *You* can do this.”

“I can do this,” I repeat as he pulls out and drops my leg. “I love you.”

After readjusting my dress, he kisses the side of my temple. His hands linger on my face, his fingertips brushing along the side of my cheek. “My brave siren.”

I bloom beneath his touch, his words making my heart hiccup inside me.

The silence of the ship around us whispers the truths and the fate of our mission.

Kai cracks the door, peering left, then right, before pulling it open a bit more. “Go,” he whispers, not taking his eyes off the corridor. “I’ll find you soon, I promise.”

As I step past him, his hand grips my arm, encircling my wrist. Tugging me back to him, he presses one final, hard kiss against my lips. I melt into him in that quick moment, my fears muted by his presence.

Then I sneak back down the passageway toward the room I’ve been assigned.

Captain Erickson

The dining table in my quarters is set up by the time we have loaded the ship and set off. Sitting down at it, I go over the books with the ship accountant, calculating costs.

“The whores will not fetch for much,” Bridger muses as he scribbles down more numbers. “They are already costing us enough in food.”

“I did not buy them to make a profit,” I return, edgily. “They are consumables, like the perishables we keep.”

Bridger nods. “Yes, to be used and discarded then.”

“Precisely.”

“Then they will not be here for the full journey.”

“No.” I would never have them set foot in Goldspince. What happens aboard a ship between men remains on the ship.

Gluttony is our greatest sin.

Drink.

Fight.

And fuck.

Regardless of our station, of our marriage vows and honor. These are the ghosts that haunt us later in life. Or always, in my case.

“The prisoners are in good health,” Bridger continues, thoughtfully. “Some of them are extraordinarily formidable. A few have been selected for the grunt crew. We’ll see if they earn their keep, or walk the plank.”

I nod. "Indeed."

I watch him as he scribbles away at the journal, filling it with numbers. My jaw tightens as I reflect on today's purchases. There's a lot that won't make it to Goldspince, I surmise.

For another dark secret I carry is that I am a slaver.

The men I bought will be sold at premium cost, and my pockets will be full for it. Half the men I have as crew will either be killed or sold to another merchant vessel, the truth of our activities either dying with them or remaining forever buried.

Oftentimes a pristine kingdom that prides itself on free will and autonomy is devoured by corruption from deep within, but it has not stained my kingdom's name, and it has been this way as long as I can remember. It must carry on.

After Bridger is done, I excuse him.

I journal for a little while, trying to keep today's activities fresh in my mind, but then I begin to write about what has been truly on my mind.

Red hair like glowing fire. I have not seen such a color in all my years. Usually dull or copper red. Never that vibrant. Steely eyes and full lips. She looked directly at me when I demanded it. I detected defiance in her as our eyes locked. She is unusual, and I am riveted by it.

I pause my writing, frowning now because she was too clean, wasn't she?

Where did she come from? She couldn't be from Morda. If she had been, she'd have been spoiled, and I have not sent the doctor yet to look her over to know whether her virginity is intact.

She'd fetch a pretty penny if she is.

But then again, I would want her for myself.

Don't I already?

“Dinner,” I demand, finished with my journaling. My curiosity has been aroused, and I will not be able to extinguish it until I look upon her face and understand her predicament.

“The girl,” I add tightly to the crewman that cleans around me. “Deliver her and then leave us be.”

“Yes, Captain,” he says.

Putting the journal away, I quickly tidy myself. I want to be presentable, though I’m unsure why it weighs on me that I want to please her. Or at least appear desirable.

It could be my vanity, or that for the first time in recent memory, I want to attain a unique possession and I need to win her obedience as well. I don’t want sniveling from her straightaway.

I don’t aim to break my toy without learning what makes it tick first.

Wearing my finest black tunic with the leather trim, my belt is sheathed with my largest dagger. I leave my hair down, perhaps to hide the light scars scattered across my face, not wanting to frighten her. I recognize that I am grizzly to look at under direct lighting, so I keep the candles burning low.

By the time she arrives with the jailer, I am seated and ready for her. He practically drags her across the room, and she lets out a pained grunt.

Immediately, I don’t like that he’s the reason for that noise.

“I did not say to hurt her,” I growl, glaring at the nameless man as he pauses, his face blanching at me.

“Very sorry, Captain,” he quickly apologizes. “It’s just... she’s not been very tame.”

My chest dips with satisfaction. Gazing at her, she slowly edges closer to her seat across from me. She is still hidden under the filthy robe she’s in.

“Take her cloak off,” I demand. “Then you may leave.”

Instantly, her cloak is ripped off her curvy body. She jumps, her arms hugging her chest as she stands there in the

center of the room, trembling like a leaf in a plain, white dress. It's form fitting above the waist—especially along her cleavage, where her tits are pushed up high—but billows past it, ending at her ankles.

Leaning back in my chair, it shudders under the weight of me.

My eyes trail her red hair, my desire growing thicker as I imagine gripping her hair and forcing her to look up at me.

Instead, void of emotion, I say, “Have a seat.”

She does as she's told, though she doesn't look directly at me. Not like she did when I surveyed her from up close. She takes a seat, and her movements are fluid. Much too confident for a being that shakes like she's terrified. Something about those delicate movements makes me wary.

“What is your name?”

“Hali,” she whispers.

“Look at me and repeat your name.”

She lifts her head, and her eyes dart to meet mine. I suppress a groan of satisfaction. She is tragically beautiful, and obedient thus far.

“Hali,” she repeats quietly.

“Where do you come from?”

“Morda.”

Keeping my voice casual, I repeat, “Where do you come from?”

She is quiet for a moment. “Morda.”

My eyes narrow on her. She is not like any woman I have seen come from an isle as depraved and deplorable as Morda.

Before I respond, there's a knock. The door opens and a flurry of dishes appear. Their smell instantly fills the air of the fresh fish and fruit we were able to grab from the markets before we set off.

Still, my eyes haven't left hers.

Her body perks up as the plates are set on the table before us. Her eyes run along the many assortments of food, her mouth parting. A dead giveaway of her hunger.

Good. I can work with hunger.

The second the servers are gone, I pluck a grape off a vine from a nearby plate and plop it into my mouth. “I am not known as a patient man, Red. Either you tell me the truth of your origins, or I will make you watch me eat.”

Her eyes widen. Shaking her head lightly, she averts her eyes from me again. “I am not lying. I am truly from Morda.”

“And I am the son of a whore,” I retort sarcastically.

“Please,” she says quickly. “I have been there for many years.”

“Whoring?”

“No, but...” Her face tightens, a look of pain crossing her delicate features. “My mother was.”

I begin my rapid-fire questions. “Who is your mother?”

“Her name was Salma.”

“Where does she work?”

“She worked at the Madame’s Manor.”

“And where were you?”

“In the basement, earning my keep.”

“Explain what that means.”

“It’s a brothel,” she explains to me now, like it’s an obvious question. “I was in training.”

“To be a whore,” I say doubtfully, still not believing the words in her story. She is too well-kept, too ethereal to be a common whore in a brothel. Someone would have noticed her. Someone would have ruined her by now.

She nods. “Yes.”

Eyeing her, I sit silent for a moment, watching for signs of suspicious behavior. “You would have fetched your Madame a

pretty penny.”

“Not after my mother died. She accumulated debt, and I was going to be made to take on that debt.”

“So?”

She shrugs. “So...I ran.”

“Then what?”

Her face falls, clearly a little put off by all my questions. “Within twenty-four hours, I was caught by a slaver and placed on the market.”

I pour whiskey into my glass and take a large gulp, thinking about her story. I turn it over in my head many times, still disbelieving it. “How did your mother die?”

“She’d been ill for a long time.”

“Yet, she was servicing men?”

Her eyes narrow on mine, and I see that defiance poke out from beneath her meek expression. “How else were we to eat? You think indecent men care what they’re rutting in?”

I grin at her, surprising her. “No, I suppose we don’t.”

She looks away, disturbed by my expression. She folds her hands together tightly, channeling her fears there.

Yes, I detect the fear in her strongly now. She is unsure.

I take another gulp of my whiskey. “Have a bite, Red. You earned it.”

She doesn’t budge, though for the briefest of moments, she peeks down at the food in front of her..

“Not hungry?” I press. “It is poor manners to ignore an invitation by the Captain of a very fine vessel as this.”

“It’s not that,” she whispers. “I’m just scared.”

I cough out a laugh. “Are you now?”

Scared is not the emotion she elicits.

“Yes.”

“Tell me what you’re scared of?”

“You.” She swallows, squeezing at her hands again.

“I suppose you’ve heard of me then.”

“Yes.”

“You’re right to be scared,” I tell her. “But I’m not hurting you, am I?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“So eat. As a whore’s daughter, you *must* be hungry.”

I have seen what hunger has done to people. They would crawl over dead bodies to eat. If she is truly a whore’s daughter, she must not know what half of these foods taste like. She could be scared, but her hunger would overcome it.

To my delight, she does not pick up a single fork or utensil as her fingers dig into the roast chicken. Her fingers tremble, hunger winning over her as she ravenously pulls off a strip of the meat and eats it. She doesn’t even look at me now, her attention focused purely on the meal before her. I watch intently as her eyes squeeze shut and a groan of satisfaction escapes from her lips.

No manners.

No etiquette.

Oh, I think I like my little Red already.

CHAPTER 4

Hali

The captain watches me eat with a look that's unrecognizable—something between disgust and lust, and the way his eyes trace my fingers as they brush my lips while putting food into my mouth makes me think he's feeling the latter.

I realize I'm eating like a woman starved, but he hasn't left me much of a choice. If I'm to continue the charade of a whore's daughter, I have to act as though I haven't had a proper meal, well, ever. It's not a lie, either. Food had been scarce on Morda.

Juices from the meat slide down my hand, and as much as it pains me, I don't wipe them off. Instead, I reach for the grapes and bring a cluster to my plate. Pulling one off, I bring it to my lips, slowly biting the fruit in half as I gaze up at the Captain with hooded eyes.

He openly stares at me with a smirk on his lips, his hand still resting on the silver fork beside his plate that he hasn't picked up.

"When was the last time you've eaten?" he probes, his voice softer than it was just moments before.

It's off putting—the change in his voice. It causes me to pause.

My gaze meets his. Hesitating, I pick up the napkin resting in my lap and wipe my hands. A low rumble in my throat helps me to clear it before I answer, but I'm at a loss for words, surprised and drawing a blank with my lie.

“A while,” I answer tentatively, hoping my vagueness will be enough.

He says nothing and simply studies me. It intensifies my discomfort.

Squirming under the weight of his gaze, I place the napkin, and my hands, in my lap.

“Well. Go on then,” he says after another few moments, tipping his chin toward me. “Eat, Red.”

I’m hesitant to return to the food, but this time when I take a bite, he picks up his fork and takes one too. We eat in silence, but I feel his eyes on me the entire time. It’s like he’s waiting for something, and I wonder what.

“So, Captain,” I say once my plate is clean and my belly is full. “Why did you request my company for dinner?”

“It was not a request.”

“You didn’t have to feed me to get what you eventually want...”

It’s bold to probe him like this, but the wine the captain has plied me with has gone to my head a little.

My breath hitches when I visibly see his demeanor switch from curious to captivated. His eyes darken, the smirk on his face deepening as he leans forward. His middle and pointer fingers run tantalizingly over the grooves of the crystal tumbler housing the remaining drops of his whiskey.

Something about the movement forces me to squeeze my legs together, igniting an ache in my core. His confidence is hard to ignore. There’s nothing courteous or gentlemanly about the way he stares at me, but, stranger than that, there’s nothing perverse about it, either.

Suddenly, the Captain stands, placing a palm on the table between us as he leans forward. His other hand reaches to my face, and he grasps my chin between his fingers, tilting my head back.

“Call it curiosity,” he muses, staring deep into my eyes.

My heart skips, and with it, my thoughts are instantly pulled to Kai.

By whatever means necessary, his voice echoes through my mind. But he doesn't know what the Captain is like. What *this* is like. Intimate and strange...I expected a rougher touch than this.

"Only curiosity?" I wonder, my voice low and breathy. I'm not sure if I meant to sound like that, but it lures the captain in further.

His eyes drop to my lips for a moment before he narrows them. Releasing his grip on me, he straightens. "Yes, Red. Nothing more than curiosity."

But his body deceives him. Behind the confines of his pants is the clear outline of his hardened bulge, and I know he's affected.

Pride blooms inside of me. He's caught interest faster than I imagined he would. Perhaps it has something to do with the effects of my siren call, though it is far less potent than during the shift.

Still, I know how to toy with a man and leave them wanting more. Taking one last sip of the wine in front of me, I meet his gaze again. "I appreciate the lovely meal, as well as the company, but I'm quite tired." I feign a yawn. "Perhaps we can continue our conversation another night, Captain? It's been such a long day. I fear I'll be poor company if I linger any longer."

I try to hide the lump in my throat as I swallow it down.

Coming across as timid is part of the allure. Portraying a mousy and unsure daughter of a whore who lacks confidence is the role I must remember to take on.

The Captain needs someone to fix—to save.

But it's hard to completely diminish my personality, and again, I've been too bold. Speaking to a ship captain like this, so brazenly... under the assumption he hasn't called me to fuck me, either. I'm sure others have been thrown overboard for less.

It's as though he can see through my cracks as his lips purse in contemplation. His eyes sparkle with unspoken words—silent promises that both intrigue me and make my stomach churn. Is he going to demand my company? My breath thins at the likelihood of it.

But then he relaxes back into his chair, his tone hard to read when he mutters, "Sure, Red." He raises his hand and snaps his fingers loudly. "KAUPMAN," he booms, snapping his fingers again.

The door immediately opens, but when the man steps forward, it's the familiar, loving eyes of Kai I see, not a man named Kaupman. They soften for a moment as they sweep over my body, his shoulders visibly relaxing when he sees me, but then his face hardens and he turns his attention to Captain Erickson.

"Aye, Captain. Kaupman asked me to assist while he tended to the crew on the port side."

"And you are?" He looks angry, and I sense that he doesn't like when things are not orderly.

"The name's Kai. Recruited from Morda, Captain."

A thick silence settles in the room as he scrutinizes Kai—sizing him up. I can practically see the wheels in his head turning and it makes me nervous. So easily, Erickson could kill Kai right here and now.

He could kill me, too.

A shudder rolls through me at the thought.

"Very well. See to it that she makes it back to her room. Immediately."

There's finality in the Captain's words, and I stand, curtsying as a sign of respect. "Thank you again, Captain. Goodnight."

He watches me without a word, and I hold my breath as I cross the room toward Kai. It isn't until I'm stepping through the threshold that Captain Erickson speaks, sending a chill down my spine from his words.

“Sweet dreams, Red. I’ll fetch for you soon.”

Looking over my shoulder, I see him rolling the handle of a dagger around his fingertips, playing with the weapon in a way that sends a clear message.

Refusal is not an option.

CHAPTER 5

Hali

Kai acts gruff with me. His hold on my arm is firm as he leads me away from the Captain's quarters. His movements are sharp. I feel forced, tripping over my feet as we move. He doesn't speak once to me, and for a second, it almost feels like one of the Captain's men is guiding me further into the belly of this ship. It's easy to pretend that it is.

I look down, hyper-aware of the many bodies we're squeezing past. The ship is large, but the corridors are narrow, and there are countless rooms and stations. The stench of rot is heavy in some pockets of the ship. Musk and men—so many of them—and aged wood. The only pleasant part about it is the scent of the sea hangs over us thickly, and I can endure the other smells if it means I can smell my home.

I yearn for my shift. To be at peace in the sea. Other sirens hunger for the hunt. To bring down the sinful ships that trek our ocean home. I understand it. I'm here for the same purpose. I hunger for it, too, but I don't think that's all there is to life.

I have a different purpose now. After my revenge, I want freedom in the form of starry skies and sandy beaches. I'm so close, I can taste it.

And yet after my personal encounter with the Captain, I'm scrambled. I'll be spending a while processing it.

"Aye, what compartment are you putting this one in?" a sailor asks, stopping us in our tracks. I glance up briefly. The man is unkempt, his shirt half tucked in soiled looking

trousers. I can smell the alcohol on his breath and fight back the bile climbing up my throat.

“What’s it to you?” Kai retorts, his tone cold.

“I wanna visit this one. Been the talk of the ship. What whore compartment is she going to be in, sailor? You can’t have her for yourself.”

“She’s to be untouched and in her own cell,” Kai says simply. “Captain’s orders.”

“She can have her own cell, then, and Cap can have her tomorrow, but right now,” —a hand gropes at my bottom, and I let out a startled gasp as the man’s breaths blow closer in my face— “we’d like to have a spin before he gets to have his fun. What do you say, poppet?”

The man’s hand instantly leaves me. I hear a sickening crack before I see what’s going on. It happens so fast, I’ve barely blinked. Kai let go of me and is holding the man against the wall of the corridor. There’s a loud bang, and the man lets out a yelp, his hand moving to the back of his head.

Kai’s tone is deadly quiet as he holds the man in place, but the warning is there. “Captain would have your head—as would I—if you so much as touch a hair on her head. An order is a fucking order.”

Letting go of the man, Kai stalks back to me and grabs my arm painfully, shoving me forward.

I let out a cry as he snaps, “Silence, whore. And move.”

My feet move quickly. I feel the eyes of the men we pass drag along my skin like slimy tentacles, and I realize the precarious situation we’re in.

I’m presumed to be a whore, surrounded by violent, drunk men. It dawns on me that in this moment, I may be safer in the Captain’s company.

Kai’s body looms over me as we walk. He’s so big—bigger than most of the men aboard. As we pass, they look at me with lustful eyes, but they give a wide berth to him,

painfully aware that he could squash them like a bug should he want to.

His aura is menacing, and if I didn't know him like the back of my hand, I might even be second-guessing his intent as he leads me sharply to another section of the ship.

It's quieter here. The compartments are filled with prisoners who aren't free roaming like others.

They're captives. The prized women that were taken against their will to serve a purpose. But even from here, I can hear them beg not for food, but for gala green.

When we approach my room, I realize that we've made it all the way to the very end room of this section of the ship. Kai roughly places me behind him as he undoes the lock on the door. When he opens it, he grabs me and shoves me in so hard I let out a sharp yell.

His face is dark when he growls unnecessarily loud, "What did you just say to me, whore? You think because you've dined with the Captain that you're somehow above us?"

What the hell is his problem?

I glare back at him, confused, but he gives me a look that I interpret as *'play along'*. Shrieking, I say, "No! I swear it—"

"And now you're spitting vile words at me? Why, I oughtta fucking cuff you to your bed."

He comes barreling into the cramped room, his face full of darkness as he slams the door shut behind him. I'm supposed to play along, but he's so convincing in his venom, I back up, my heart in my throat as a swirl of wary thoughts invade me. For a moment, I wonder if I've misunderstood.

But this is Kai.

My Kai.

He'd never hurt me.

Charging toward me like a tsunami, I don't have time to form a response or even attempt to raise my hands to protect

myself from his rapid advances before his mouth slams against mine.

His kiss is so intense, my head spins as his large hands wrap around my thighs in a squeezing, possessive way. Lifting me, my back slams against the wall, and a sharp pain runs down my spine. The desire I feel overwhelms the pain, as Kai works my mouth like a fucking god, his tongue lapping against my own.

When he pulls away, my breaths are hard and fast. I look at him needily, but I attempt to glare. “You almost had me,” I whisper-hiss at him.

“Good.” He bites at my bottom lip, and I quiver.

“Not good,” I retort through a half-moan. “You were so rough with me, Kai.”

“Yeah.”

“And mean.”

His green eyes meet mine now, and the edge is still present in his gaze. “I have to be. You’re a whore on this ship, Hali. To these sick drunks, you’re to be the Captain’s personal slave.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“You’ve been playing your role well, too, haven’t you?” he prods just then. “I saw the way the Captain looked at you. He was mesmerized.”

“You knew that already.”

“It still bothers me greatly.”

I can hear the barely contained anger in his voice. He doesn’t like that the Captain had eyes just for me. Maybe he was hoping I’d come onboard without capturing his attention, despite it being our plan. It’s personal.

I wrap my arms around him and press my lips against his, hoping to bring his focus back to me. To *us*. He instantly returns the kiss, his muscled body pressing further into me. His scent clouds around me, reminding me of the deep ocean water.

Kai is menacing when he wants to be, but I bring him to his knees. He yields to me, his rage contained, gentling at my touch. I love that about him. How fiercely devoted he is. From the moment we met all those years ago when he noticed me alone in that tavern, he was obsessed with me. I was running from my past, the anguish still present to this very day, and he was determined to get me to face it.

And now I am.

I feel his hardness press against me, and I let out a soft moan. My fingers dig into his shoulders.

“Kai,” I whisper, barely aware of anything beyond his touch.

He eases back from my lips, exploring my body with his hands. My eyes are shut tight, but I feel his gaze on me. As he tugs my dress up, I quake when his fingers brush along my core.

“Wet already, Hali?” he murmurs, licking at my bottom lip. “Or were you already dripping for *him*?”

My eyes flash open. Glaring at him, though, I feel my cheeks grow hot.

Was I affected by the Captain? *Yes, maybe I was.*

I hesitate for a beat of a second—the truth stunning me. The delay of my denial has Kai gripping me even tighter.

He kisses me again, but it’s bruising this time. He is barely holding onto his rage as he growls, “Answer me, Hals.”

But I don’t. I *can’t*. I don’t even understand what I’m feeling, myself.

Captain Erickson was supposed to be grotesque. Revolting.

That’s what I’m supposed to feel about him. Nothing but disgust.

Yet, there’s such an edge to him I’ve never encountered in a man before, not even Kai.

The Captain is ruthless, but not in an off-putting way. He’s the type of villain you want to dig beneath the layers of simply

because their darkness intrigues you.

What makes him the way he is? Has he always been a horribly cruel man? And why hasn't he directed that cruelty to me? He didn't have to let me go to my room. He could have easily held me captive in his quarters. Does it even matter?

I feel self-loathing at these thoughts. I'm betraying not only Kai, but myself and our mission.

"I want you," I fervently tell Kai, this time nothing hard in my voice. "Just you, Kai. Right here, right now, I'm not his prisoner or a whore on this doomed ship. I'm *yours*."

"Then make me believe it," he retorts, and I can hear his desperation. He is coming apart at the seams. We may be away from Captain Erickson, but he still dominates this space and our thoughts.

"Take me," I urge. "Let me show you it's only you I want."

I barely finish speaking when Kai acts on those words. We're a quick mess of harsh kisses. He pulls down his trousers, and I pull down the front of my dress, exposing my breasts to him. He groans low in his throat and thrusts into me, his mouth locked around my nipple. Shutting my eyes, my head hangs back as he fucks me fast and hard.

"Hali," he whispers harshly, demanding for my mouth again.

I open my eyes and accept his kiss, but it's all tongue and fierce desire. Sucking at it, I feel his cock grow harder inside me. The strings of his tunic are loose, and as he fucks me, I can see his muscled torso strain with the quickness of his movements.

It takes everything to be quiet. I want to cry out. I want to moan and scream his name. Instead, I bury my nails into his shoulders and bite at his skin, sinking my teeth into his shoulder to drown out my sounds.

I explode around him quickly. The orgasm is so sudden, I quake, gushing around his length as he follows after me. His cock stills, pulsating as he comes.

Burying his mouth into my hair, he muffles a long groan.

Not giving me time to come down from my high, he immediately withdraws from me, setting me down on wobbly feet. He's sweet enough to tidy my hair, but there's a tormented look in his eyes as he peers down at me.

"It's okay," I assure him, heart still beating strong in my chest. "You can go."

"Hali, we can just leave," he says, his voice breaking as the words rush out of him. "I can bring down one of the little boats and we can be out of here—"

I cover his mouth with my hand, silencing him. Staring into his eyes, conviction is strong in my voice when I say, "In two days' time, we'll be off this bastard ship and Captain Erickson will be dead. He'll be paying for his sins against our kind in the afterlife, and we'll be free, Kai."

He nods, and I see his fight return to him. He looks more centered now, though there's still a hint of conflict in him as he looks at me one last time.

Kai is hesitant to go—he doesn't want to. He knows what it means. That I'll be in this room, my purpose strictly determined by Erickson.

A nearby bang sounds, coming from down the corridor. My eyes widen, and Kai's face returns to the cool look from before. He doesn't say a word.

Our time is over.

He leaves immediately, slamming the door shut behind him, and I'm trapped. Alone again.

A captive.

The *Captain's* captive.

I ignore the strange current I feel at the thought of him.

Erickson's going to call for me. Maybe sometime later in the night. Maybe in the morning. And I'll have to dazzle him. Put on the show and play the part.

I'll mesmerize him right before I watch him drown in his own blood.

Hali

The water calls to me.

Moisture floats in through the small open porthole, carried in by the light breeze. It rests on my skin, beckoning me and begging for my attention.

I daydream of its cool embrace, swimming deep into the ocean as my fin cascades me further and into its depths. Creatures of the sea join me as we glide through the schools of fish, dipping down to where the coral rests on the ocean floor.

To my dismay, the best I can do is dream of the place I call home and count down the days until I'm reunited with the waves, and the sea salt, and the familiarity. Laying on the bed in the quarters Erickson assigned me to, I wait, staring up at the planked ceiling and studying the woodgrain.

I had anticipated being called upon immediately after leaving my dinner with the captain, but that was almost two full days ago. Hours upon hours have passed since Kai left and locked me in this room, and it's all I can do—sit and wonder how many hours have passed.

Earlier, shortly after sunup, I heard chains being unwound as we anchored somewhere. But the only view from my porthole shows me the shimmering ocean, and no clue as to where we might be.

Now, the sun sets from a long, restless day stuck in these chambers with nothing to do except think.

Think about how, sometime mere hours from now, I will seek my revenge. When today turns to tomorrow, the shift will

transform me to my true form and I will use my magic to end Captain Erickson and finally extinguish the Erickson bloodline. I think about Kai, and what this will mean for us.

We've been talking about taking the ultimate commitment—our final union—once we completed our mission.

Our families expect it.

Our *kind* expects it.

I'm jolted from my thoughts by the sound of keys jingling outside of my door. Sitting up, I shuffle up the bed and lean against the rusty metal frame that extends from the base and up the wall.

The door flies open, its heavy wood slamming against the wall of the chambers, and from the shadows, Kai steps into my given space carrying a tray with a sparse plate of food and a glass of what appears to be water.

"Hi," he grins, jutting his leg backward to use the sole of his boot to close the door behind him. He brings the tray to my bed and sets it down as I blow out a breath.

"You scared me half to death," I scold, but it's overpowered by the growl of my stomach when the scent of the food hits it.

"Sorry," he chuckles. "Brought you dinner. Bread's a little stale and the soup's probably cold, but it was the best I could do. Captain said not to feed the whores, but I swiped it when the shifts rotated. I wanted to come yesterday, Hali, but I couldn't... I'm so sorry."

Reaching for the bread, I rip a piece off with my teeth and chew slowly, processing Kai's words. "What do you mean, the captain said not to feed the whores?"

His shoulder shrugs. "I don't know, Hals, that's just what I was told by the guy in charge of me. I suspect they think a hungry whore will do anything." He pushes the tray toward me, his face twisting with disdain. "All I know is I wasn't going to let you starve, so here I am."

Lifting the bowl, I sip the soup. He was right—it is cold, and instead of it warming my insides, it sends a chill through my bones. But food is food, and after so long of not eating, I'm famished and will happily consume every last drop.

Kai must assume my chill is from the air, because he stands and goes to close the porthole. With his back to me, he asks, "Did he come for you?"

"No," I say before taking another gulp of the soup. "I expected him to, but he hasn't."

"Word on the ship has spread quickly of him taking a whore to his quarters two nights ago for dinner. The men are curious—I wonder if that is why he hasn't come for you."

"To avoid their attention?"

"More like a riot."

Shrugging, I rip the bread apart with my teeth.

"I fear you're in danger, Hals. The men who haven't caught a glimpse of you are desperate to. I can't protect you if I'm not with you."

"I'll be alright. I can take care of myself, Kai. You know this."

He sits on my bed and takes the bowl from my grasp, placing it on the tray. His hands cup my face, his thumbs brushing rhythmically over my cheekbones. "I do, but I also know what men like the ones on this ship are capable of. And you don't have your magic right now, Hali."

"I'll be fine," I stress, but even as I say the words, a ripple of doubt trickles through me, starting in my chest and blooming outward. "My magic is cresting. I can *feel* it, Kai. The shift is close."

"We only have some hours left. Are you ready?" Excitement dances in Kai's eyes, and his hands float down to my shoulders, kneading them lightly.

"Beyond ready. I can't wait for us to be off this ship and back in the ocean. That's all I've been thinking of today."

I'm acutely aware of Kai's fingers trailing down my body, moving torturously slow. My heart rate quickens, my tongue pokes out to wet my lips and his eyes lock on the movement.

"I just can't get enough of you," Kai groans, gripping my thigh punishingly as he takes my mouth with his.

Wasting no time, he pushes my undergarments down my thighs and plunges two fingers into my depths. I'm already soaked for his touch, and they glide in without any resistance. He groans again. "Fuck, Hals. After all these years, you've never not been ready for me. Such a good fucking girl for me. You love it when I stroke you from the inside, don't you?"

He repositions his hand, so the edge of his hand rubs against the sensitive bundle of nerves as he drives his fingers into me.

"Yes," I moan, tipping my head back. My legs spread wider. "Please, Kai. I need you inside me."

"With pleasure," he groans, using his free hand to push his trousers down so his length springs free. With his body, he urges me to lie back. In one thrust, he's inside me, and we're moving in unison.

"Goddess," he groans, and I slam my palm over his mouth.

"Shhhh."

His body is all hard against my soft curves and I rub my hands against the muscles in his shoulders, feeling every ridge beneath his tunic. The bed squeaks with every move, the noise filling the otherwise quiet space as we both fight to be quiet.

Boisterous laughter echoes through the hallway beyond my closed door and for a moment, Kai stiffens, his hips coming to a still. "The door isn't locked, Hali," he stammers, his voice in a whisper.

"*Finish*," I beg, my orgasm so close. The familiar tingles are erupting through my body as it tightens in anticipation, my toes curling against the raggedy blanket beneath us.

Kai shifts so he rests on his forearms as he looms over me. My heels dig into his lower back and my thighs tighten around

his middle. He resumes his thrusts and connects our mouths again in a messy, feverish kiss.

Whimpering, my body explodes, my core clenching around him. He groans as he chases his release, grunting as he finishes. As we catch our breath, he pushes the hair away from my face.

“I love you so much.” He presses another kiss to my lips and pulls out of me, and I wince at the loss of him.

“I love you, Kai. We have one more day, and then we’ll be off this ship and back to our life together.”

“I’m counting down the minutes,” he tells me as he stands and puts himself back together.

I sigh and sink my head deeper against the pillow. “Me too.”

“I’ll leave the food. Finish it, then hide it under your bed.” He reaches for the doorknob and pulls it open. Stepping through the threshold, he comes to an abrupt halt.

“Aye, whaddaya doin’ down ‘ere, Sailor?” An older man’s voice slurs from beyond the doorway.

“Fuck,” Kai curses, and I see him step forward quickly, wrapping his hands around the man’s head. In one fluid motion, Kai snaps the man’s neck and his body crumples to the ground.

I slap my hand over my mouth to hold in my reaction. Kai’s eyes quickly find mine from across the room.

“I had to,” is all he says.

Nodding repeatedly, I squeeze my eyes shut.

My kind may be considered monsters, but it’s still difficult for me to witness firsthand what we’re capable of at times. This man’s death came so unexpectedly, I’m caught off guard by it.

Kai slides his hands beneath the man’s body in preparation to lift him, before realizing the door is still open. He casts me one last quick glance before closing it, and then I’m left alone

to listen to the muffled sounds of him dragging a body down the hallway.



IT'S impossible to gauge how much time has passed since Kai left, but I finished my meal, stowed it beneath the bed, had time to pace, and watched the moon rise from the horizon to up high in the darkened sky.

I'm about to retire to my bed when footsteps draw near and catch my attention. I turn just in time to see the doorknob turn, and I realize then Kai may not have locked me in—an oversight since he had more pressing matters to attend to, such as the body he needed to dispose of.

A smile plays on my lips as I wait for him to come in. “Back so—” but my thought is cut off when a man, who is most certainly not Kai, comes in. “Who are you?”

He lets out a high-pitched whistle. “Well, well, now I see why the captain has taken a likin’ to ya. You’re quite a looker, dolly.”

Taking a few slow steps backward, I brace myself against the wall, ready to run—or fight—if I have to. “What do you want?” My voice is steady, but there’s a fear that slices through my stomach at the sight of this man.

He licks his lips, his greedy eyes dragging up and down my body. Finally, he rolls his eyes, as though he’s annoyed. “Captain sent me to fetch ya, and he’s timin’ me too. Let’s go, whore.”

“What? Now?” I stammer, but my feet are already guiding me across the room, knowing I don’t have much of a choice.

“Captain’s orders,” he says, gripping my arm tightly as he drags me from my chambers. Goddess, if I have to hear those words one more time.

Once outside my room, I realize how cold the night air is. Gooseflesh lines my skin and I shiver as we climb the stairs to the next level.

After we make a few turns, the corridor becomes familiar and to my surprise I stop resisting against the man's grasp now that I see he truly is bringing me to Erickson.

It shouldn't bring me comfort, but it does. There's anticipation now that I know I'll be seeing him. My own curiosity, perhaps.

His boney hand raps against the wood, and from the other side, I hear the Captain's muffled voice saying, "Enter."

The man who brought me here tosses the door open and shoves me inside, pulling it closed behind me. Blood rushes to my ears, the room muffling so the only thing I can hear is my own heartbeat as my gaze collides with the giant man that has me on edge.

The only light in his room is that of a candle housed in a lantern that sits on his bedside table. The shadows from the flame dance across his bare skin as he leans against his map desk.

My breath hitches as I take in the sight of him, his trousers hung low on his waist, feet bare, as is his shirtless chest.

He's beautiful. Utterly breathless.

It's truly such a shame I have to kill him.

I can't help myself as my gaze trails his body, admiring the hard plains of his abdomen, and the way it flexes as he breathes.

On his wrist, I notice a bracelet that catches my eye—something I hadn't noticed until now but am finding a strange curiosity to see it closer. It intrigues me, and there's a sensation buzzing through me simply from looking at it.

"Good evening," his low timbre voice slides across the room, and I lift my gaze to his. He's staring at me openly with a smirk on his face.

Swallowing thickly, I stow my nerves aside and lift my chin. "Captain."

"I hope you've found your quarters to be accommodating. Have you eaten?"

My blood turns to ice at his question, and Kai's words ring through my mind, reminding me of the captain's orders to not feed the whores today.

"No," I lie, bringing one hand to my stomach. "I'm starving."

He purses his lips and stalks toward me. With every step I hold my breath, not releasing it until he's crowding my space.

"So am I."

He's not referring to food. My heart falls, and I realize why he's called me here.

He's called for a whore to fuck.

Taking another impossible step forward, his hand cups my cheek. I'm surprised at the tenderness in his touch, but not blinded by it. Stepping into character, I gaze up at him, thinking of ways to bide my time.

"I'm so hungry, Captain. May I please eat first?"

Gaze darkening, his soft touch turns rough as he lowers his hand to my breast and kneads it roughly. His head dips, and he licks the column of my neck. "I could think of ways to take your mind off of food, Red."

Without warning, his hand pushes beneath my dress and he rips my undergarments from my body and traces his thumb against my slit.

Through his teeth, he sucks in a breath of air.

"Already dripping from between your legs for me. Tell me, did your mother get you into the business as a girl, or did you remain untouched because of the whore *she* was?" His thumb strokes my slit as he speaks, slowly torturing the place between my legs in a way I'm embarrassed to admit is making me weak in the knees.

I hate that my body is responding to his touch, but it also brings me sick satisfaction that along with my own arousal, the captain is feeling the Kai's cum as it drips from me.

“There’s something special about you,” he continues speaking, “different from the rest. I don’t buy that you came from Madame’s Manor. You’ve got secrets, Red, and I intend to uncover them.”

Knowing that I need to act before this gets even further out of hand, I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing a tear to fall from the corner. “Please,” I beg. “I’m feeling queasy from the pain of hunger. Allow me to eat? Then I can satisfy your needs.” Bile rises in my throat as I say that, but if he feeds me, I can draw out this time together and think of a way out.

He expels a shuddering breath and takes a step backward, allowing his hand to drop in the process. “Very well,” he snaps, turning to the table. “I anticipated something like this happening, so I had the servants bring in food. Sit.”

I follow his instructions, rounding the table and lowering myself in the chair I sat in when we dined together the first night. He nods as he smiles, a sardonic show of his teeth as I lift the cloche from the plate at the same time he brings the hand that was just between my legs to his nose and takes a deep inhale.

He’s smelling me, and it makes me want to physically recoil. Stunned, my hand freezes mid air, the cloche still in my grasp.

“Eat. Energize,” Captain Erickson commands, pressing his elbows on the table as he rests that same hand against his face. “We’re nowhere near done for the night.”

Hali

I take my precious time eating. Drawing out the moments because I know what might come next.

Not might, Hali. Will.

The thought makes me queasy. I turn my attention to the table, trying out the variety of dishes. There's a plate filled with thin cuts of meat, and I go to it first. I'm all too aware that Captain Erickson is watching me, his gaze riveted to my every move.

"Do you like it?" he asks quietly as I chew on the meat.

I smile weakly at him. I know I'm supposed to be shy, but he watches me so intently, I'm afraid of changing my expression. I don't want to try too hard. He might sense the shifts in my demeanor and figure out my ruse.

"I like it very much," I say kindly. "Thank you."

"There mustn't be fatty cuts like that on Morda, I surmise."

"None at all. A lot of chooks, some fish..."

What else do they eat on Morda?

I'd barely been on that shithole island for a couple of days before Kai and I had received word from a bootlegger of the ship's path. We chased after it knowing it would dock at Morda, and so when we got there, we hid in an abandoned home on the edge of a forest. Kai had packed us a lot of dried fish and cheese; at night, Kai would slip out and scout the island, eavesdropping on conversations to gauge what was going on. He'd mentioned how gross the food was. How the

majority of the residents were male fugitives that enjoyed fucking the whores and getting rowdy at the bar. We made sure not to surface during the day until news spread of the Captain's arrival.

Kai and I spent so much time in the squalor that we were in. He'd kept me warm, fed, and doted on me with what he could find.

Goddess, I love him.

Not for the first time, I wonder what we are doing here. It's hard to remember the goal, but then I look up and I'm here, in the flesh, sitting across from a notorious man who has left behind nothing but turmoil.

Maybe Kai had been right about leaving after all.

"What about you?" I question next, keeping my voice small. "What's the food like where you live?"

The Captain leans back in his chair. "Elegant."

I blink, unsure how to respond to that. "Oh?"

"Fancy," he explains. "Do you understand what I mean?"

"Food that's pretty to look at?"

"The whole kingdom is like that. Unblemished, beautiful, utterly obsessed with perfection..." He pauses, flexing his jaw as a look of disdain passes over him. "It's better out here, in the sea."

"You like the ocean?"

"It beckons me."

Now I'm intrigued. These aren't the villainous sort of answers I expect. Tilting my head to the side, I study him. "It beckons you how?"

Erickson grabs a fork and stabs it into a piece of meat. He raises it up to his face, spinning it around. "I like what it gives me, Red."

The riches he pulls from its depths, he means.

Like the tails of sirens...

I don't taste the food anymore. My eyes blur with emotion as I recall my ocean home pillaged and destroyed under his command.

It was most certainly a villainous answer, Hali.

"Is that why you don't go home?" I wonder, unable to stop myself. "So they don't see that look in your eye, Captain?"

Now his eyes shoot up to meet mine. "What look do you see?"

The word tastes acidic on my tongue. "Bloodthirst."

His hard expression fades as his eyes narrow on mine. "You certainly talk out of line for a timid whore."

My heart beats faster as I struggle to look away. I can't, though. My gaze is pinned to his eyes. He stares at me deeply, like he can pull me apart, and he knows, doesn't he? He sees my ruse. I should be more frightened than I am. It's just...I need to see his true self. I need to know that he's callous and deplorable. That we're killing him because he's proud of the destruction he's left behind.

"Tell you what," he says next. "You tell me one truth about you right now, Red, and I'll reward you kindly."

"With what?" I wondered.

"Anything you want. If it's safety from my crew, I'll have you sleep in my quarters. If it's more food, I'll deliver a tray of whatever you desire to your room myself. What do you say?"

"I say you're tricking me."

Humor flashes in his eyes as his lips curve up on one side. "I'm not."

"You want me to tell you a truth?"

"I do."

"Why?"

He takes another bite of his food, chewing it, staring along my face and down my throat. His gaze lingers on my breasts,

which are pushed up higher than I'd like. "I can't figure you out, and I need to."

"What if you're wrong and I'm not interesting?"

"Doesn't matter. I can't shake you. My gut is telling me you're no whore. It's telling me you're dangerous, but I can't pinpoint why. And it's fucking with my head a little. Because you have to be, honest to fucking Goddess, Red, one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen." As if listening to his own words, he shakes his head at himself, eyes widening a little like he can't believe he's said that. His face hardens a fraction as his voice tenses. "A truth, Red. Give me one."

I look away, my brain scrambling to fake a story about myself in Morda. Some sob story that I can hide behind and that he can feign pity at.

Maybe he's the savior type. But I shake my head to myself.

No, not this man. He is the kind of person that would watch a drowning man flounder until he was on the cusp of his last breath before he even thought of pulling him out.

He would push me to my limits, if given the chance. So no, I don't want to be a fake pity case. I don't want to lie at all, actually. Because I sort of want this game to go both ways.

Licking my lips, I pause to take a sip from a glass full of wine by my plate. The taste is rich on my tongue. For a man who hates fanciful things, his booze speaks otherwise. I look down at the glass for a few moments, deciding my words wisely.

Then I think, to hell with it. "When I was a little girl, I watched my sister get killed. She sacrificed her life to make sure I was hidden. I watched her get cut apart like a piece of fish, and I was too much of a coward to help her."

Clara had visited me during her shift. I had begged to see her. I was ten, and I'd never seen a siren in true form. Sneaking out of my house to meet her at the docks of an old marina, I remember feeling so happy that she was doing this for me. It was a big risk. Sirens weren't supposed to be near shore at all, but she knew how much it meant to me.

I remember the joy I felt. I couldn't believe how beautiful she was. A dazzling sea creature with shimmering red hair, like mine, and a glowing form. She'd come straight up to me on the dock, rested her elbows on the boardwalk and smiled up at me.

"You look like a star," I beamed.

"It'll be your turn soon," she'd said. "Hold tight. Some years yet, Hali, and we'll be doing this together."

There were no words to describe my happiness. Life had been hard. Our family had very little. In fact, what we did have we owed to Clara and her work as a seamstress. She held us up.

It's why I blame myself for her death.

Within minutes of admiring her, dark shadows had fallen over us, and I felt a jolt at the back of my head. The hit was so sudden, everything had gone black. By the time I blinked my eyes awake, men were searching the waters and another was hovering over me, a knife to my throat.

"That fucking siren better show herself," a deep voice said. "Or we're going to cut you up, little miss."

With their words, Clara did.

I had blood running down my face. A hand had been wrapped in my hair, tugging tightly at me by a stinky, filthy man with missing teeth.

But the other men—those who were calling her out, were dressed far too well. When she had emerged her head, her terrified eyes locking to mine, one of the men said something to her. Something that made her eyes glisten with tears.

I was scared, but I knew Clara would use her siren song to stop them from hurting me. I kept waiting for it to come, but her lips merely wobbled with emotion.

I wouldn't understand until later that a siren's song waned close to shore. That we needed the power of the ocean to carry it.

Without fighting, she let them drag her out of the water and set her down on the boardwalk beside me. Still dazed, I

sobbed for her as she pleaded for them to give her a few minutes to tell me goodbye.

“Run, Hali,” she whispered in my ear. “You must pack your things and run. Never look back.”

She embraced me as I lay there, barely able to move, my head throbbing as I realized they were going to hurt her. She embraced me, and then she offered herself to them. I crawled back, watching them form a circle around her, feeling a fear so thick, it felt like a weight around my throat. They paid me no attention as I hid behind the water barrels used to refill docked ships. I watched everything unfold, hanging on to every word as they mercilessly stole the best and most beautiful person I had ever known.

I don't like to think about it.

Of the vile things they did. Of the promise of riches they later exchanged to one another. Of how they were going to sell her tail, and they knew just the right buyer.

I grew up in that single moment. My childhood was gone. I was never the same again. I can't remember what life was like before that night. I just knew there was a single name they uttered, the name of the buyer who would make them rich.

Staring at Captain Erickson, I wait for his response.

My eyes are surprisingly dry as I think about my sister. I'm not emotional, as I usually am. In fact, I'm full of barely restrained rage as I stare at the very man that purchased my sister's tail.

This is personal, I remind myself. I need to be here. To look into the eyes of the man that still has a piece of her.

“Your turn,” I say next, and it sounds unlike the meek girl I've pretended to be.

He stares at me for several moments. “My turn?”

“I can have whatever I want,” I remind him.

“And what do you want, Red?”

“I want a truth from you.”

His brows lift minimally. I detect the surprise in him. Of all the things I could want—the food, safety, the comfort of his quarters—I’m instead asking for the same thing he did of me.

He takes a drink of his glass. It’s amber liquid. Tougher stuff I can tell by the hiss he blows out as he presses the drink back down. For once, he’s quiet, like he doesn’t know what to say. He’s always been taking the lead; begun and ended every conversation, treating me like a pawn, but it’s different now. There’s tension in the air.

When he looks at me, he’s not just loaded with that desire, but curiosity, too. It’s so thick in him, it might even *outweigh* the desire.

He doesn’t look at me, his eyes drawn to his wrist. I watch as he rubs at a bracelet there; his eyes losing focus, and for a moment, he’s very far away. I look down at the bracelet, wondering what emotion or memory it is attached to.

He lets out a long, shuddering breath. “Me, Red? I’m cursed.”

I wait for the punchline. For something vicious and cold. There is none.

Clearing my throat, I feel a little unnerved by the attention he gives to his bracelet. He nearly looks like a lost man. Someone you’d find tucked in the corner of a bar, drinking his sorrows away. There’s so much pain in that single look, I have to look away.

I’m being ridiculous.

There’s *nothing* there.

I’m simply searching for what can’t possibly exist, and so what if he was sorrowful about something? It doesn’t excuse the long history of treachery he’s left behind.

Still, I can’t help myself.

“Cursed?” I whisper.

I keep my eyes trained downward as I wait for his response. He shifts in his chair, and I sneak a glimpse up,

watching as he licks his bottom lip, glistening it, and goes to speak.

BANG! BANG!

The knocks on the door are so sudden, I jump, my heart lodging in my throat.

BANG! BANG!

The Captain lets out a long sigh. “What?”

The door practically crashes open as an elderly, tall man steps through. My eyes widen in surprise as he tugs behind him a small body.

Oh, my goddess.

“Captain,” he hisses in greeting.

“Grimy,” the Captain replies, cutting his eyes to the boy in Grimy’s large hold. The large man is fisting the boy’s collar, shaking him about, and it nearly makes me jump out of my seat to pull the boy away from him.

“Your son was caught hidden under one of the tables in the entertainment room...where the women are performing for the men.”

My vision spots as the shock knocks me cold.

Son?

No, no, no.

This can’t be.

I fight to contain my shock, but it feels like the world has tilted on its axis.

I had no idea the Captain was traveling with a child.

His *son*.

Looking at the boy, I see he has all his father’s dark colorings. He’s beautiful too, like his father. His body is small, thin. He can’t be older than twelve.

The goddess is cruel.

The child glares up at Grimy, but his cheeks are red and he looks embarrassed to have been caught.

Captain Erickson's voice hardens and his expression becomes fierce with quiet disdain. "James, I brought you onboard to shape you into a man. You still have a long way to go. You left a privileged world and you still think you are owed luxuries you simply wouldn't know how to possess. It is my greatest disappointment, having you grow up in such vile splendor. What makes you think you deserve to enjoy the temptations of the flesh if you are unable to control yourself?"

James clamps his mouth shut, his face falling as he looks down at his feet. The words were so biting, I feel conflicted for the boy. Where is the affection? The gentle lesson that sometimes a boy is too young to understand this side of men? Even as I ask that to myself, I nearly want to scoff. If you're taking a young boy aboard a bloody ship where vile shit like this happens all the time, what fatherly affection could there possibly be?

"I understand your curiosity," the captain continues, "and as much as I look forward to the day you get to experience the many...joys life has to offer, you simply wouldn't know what to do with a woman if you got given the chance. Or am I wrong?"

His son shakes his head stiffly, quietly muttering, "No, father."

The captain looks at the man named Grimy. "Take him to his room. Lock it if you have to. He will get properly punished in the morning. Maybe I'll have him polish that room he spent so much time gawking in."

Even Grimy looks upset by the captain's words, but he stiffens a nod. "Yes, Captain."

His hold on the boy becomes gentler as he steers him out. The door shuts, and I look at the Captain now, watching him viciously twist around the bracelet, his teeth clenched. His mood has turned sour. In the blink of an eye, he went from looking sorrowful to vicious. I clench my hands, rattled by the uncertain mood in the air.

“Why are *you* upset, Red?” he questions then, like he’s itching for a fight.

“Your son is beautiful,” I whisper, walking on eggshells.

“He’s a *boy*,” he hisses back, defensive.

“He looks like you.”

“That is where our likeness ends.”

“I can see that.”

That answer doesn’t please him.

Not one bit.

The captain then downs his drink and slams it on the table. Whatever thoughts he is having, he is transformed. His eyes cut to mine, and I know what’s coming.

“Enough,” he says icily. “No more talk. We’re going, Red.”

“Going where?”

He stands up, and the chair screeches back, loud as the screams in my soul because I already know.

“I want you in my bed, Red. I want you now or I might end up taking advantage of that porcelain flesh right here, within earshot of my men.”

I’m in trouble. Glancing nervously at the door, I feel the world close in on me. If I screamed for Kai, would he hear me?

We’d be as good as dead if I did that.

Deep breaths, Hali.

The shift is coming.

Your hours with the captain are numbered.

As is his life.

CHAPTER 8

Hali

Captain Erickson keeps his distance from me as he leads me to a door inside his quarters. I try not to question it, but it's rather bizarre. He's made it a point not to touch me, like maybe he doesn't trust himself. Or it's just another game to him. I simply follow after him, feeling my skin grow cold.

Fear shoots through me like ice. I feel it from head to toe. My shift is coming in a matter of hours. I can feel the transformation already starting. There's a buzzing beneath my skin.

Usually, this is an exciting time for sirens. The buzz is welcomed, and the anticipation is like the clock winding down to New Year's day.

But there's no excitement right now as he pushes open the stressed wooden door and stops there, looking at me. He doesn't even gesture at me to go in. He just stares at me in that expectant way.

It's ominous to me that I have to walk in before him. That I can't simply follow him like he'd already made me do.

Glancing behind my shoulder, I stare across the room at the door leading out. My lips tremble ever so slightly.

I think of Kai's final words to me when he'd fucked me roughly after we found each other upon boarding.

"By whatever means necessary."

But this wasn't what we had in mind. At least, it wasn't what I had in mind.

There's no way Kai would allow another man to fuck me.

Yet, here I am, walking past the captain who has had me in a loop from the moment I laid eyes on him.

How the hell am I going to dodge this?

My legs feel like lead as I walk through the threshold. Before I've even gaped at his bedroom, I feel his body come around mine. His arm wraps around my waist, pulling me into his hard chest. My heart jumps to my throat, and I let out a sharp gasp as his lips press against my ear.

"Another truth," he roughly demands, wrapping his teeth around my earlobe. I expect a sharp pain to follow, but he grazes it simply before skimming his nose along my hair.

I'm sure he can feel my heart beating against his arm. It's wrapped so tightly around me, there's hardly any room to breathe.

"I'm scared," I admit. That's my truth.

"Of me?" he presses.

Of you.

Of what I'm about to do.

Of how I'll send this ship plunging into the depth of this ocean knowing your son will die too.

Goddess, give me strength. "I'm scared that you're going to hurt me."

"Do you think me so callous as to be a selfish lover?"

"A violent lover, more like."

"Hmm."

He goes quiet.

I wait on tenterhooks for his next move. My gaze is fixed ahead. Through the curtain of hair that's fallen over my face, I see the giant bed feet away from us. There's a cool breeze hitting my heated cheeks, so there must be an opened porthole.

I wince when his arm tugs me harder into him.

"Who are you?" he rasps.

“I already told you.”

“A whore’s daughter.”

I fidget around his tight hold. “Y-yes.”

“We agreed to tell the truth, Red.”

I feel pain around my ribs, his hold punishing. “You’re hurting me.”

“What makes you think I care?”

Before I can protest, he suddenly lets me go and I stumble forward. I hear him move across the room, the sound of liquid filling into a glass follows.

Then, he trudges back to me, though he’s back to keeping his distance. I can do nothing but stand straight, unmoving as he circles me, his eyes meeting mine before drifting down my body.

His large hand is wrapped around a glass of amber liquid, and he brings it to his lips, taking a large gulp of it.

“You’re right,” he murmurs, pausing in his step to look at me. He raises his glass like he’s pointing it at me. “I *am* a violent lover, Red.”

My nerves rattle inside me as I say nothing back. I want to keep him talking. To keep pushing back the inevitable. But I can’t seem to draw the words out. Being alone with him in this setting has me mute.

“But with you, I think I’d be sweet,” he adds next, his hard face growing gentler.

He takes a step closer to me, and now I’m seized with panic.

“That’s not a truth,” I sputter out quickly. He pauses again, tilting his head to the side. “If it’s something I already knew, it doesn’t count.”

There’s a ghost of a smile on his lips. He knows what I’m doing. “Is that so?”

“And the conditions were clear. I tell you a truth, and now I request the same of you. A *real* truth. Something nobody else knows about you.”

“There are a lot of those.”

“Then this should be easy, and hopefully, you won’t cheat me this time.”

“Cheat you?”

“You never completed your last truth.”

“I hardly recall what I told you.”

His amusement relaxes me. I feel the trembles abate as I force a soft smile. “You told me you were cursed.”

His eyes dim. “Ah.”

“Cursed in life?” I wonder aloud. “In love? Aboard this ship? There are a number of ways a person can feel cursed.”

His smile turns bitter, he takes another gulp from his glass. “I’m afraid it’s an actual curse, Red.”

My brows come together. “What sort of curse?”

“Is that a second truth you want?”

“I hardly think it’s the end of the first.”

Pointing his glass at me again, he says. “It counts as the second truth. Take it or leave it.”

Frowning, I relent. “Fine.”

“It’s a very sensitive truth, Red,” he says as he walks about the room again.

“Are you going to kill me for knowing?”

I wait for him to nod, to tell me that he will do just that, but he shakes his head softly. “No.”

“My last admission?” he whispers. “Aside from the fact I find you utterly fascinating?”

“What is it?” I push.

“I love my son,” he tells me gravely. “I love him dearly.”

Of all the things I expected him to say, this stuns me.

He edges closer to me, his eyes drinking me in. I look back, too, shocked by his admission, by the anguish that momentarily flickers through him. I can't deny he's evil. I couldn't possibly forgive such a man. And yet...I realize that nothing is ever truly black and white, is it? Yes, he's capable of repulsive acts, but there's the smallest part of him that still feels. He'll never change. I'm certain of it, but it still doesn't erase this fact.

Swallowing my nerves, I ask a question that has been burning on my brain since learning of his son. "And his mother?"

For a moment, a pained look passes across his features. "We don't speak of her. A father is all he truly needs in this life. To teach him the ways of the sea, and how to be a man." He looks away for a moment, his voice dropping as he mumbles, "I love him more than she could have."

"Does he know that?"

He frowns, and I get the impression he hadn't wished for me to hear that last bit. "It's better he doesn't. Love is for soft hearts, Red."

"Love can strengthen hearts, Captain."

Now he won't look me directly in the eye. He looks at my features, his fingers gently combing through the strands of my hair. Under his touch, I see random strands of them shine brighter.

That buzz beneath my skin continues to grow. Right before I shift, anyone close to me will see it. The glow of my skin, the shine in my hair, the dazzling allure.

"You think love has all this power, don't you?" he asks, though he doesn't wait for an answer. "That you can just open yourself to someone and heal them, or that all their evil can be washed away when they open themselves back."

"It depends," I say, unable to hide the sympathy in my voice.

“On what?”

“On whether he wants to wash away his evil.”

His chuckle is empty, nothing genuine about it as he considers this. “I have a feeling,” he murmurs, lost to whatever thought he’s holding onto. “Even love can’t redeem a man like me.”

“You’re wrong.” I simply say.

I’m not trying to comfort him, but I do believe it to be true. Where there’s love, there’s always possibility for redemption. And looking up at him, seeing the way his expression shifted when he spoke about his love for his son, I know it’s there.

It won’t be there for me. I’m just a passing fancy. Or for anyone else. But for his son... His son is his purpose.

Even a villain has a heart.

Nothing is black and white, after all.

He drops his head closer to mine. I hold my breath, body stiffening when his lips press against mine. I wait for the revulsion. For the hatred and anguish to hit me.

None of that comes.

When he presses his lips to me, I can imagine that the smallest part of him, the part he hides well, is *all* of him. How easy would kissing a man like that be?

His lips aren’t hard. They don’t mercilessly ravage mine, demanding for me to return it with equal ferocity.

Quite the contrary.

I don’t kiss him back, and he’s fine with that. He wraps his arms around me, tugging me closer to him, until my chest is flush against his. His mouth presses along mine, kissing me dotingly, and it takes everything not to cry.

I want to cry for my sister.

I want to cry for Kai, and all the ways this kiss could change our relationship if I were to allow it.

I want to cry for myself because...because I can understand why a woman tries to change a man. We see a window into their soul, and it's hopeful. It could be beautiful, too.

Mostly, I want to cry for Captain Erickson because it's too late for any of that. Life isn't black and white, but it's cruel, and sometimes the smallest window of hope isn't enough to save a man.

But I wish...maybe I wish that his son can forge a new path, away from the vile world his father built and lost himself in.

Maybe James still has hope...*if* I can save him.

I spread my lips, accepting the Captain's kiss because I know this is all the time he will have left.

I endure it. I even feel guilty.

He pulls away, looking at me now with the gentlest eyes. "Now that's a kiss better than any violent desire."

I merely offer him a wobbly smile.

"Another truth," he says, and it isn't a demand but a request.

"I won't forget a kiss like that," I tell him honestly.

He smiles at me triumphantly. "I think I'll keep you around, Red."

I can't say anything to that. I feel a tear fall, and his eyes narrow on it. His finger comes up to wipe it away. "I still want you," he says. "Touching me will bring you pleasure. I promise it, Red."

"Hali," I find myself saying. "My name is Hali, Captain. I'm not a thing. I have to want it too, don't I?"

Now amusement flickers in his gaze. "Most certainly not the words of a daughter's whore."

"No," I say sternly. "Certainly not."

He steps back, going to the bed. “I said I want you, Hali. I want you badly. Undress for me.”

But I don’t.

He doesn’t mind. He knows I’m going nowhere. I have no choice but to stay, but it’s like he’s pretending he’s giving me the option.

From where I stand, I allow myself to take him in. His body is large, as I expected. There are marks and scars over miles of muscle. A flash of heat washes over me, and I shake my head, telling myself it’s just the buzz under my skin. Just the shift warning me it’s coming.

Then I think of Kai, and my promise.

I can’t.

I *won’t*.

But goddess, this captain is making me forget myself for a small moment.

“Hali,” he warns, returning to stand before me. He looks down at me, and his hand that is running down my arm, leaving goosebumps behind. “I kissed you softly. I gave you my truths. But I’m a red-blooded man, and I need to fuck.”

“And I need to remember why I’m here,” I return swiftly.

“You’re here because I ordered you to be.”

“No,” I whisper, more to myself than him. *I’m here for revenge.*

He squints down at me, confused. “Hali—”

BANG! BANG! BANG!

“CAPTAIN!” shouts a man beyond the bedroom door. “Captain, there’s an emergency!”

Erickson’s face hardens with rage. He twists away from me, quickly throwing the tunic back on as he stomps to the door and rips it open. “This better be a matter of life or fucking death!”

“There has been a death,” the man returns breathlessly.
“Hysten’s been found dead!”

“What?” Captain Erickson retorts.

“His body...it was stowed away in one of the rooms. One of the whores says a big burly fella had been carrying him around... Captain, I think something strange is happening.”

Cold slams into me.

A dead body.

Big burly fella.

They’re talking about Kai.

No, no, no.

“Do we know who the man is?” questions the Captain.

“There are only a few men with that description.”

“Have them rounded on the deck right this fucking second.”

He slams the door shut again, resting a palm against it. The bracelet around his wrist catches my eye now. From this close, I see words running across it. Words from a different dialect. Oh, my goddess.

Witch tongue.

Witches only impart their language for a...

Curse.

My eyes flare with suspicion, along with my fear for Kai.

“Come, Red,” the Captain says, breaking through my thoughts. “I want you by my side.”

“For what purpose?” I question.

He turns to look at me. “I’m not done with you.”

Go, I tell myself. If he takes me above deck, I’ll see Kai.

I nod, looking down at my feet as I become submissive to him. “Of course, Captain.”

“Out there, you keep that wicked tongue to yourself,” he warns. “Or else I’d have to punish you in front of my men. Appearances are everything. I can’t look weak.”

He thinks himself weak for all his admissions. Interesting.

“I understand,” I assure him.

“Then come.”

Hali

Fear spikes through me from the frantic hum throughout the ship. The finding of the man's body sent a scurry of chaos throughout—as though they've never had a man killed while aboard.

As the captain and I make our way to the deck, my eyes scan faces, searching for Kai among the countless nameless men.

I work hard to keep up with him as he moves past his men, taking several steps for every one of his strides.

Coming to an abrupt stop in front of an older man, he barks. "Has he been found, Grimy?"

I startle from the anger in his voice.

The old man, Grimy, glares at me as I stand behind the captain. He assesses me with scrutiny before answering. "No, Captain. We are working on collecting the crew who fits the description."

"And the whore who saw him?"

"There, Captain." His chin tips behind us and we both turn, finding a scared woman standing by a large barrel. She looks dirty and unkempt, and for a moment I wonder how she possibly could have seen Kai carrying a man's body from the cages where the others are being held. She hardly appears coherent, her mouth mumbling her desires for more green gala.

As though reading my thoughts, the captain's head whips back to Grimy. "We're taking her word on the matter?"

“We are, Captain,” a man who I recognize from when I first came aboard—Kalis, I believe his name is—says as he joins us. His eyes dart over to me as Grimy’s did, and I lower my gaze to the floor, remembering what Captain Erickson said about keeping my tongue to myself while I was out here.

I’m still not sure why he asked me to come along. Maybe he enjoys having me by his side, like a trophy everyone keeps swinging their heads to look at. Whatever the reason, I don’t complain. The longer it takes me to find Kai among the crowd, the deeper the fear settles.

As I subtly look for Kai, I catch sight of my hair in the reflection of the moonlight. The long, red strands shine brighter than they did just hours ago. The effects of the shift’s magic are becoming stronger, and I realize my time is both running out and about to begin.

My only hope is that the Captain doesn’t notice the changes of my body before I can get myself to solitude and prepare for the shift to happen. Once the time turns to midnight, the shift is instant and I *must* be in the water.

A commotion toward the bow of the ship catches our attention and seconds later, a few crewmates step forward with two men in shackles.

“Line them up,” Captain Erickson barks, and the men do as they’re told, positioning their prisoners in a straight line.

Moments later, two more men join them in the line-up.

Exhaling a breath, I turn back to the captain, expecting him to give more instruction to his men. His gaze is already on me, so I give a weak smile, as fake as it feels to do.

There is nothing happy about this moment.

Innocent men are awaiting their fates in Captain Erickson’s hands.

Kai is nowhere to be found.

The captain has made me his prey.

And the shift is looming, and while it should be exciting, it suddenly feels very bittersweet.

“Aye, got one mo’, Captain!” someone yells from a distance. Heavy footsteps follow, and the crowd parts, exposing another man in shackles being led by the one who shouted.

Gasping, my hand flies to my mouth. My eyes widen as they drag over Kai’s body—beaten and bloody.

He must have resisted. Put up a fight to protect himself, but somehow, he was overpowered.

Kai must have heard my gasp because his eyes look up at me from where his head hangs, connecting with mine. The moment they do, he straightens, and his face morphs from anger to fear, and dare I say confusion.

Distracted by my presence, Kai falls to his knees on the deck as the man leading him pushes him to join the line. Fury burns within me, the powerful emotion mixing with my magic that is swirling inside as it waits to reignite. I have to clench my teeth to keep from acting out. Kai must see it, because so subtly, I see his head shake.

“Are we awaiting any more men?” Captain Erickson growls at Grimy and Kalis.

Grimy purses his lips, while Kalis takes a look at the line of prisoners in front of him.

“This should be the lot of them, Captain.”

“Very well.” Stepping forward, his hands join behind his back and he takes slow, calculated steps as he walks past the five men, moving up and down the line, assessing them each carefully. “One of you has killed a man on my ship. An action that was not assigned to you, and because of this, the perpetrator will walk the plank.”

Not a single prisoner dares to speak or protest. Slowly, Erickson turns to look at me, then turns his attention to Kalis.

“WHORE!” Kalis shouts to the woman still huddled by the large barrel nearby. “Address your captain.”

Scurrying forward, she curtsies low in front of Captain Erickson, averting her glazed eyes as she hangs her head low

in respect. “Captain, thank you for allowing me to—”

“Which of these men did you see carrying the body, whore?”

Straightening, her eyes rake over each man while we all wait with bated breath.

I feel like I can’t breathe.

The shift must be close—with every passing second I feel my magic grow, and the need to be in the water calls to me.

From my peripheral, I can also see the men on deck feel the effects of my magic—of my siren song. The way they look at me and the other woman is different from how they were looking at us prior. A few even reach down to adjust themselves behind their trousers.

Looking at Kai, I can see the effects of the shift settled on his features as well. His skin is smoother, the coloring in his irises more vibrant.

Walking the plank would not be the worst fate he could meet tonight, but I fear the weight of the heavy chains on his hands would hinder his shift. What if he can’t break free? What if the shift happens too soon, and he drowns before his tail appears?

Stalling is my only option. I must draw out the selection until I can be certain the shift is imminent.

“Out there, you keep that wicked tongue to yourself. Or else I’d have to punish you in front of my men.”

The Captain’s words cause me to hesitate as I think of a way to buy more time, but unfortunately the seconds cost me.

“That one,” the woman says, cutting off my thoughts. My eyes snap to where she points, and my heart falls. “That man right there. He’s the one who carried the body, my Captain.”

Kai.

“You’re sure?” Captain Erickson confirms, and the woman shakes her head jubilantly. His eyes narrow at her for only a moment, before he turns to give orders to his men. “I want his

feet bound, and his neck collared. See to it that he sinks to the bottom of the ocean after he walks the plank.”

Two men rush forward and attach more metal and chains to Kai’s body. A whimper builds in my chest, but I hold my breath, not allowing it to manifest in fear of the attention it may bring.

“And the rest of the men, Captain?” Bridger asks, ready to follow his lead.

“They can spend the night in the prisoners’ quarters. We’ll find suitable punishment for them in the morning.”

“Captain, these men have done no wrong,” Grimy speaks up, and I’m a little surprised by his brazenness. He must be close with Erickson to dare disagree.

A wicked gleam flickers into the captain’s eye, his lips turning up in a smile. “No, but they were suspects.”

He doesn’t elaborate, and I fight the shiver that builds at the base of my spine.

“And as for you,” Erickson bellows so that all can hear. Drawing a dagger from its sheath, he walks over to Kai and prods his back with the tip of the weapon. “You will walk the plank. MOVE.”

Our eyes meet before Kai gives me his back, turning to face where the wooden plank protrudes from the side of the ship. He steps onto it, and once again Captain Erickson prods his back with his dagger, until Kai has moved far enough on to the plank to evade it.

“WALK THE PLANK!” a crewmate yells from behind me, starting the ritual.

Before long, every man on deck is yelling in Kai’s direction, and some begin to chant.

“Walk the plank!”

“Walk the fucking plank!”

Kai doesn’t turn back to look at me, but it doesn’t matter. The shift is soon. I can feel the magic itching at my skin, so

close to breaking free when my true form can finally come out. He must be feeling the same. He must know his magic is just beneath the surface.

With sure steps, he inches forward to the end of the plank, but he doesn't allow himself to fall over.

Shifting his head, he looks at Captain Erickson with a menacing glare that would have any ordinary man trembling. But not the captain. No, the captain simply smiles at him with a cruel, cold smirk.

“Walk the plank, *sailor*,” Erickson mocks.

Turning further, Kai meets my gaze briefly, then turns back to the captain. “Fuck you,” he spits, then he takes the final step and falls feet first into the ocean with a *splash*.

The sight steals my breath. Cheers erupt from the crew. Squeezing my eyes tight, I beg for the shift to happen. Let the clock strike midnight and allow Kai full use of his magic.

He will break free of the chains, Hali. This is Kai. He'll be fine.

I jump when a hand connects with my lower back. My eyes fly open and I see the Captain staring at me, his gaze soft. Quickly, he asks, “Was that too much for you?”

His concern is disconcerting, and I cannot find the words to answer. Shaking my head, I force myself to look away. His actions and his words conflict, and it confuses me.

Confusion is the last thing I should be feeling when the shift is moments away.

At least, I hope it's moments away.

Kai, my brain cries, but the words are shut firmly inside me.

Around us, the men begin to celebrate. Boisterous songs of the sea erupt from all around, the men dancing and demanding the lower crewmates to fetch them drinks and whores.

Swallowing thickly, I take in the commotion before staring out into the sea. My feet guide me to the edge and I look out to

where Kai jumped. Seeing no disturbances in the water makes my heart feel as though the chains were shackled around it, and not Kai.

The sea is dark. The moon hidden behind a passing cloud.

“You are an empath,” the smooth, deep voice of the captain sounds from behind me.

I’m about to answer, my body turning in place to face him, when a searing spark penetrates through me. My body physically jolts, the sensation so strong I know exactly what is about to happen.

Eyes widening, I step onto the plank, my only thoughts of how I must get to the water.

“Red?” Erickson questions in concern, but it’s too late.

Another jolt blasts through me, this time eliciting a moan to pass over my lips. My magic has been restored, the sharp tingles radiating through me. My skin takes on a glow.

“It can’t be,” he growls.

“One more truth,” I breathe out, the pain and pleasure of the shift mixing into one. My emotions are frayed, but I feel the strength in me, and I’m certain of what needs to be done. I look over my shoulder at him, my voice hardly above a whisper as he gapes at me. “Revenge is harder than I thought it would be. Forgiveness is possible, but it doesn’t erase the price of your mistakes. And it would have been easy, Captain Erickson. It would have been easy to fall into you.”

Behind him, the merriment grows louder, the sounds of glass shattering and boards splintering while rowdy men whoop and holler.

An apology is at the tip of my tongue, but as I look at Captain Jack Erickson one final time—*really* look at him—I can’t bring myself to apologize.

I have nothing to be sorry for.

Clara’s beautiful siren form fills my mind and I smile, missing my sister so wholly the only thing I can feel in the

moment is love. Love, and the burning, consuming need for revenge.

My eyes meet Erickson's at the same moment he takes a step onto the plank, his arm reaching out as though he means to grab me, and I swan dive off it.

As I descend, I hear him scream "Fuck!", and then I breach the ocean.

Cold, delicious sea water envelops me and with the most perfect of timing, my body shifts into my true form—my siren form, and for the first time since stepping on board the Trident, I feel like I can finally breathe again.

Captain Erickson

Chaos is coming.

I'm detached, standing in the midst of it, watching the men twist their heads up into the air. Their bodies change, growing tighter; they don't understand what's happening.

But I do.

I've seen this before, but it's never happened on the Trident. I'm protected from the song I know will pierce through the air. There's no point telling anyone what I saw. No point warning any of these scoundrels that the whore we thought we bought was secretly a siren.

She was in human form.

I can't grasp it. I don't even feel enraged by it.

Instead, I feel my lips twitch. She tricked me, and I can't loathe her for it. She came for her revenge, but what the fuck had I done to her? I search my mind, seeking an answer—

"I watched my sister die."

I still, her words echoing inside my mind.

It was the only time I'd seen her so vulnerable. It was her first truth, therefore the most powerful truth of them all. And I know...I fucking *know* what I did.

Though I never killed the siren myself, I still played a part. I think of the tail hanging in the office of my kingdom. It was an expensive purchase, and I couldn't deny the disapproval of my people when it was brought in.

Times seem to be changing. Views are morphing. The sirens are dying out, and there are kingdoms suddenly crying for a change.

It won't come. It's too late. In a matter of decades, the sirens will be gone.

But not if they've been living among us in plain sight.

Dazed, I walk across the deck, ignoring my name. They barely care that I don't respond. In their confusion, their bodies will be drawn to that song in a matter of time.

She'll kill every man.

She'll bring the ship down.

It's what these sirens do.

We've pillaged from their ocean home too long. I can't deny their reasoning. I can't deny that we deserve it.

Running my fingers over my lips, I remember the taste of her. My bracelet slides down my wrist, prompting me to look at it. She didn't affect my feelings. I'm protected against her charm. And yet I fell into her so easily. I wanted to believe in her charade. But perhaps it wasn't a charade at all.

And just like that, my bracelet comes alive, its inscription glowing in gold, and I hear it.

The riveting sound cutting through the air.

Her song.

And then I think of *him*.

I think of James and, as I look down at the bracelet that protects me, I know what I must do.



THE SHIP LOSES CONTROL FAST. I hear its bones ache as it begins to get thrashed in the water. The waves are so high they cover the sky. In these moments, we are bathed in darkness and desire. I can feel her song thrum through me. I can feel the pulse of pleasure, coating me.

"It would have been easy to fall into you."

I shut my eyes tightly for a brief moment.

I'm nothing good, I know that. I deserve to lose my ship, to see it break apart and to fall into the abyss of the ocean, to be lost and forgotten. But I won't let it wipe out my lineage. Goddess help me, I still think he has a chance to save our bloodline and change our course in history.

The siren's song abates, and I know that was just a small one. She's still gaining her power. The big one is coming and I don't have much time left.

In my kingdom, I'm known as the immortal king. Never ravaged by time. A gift from the goddess, they said.

Not today.

Death calls me.

I look down at my wrist. There's a burn ring around where the bracelet once was. I feel naked without it, but I'm also at peace.

I had found James hidden away. I remember the look of terror in his eyes as he stared at me, and for the first time in my entire life, I wanted nothing more than to wrap my arms around him and protect him. To whisper a truth to him. Something he never quite knew.

I wanted to tell him I loved him and to be a better man.

It didn't seem right to say it. To confuse him. To make him conflicted about the loss of his father. I want him to live and loathe me. I would have loathed me too. I deserve it. This is my punishment, and like that damned siren said, forgiveness is possible, but a price must be paid.

He'll make it. James will survive this.

"It would have been easy to fall into you, too," I whisper, ready for her song. I am about to lose myself. To say goodbye and be at her mercy.

I know she will show none.

Just because I will save my son, it doesn't erase the atrocities I've committed. I have blood on my hands. Blood

that didn't have to be spilled. The blood of her *sister*. Though my hands aren't covered in her blood, I still keep the trophy of her body.

Rain pelts us. The deck sloshes with water as the ship rolls around a now turbulent sea. Lightning strikes, lighting up the dark skies, and the men shriek fearfully at the sound. Waves begin to crash against the ship, and now we're in mortal danger.

It's coming—

Her song cuts through the air suddenly, powerful and sharp. The wind whips around the boat like a tornado, sending debris flying across the ship. I feel sharp cuts across my face as my body trembles. The men that were screaming before are moaning with desire and crying out with devotion.

“My love!”

“My woman!”

“My star is singing for me.”

I fight to contain my sanity. I feel it slipping away. Without my bracelet, the magic leaves my being like a time glass running out of sand. Replacing the shield is a desperate yearning. I feel consumed with love. Love for an imaginary being. A trick. An illusion of the senses.

I try to fight back.

I think of James.

James when he was a baby, cooing for a touch. I merely looked at him.

James when he took his first steps to me. I turned my back on him.

James when he said his first word, “Da.” I told him to quiet down.

James when he stared at me, desperate for warmth. I was cold.

The ship rumbles beneath me like an earthquake. I look down, my cock bursting at the seams as I continue to fight

back. The men around me jump overboard, mindless and empty, like they are slaves to the sea itself being called back to their master.

“It would have been easy to fall into you.”

I wonder...

I wonder in that instant what might have been.

If it was possible that I could have done things differently. If I had never boarded this ship. If I had never hung her sister’s tail in my office.

If I had been a better king, and if my son had a better chance.

The rumbles beneath my feet continue to grow stronger. Fear chokes me as I slowly look up. My breath is stolen from my lungs as I gape at a wave coming for us. A wave that kisses the sky. Her song continues to grow louder. I blink back the black spots, watching the wave come closer.

I am going to die.

“Goodbye,” I whisper to her. To James. To myself.

I think of my son as the wave slams into the Trident and my world goes black.

Epilogue

KAI

She looks beautiful when she's murderous. I've seen her like this before. Several times, actually. Destroying ships. Ripping the hearts from the men as they fling themselves into the ocean, convinced the love of their life is in the darkened sea, waiting to greet them.

They're half right. Someone is waiting to greet them, but what they don't realize is that it's the love of *my* life waiting for them. And she's not waiting to say hello.

Ripping through the flesh of another crewmate, she pulls out his heart and winds her arm back, throwing the unbeating organ as far as she can. It *plops* into the water several feet away.

She hasn't realized that she isn't alone out here, or maybe she can sense me and I'm not giving her enough credit. Nevertheless, we haven't spoken since our last encounter on the ship and I'm desperate to touch her—to taste her, and the devastation and salt water that's on her skin.

The Trident is on fire in two places, and if my assumptions are correct, it's taking in water on the portside. She did a number on the ship but, for some reason I've yet to discover, she hasn't completely obliterated it.

Screams of chaos sound as distant callings from where I float in the sea, and after watching Hali destroy six more men, I can't wait any longer.

Silently, I swim through the water to her, only stopping once my arms are around her middle and my head breaches the

surface as I kiss my way up her spine.

“You’re alive,” she breathes, relief instantly relaxing her into my arms.

“Of course I am. Did you have such little faith in me?”

Using her fin to spin around, her arms wind around my neck. She kisses me fiercely—our tongues colliding and rhythmically dancing together. We stay fused for several seconds, and when we finally part, her lips are swollen.

I lean forward and suck her bottom lip into my mouth, my hand cupping her naked breast, and I groan.

“The chains looked heavy, and had the shift not happened when it did, you could have drowned,” she argues, but I can see the turmoil reflected in her darkened eyes. It scared her.

“You never have to worry about me, Hali.”

“I just love you so much.”

“And I love you.” I kiss her again. “Hali, you did it. You took down Erickson. It’s over. The Erickson bloodline is finished, a huge victory the sirens will thank you for. It’s our chance at peace knowing he’s gone.”

“*We* did it,” she tells me, but there’s a sadness in her voice that I don’t understand.

Did something happen between her and the captain?

My eyes search hers, but aside from that hint of sadness, she seems like herself.

“Hals?”

Her head drops to my shoulder, and I feel her take a deep, shuddering breath.

“Hali, what’s wrong?”

“The bloodline didn’t end with the Captain,” she tells me. When she looks up at me, I can see the defeat written all over her features. “He has a son, Kai. The Captain has a young son named James.”

I feel my face fall. My eyes move from Hali to the ship behind her as my mind works to fit the pieces together.

“Then let’s go back to the ship. We will kill him, too.”

“We *can’t*, Kai. He’s so young. I can’t harm a child, no matter who he is the son of.”

The hurt etched into her features sends a pang through my heart, and I’m reminded why I love this woman so much. Her heart calls to me as strongly as the ocean does. She is my mate. My soul. The siren sent from the goddesses for me, and me alone.

If she wants to let the boy live, then I won’t argue.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers after a moment. “I’ve failed you. I’ve failed Clara.”

Returning my attention to her, I cup her face, brushing my thumb along her cheekbone. “No,” I say sternly. “You have not failed, Hali. You destroyed the human who hung your sister’s tail like it was a prize to be displayed. You brought an end to the Ericksons—”

“But I *haven’t*, Kai.”

“You have. One day, many shifts from now, another siren will allow him to meet his end. You allowing the boy to live does not mean you have failed. It means you have a heart. And your heart is the thing I love most about you, Hali.”

Leaning forward, I press my lips against her once more, and hug her tight to me.

The water ripples around us, stilling as it does when the destruction of a siren’s magic has settled.

Hali is no longer channeling the storm.

“Can we go home now? I miss my family. Our people. I want to be among the others through the shift.”

The light of the moon reflects in her eyes as I look at her. She looks radiant, the magic still vibrating through her body, the glow of her siren form emanating over the dark waters.

Happiness overtakes the surprise of learning Erickson had a child, and though I have a nagging feeling inside telling me we should kill him too, I relent, for Hali's sake. Regardless of if the boy lives or dies, we fulfilled our objective.

Jack Erickson is dead.

The monsters that are the Ericksons are almost completely gone, and for the next few years at least, our kind can be at peace again.

Smiling, my hand skims down her bare back as we both stare at the orange embers burning from the deck of the ship.

“We can go wherever you want. The ocean is ours, Hali.”

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Acknowledgments

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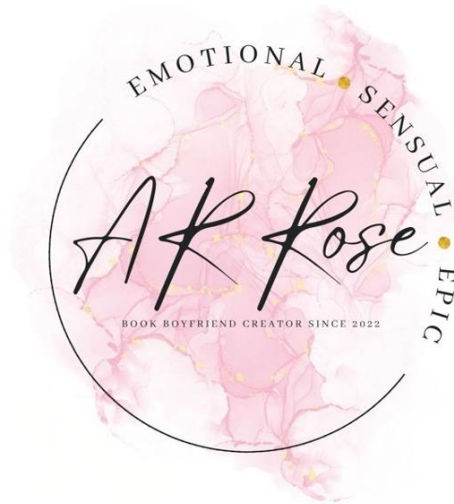
Sins of Bliss



New York Times and USA Today bestseller, R.J. Lewis, is the number one bestselling author of the Ignite series, the Loving Lawson series, the Borden series, and numerous other titles. At the age of 22, Lewis nervously fulfilled her year's resolution (a week before the year was out) and published her first title Ignite and has never stopped writing since.

She has been writing all her life and looks forward to sharing her stories with readers who are interested in character growth and romance of the unconventional kind.





A.R. Rose's greatest job in life is being a mom to her two boys. She is a born and raised California native who loves to hang out at home with her kids and her dog.

A.R. realized her passion for writing in the third grade, although it wasn't until early 2022 when she began to pursue it. Now, if she skips a day of writing, she feels as though her day is incomplete.

On any given day, you will find A.R. toting around her laptop and her Kindle, with a coffee in hand, daydreaming about the characters and worlds she's building. She is grateful to have the opportunity to bring her stories to life and is excited about her journey as a romance writer.

