

RAVEN STORM



BLOOD  
OF THE  
SIRENS

BOOK ONE

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# TRIGGER WARNING

Chapter 22 contains a scene where consent is extremely dubious and borders on rape. Asterisks and a further warning are printed in the physical chapter itself to warn you before it begins, and again when the scene has ended.

-Raven-

# ONE

Merrick

“HEY HOTTIE!”

Fear stabbed my chest like a pike, and I whirled around, flinching away from the two females who sat in one of those tiny, colorful boats that were popular with humans. I liked these boats; they lacked sharp blades and made the humans work to propel themselves through the water.

An honest boat.

The first female had bright yellow hair, nearly white, and held a large, fake fin in her hands. Human hands were no good at navigating in the water. The other female had straight, black hair. Both of them had skin too light for this sun. Already it was tinged pink from being out on land for too long.

“I said, ‘Hey, hottie!’ ” she said again.

*Hey, hottie!*

I recognized the words said, but the context didn’t make sense. I wasn’t hot though ... nor was I cold. Human slang and speech patterns changed quicker than we could catch up with.

Most of my friends liked to stalk humans from the safety of the water, always hoping this one time would be the one where we’d find a siren born. A few even dared to walk among them, desperate enough to find a partner. But I resisted

all of that. I knew what would be required if I successfully bred with a human female, and it didn't sit right with me.

That didn't mean I was immune to my instincts, however.

"H-hey, hottie," I said back. It seemed right.

Females turned me into stuttering messes. Females meant change to my daily routine, and unknown futures with unknown expectations where I'd never again be left alone to do my art—

It wasn't the fact that I was flitting about on the surface again—no, that was expected from a male of breeding age. Encouraged, even.

The blonde wiggled her eyebrows. I'd apparently done OK. I tread the water. They looked down at me, waiting. I stared at the pearls dangling from her earlobes. They were a pink color I had never seen in the ocean! Maybe I could ask her about them? The sun flashed off their sparkling rings, and not for the first time I wished I could figure out how to mimic the flare of the sun underwater.

"Wanna come back to our place?" The one with yellow hair leaned forward, her breasts bunching underneath the bulky garment she wore strapped to her chest.

The human females were interested in me, paddling toward me and reaching out with their fingers. All thoughts of speaking to them fled as my brain turned to mush.

I flinched backward, nearly stumbling and falling to the water. One sniff as they neared confirmed what I'd already known: these were not siren born females. They were not suitable for breeding.

*Phew. Pressure averted.*

I said nothing, mentally chanting at myself to keep my arms and hands above the water. If my extremities got wet, they'd grow scales and fins. Then the females would scream and draw attention.

I breathed out, trying to relax. At least they weren't fishermen. Her boat carried no hooks or poles. No nets or

sharp things with which to take from the ocean with no intent to give back.

We stared at each for a long moment.

“I must go now,” I said, figuring that was the easier path.

“Wait—”

I dove into the water, scales erupting over my chest and arms as I pushed off with my tail. I swam out hard down the large canal, staying underwater so the females couldn't follow me.

*You're going to be late.*

And that was the least of my worries. I also needed more shells to finish my latest piece. Running into the two females had wasted a lot of time, so I couldn't waste anymore and would have to go straight home. Luckily, I had one place close that I usually saved for emergencies. I had just enough time to check a spot on the edge of the canal, then I'd have to go.

*Females. Of all days to actually run into some.*

Once we turned sixteen, the elders told us to wander the shores, don clothing and walk among the humans. It was why we learned their language from an early age as well. Males must choose a female to breed with, after all. Even if suitable females were getting harder and harder to find. I never protested. After all, it didn't affect my art—my father didn't know if I was off hunting females or sea glass.

Father expected a lot from me—to one day take over the clan from him, to beat out all the other males my age and find a female, breed, and bring more mers into the clan.

There was a spot where the land ended in a point, and the canal met the open ocean. Just before that the canal water was much calmer, and usually an abundance of shells where the rough current of the ocean met the water from inland.

But calmer water usually meant more people as well.

*Just get in, and out.*

Thankfully, there were no humans today on the water or on the shoreline. Toward the tip of the coast, I navigated between the thick reeds and scooped the murky bottom for the best shells, broken or not, and slipping them into my satchel. No sea glass today, unfortunately. Pressed for time, I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings as well as I should have been. I hung my satchel on the end of a gnarled old tree sticking out of the water to give me a better range of movement as I dug into the sand with both hands.

“Ack!”

Distracted as I was, I didn't see the netting invisible under the water. It caught my tail as I twisted around, settling around the edges and squeezing dangerously tight in seconds.

*Ow!*

The water rippled out a few yards front of me, a rough scaly head poking out to give me a sniff. The alligator gave me a wary look, and I growled, flashing my fangs at him. He sank further into the water, instincts telling him I was more trouble than it was worth.

Cautiously, I pulled against the woven netting. It was tight, but at least it was woven rope. It wouldn't shred my scales like a fishing line would. Perhaps I could simply break it?

I yanked hard, but it didn't give. I tried this a few times in vain, even diving below the surface to pull at it with my arms. The anchor of this snare was set deep into a rock, and the net only constricted tighter around my tail the more I struggled. Even if it wouldn't cut me, it was still uncomfortable. My knife sat in my pack on a tree nearby, just out of reach. I growled at my idiocy.

My mind whirled with the implications. I'd be late for the clan meeting, and Father would send others to look for me. It would be embarrassing and painful for everyone involved, but at least I could claim I was hunting for a female. Father would be mollified by that, even if it wasn't true.

As if that mattered. Father and the other clan chiefs thought the siren bloodline was finally dying out since our



clan hadn't had a birth since young Taro, who was now twenty-seven. Most of the males were thinking it was nearly impossible to find a suitable female any longer, and there was talk of just breeding any female to see what would happen.

The wind shifted, and I froze. The sound of humming floated over the breeze.

Someone was coming.

I'd always been told as a boy that when I found a human female who carried the blood of the sirens that I would simply *know*, but I never truly believed it.

Not until now.

My body and hormones went haywire as the smell of the ocean and waves hit me, but with more. Her scent carried a sweet undertone my kind lacked. She smelled like the sun and hope. She smelled like determination sharpened to the hard edge of a knife. She smelled like a subtle, spicy undertone hinted at the warrior bloodline she carried in her veins.

I tried to breathe normally and not frighten her.

Or myself.

My mind struggled to believe what my senses were telling me.

*A female capable of giving birth to merfolk. And you found her.*

Hot need exploded through my body, shocking me senseless. I'd been coming to the surface ever since I became of age, but had never run into a siren-born. Not in twenty years. Now that I had, my body ached for this female. It was like a lever released after decades of being held down.

My first visual of her was her as she paddled toward me nonchalantly, a clear indication she hadn't noticed me.

The female was thicker than most of the ones that wandered up and down the shoreline with mere scraps covering their bodies. Most of them looked as though they might snap in half if grabbed. This one looked sturdy. Strong. She wore a garment that covered every part of her. That was

smart. From what Father said human skin tore easily,. And humans always get cold.

This female was intelligent.

Her chest and stomach puffed out comically with one of those floating shirts that humans felt necessary to have when in the water. Foolishness. One could either swim or couldn't. Her brown hair was held back with a string, gathered into one long tail in the back. Golden highlights winked at me underneath the setting sun. Her eyes were a bright green.

She worked the fake fins to move her boat closer to me, and I forgot I was trapped in the netting. Flailing backward with a giant splash, she turned toward me.

I panicked like a frightened guppy, but there was nowhere to run.

# TWO

Jesse

I'D ALWAYS BEEN OBSESSED with the ocean. And not the YOLO, \$4.99 mug that said "life's a beach" obsessed or someone who has their entire bathroom covered in seashells and annoying, quirky little wooden signs that said 'wipe your sandals' or 'wine o'clock.'

No, I was legit. Or at least, I made a promise to keep telling myself that. I was a competitive swimmer who'd grown up going to the ocean at least once a year even though my single mother hadn't really had the means to make it happen. Thank God my gram and my pap lived out here, so we could stay for free.

We both had the ocean in our blood, my mother jokes.

Photos of me at the beach when I was young littered my room. I was all brown braids and pink cheeks, hazel eyes brimming with excitement as I held up a seashell. It was a different time and the contrast of the state of the house between now and then was a stark reminder.

The bright white paint was faded and chipped. A spot on the ceiling in my bedroom leaked, and the mice were slowly waging war and making advancements in the attic every night. Despite all that, my grandparents' run-down house had an excellent location right on North Carolina's intercoastal waterway. They'd moved to a retirement village further south and weren't quite ready to part with the North Carolina house

yet. So, I lived here and kept the place up while attending school. Well, I was supposed to be attending school.

Though the house was making its own case of giving up ... crack by crack.

I pushed my paddle harder into the intercoastal waterway, my kayak zooming through the reeds. At least now that I was kicked out of school, I should have more time to work on the house. I hoped that I could fix it up and prove to my grandparents I could care for it. Maybe one day I could buy it.

I tried not to think about the letter from the township on my kitchen table, calling the house a liability. There was a lot of other legal jargon, but the intent was clear: fix it up or it'll be condemned.

A large splash jerked me out of my thoughts. There were alligators around, after all. What was that moving lump up ahead?

Oh. *Oh.*

Only his upper body was visible as his lower half disappeared under the water. He stared at me, open-mouthed. I had a great view of the etched 'V' below his ab muscles. You didn't see them built like that every day.

I'd read a dirty romance book once that referred to it as a 'cum gutter.'

My face went red just thinking about it.

*Focus, Jesse.*

Right. The hot guy. Was he stuck or caught on something? Fishermen sometimes left traps and other things that could easily ensnare a swimmer or kayaker. Maybe he needed help? He looked embarrassed about something.

"You good?" I asked.

Blonde dreadlocks rested against his tan shoulders with an odd tinkling sound. Bits of shells and sea glass were woven into the strands intricately; they were either in the dread itself or in one of the many braids that went down his back.

Hot and unique-looking. Lucky me.

Wide eyes stared back at me. They were a bright, alarming turquoise the color of which I'd only seen on tv or photos of far-away islands, but nowhere in the oceans I'd been around. Certainly not here. Green and blue blinked, and pale, pink lips parted slightly and revealed perfect and glaringly white teeth.

Water sluiced down his heavily muscled upper torso as he straightened. The water ran over an odd tattoo that snaked around his upper arm and across his clavicle to wrap around his neck. It reminded me of the traditional tribal tattoos from Polynesian cultures. Not ones done at a shop, but ones done the old-fashioned way—with a bone needle and ink.

*He looked like one of those muscled fire dancers from commercials except blond and blue-eyed.*

I gripped my paddle tightly, aware that my wet hair and lumpy wetsuit was *not* the ideal way I wanted to meet someone who looked like him. A stab of the familiar fear and anxiety cropped up, but I immediately shoved it down. Not now.

I was used to people staring at my rolls and my thick legs, and yep, even my ass. At twenty-six, I was sick of the shit and the yo-yo diets. I'd made a vow to be fat and happy. Or tried to. It was a work in progress. Fuck men and their expectations. I wouldn't treat this one any differently.

I cleared my throat, realizing we'd been just staring at each other. I looked left and right, frowning at him. "Did you lose your kayak or your paddle board?"

We were pretty far out from the nearest beach house by a few miles. Wetlands stretched all around us, so it didn't seem likely he'd swam here. He looked like a surfer or a paddle board guy.

He certainly looked strong enough.

I dipped my paddle in the water and gave a small push toward him. He flinched away like I'd charged him with my kayak. His arms pinwheeled out behind him, water sloshing toward me in a mini wave.

My kayak bounced up and down.

“Dude, chill. Just making sure you’re OK.” I paused, taking in the utter look of panic on his face. “You *are* good, right? This isn’t a two-person kayak, but we could figure something out.”

I reached a hand out toward him. I didn’t know why. His nostrils flared the closer I got to him.

I tried again. I knew I wasn’t super attractive or anything, but this hardly seemed like a reasonable reaction.

“Hello?”

He blinked and opened his mouth. An odd, huffing sound came out before he cleared his throat and tried again, blushing like mad.

“H-hi.”

An utterly gorgeous, *shy* man?

And it wasn’t even my birthday.

I put my paddle down across the length of the boat and with my free hand, dug in my life vest pocket. I pulled out a small pocket knife and flipped the blade open, offering it to him, handle first.

“Here. Assuming you’re stuck?”

Those eyes went wide at seeing the blade, then shrunk as I offered it to him. He held my gaze for a moment longer before snatching it and diving under the water.

I frowned at the brief bit of contact. His touch had been cool, but warmer the more he held onto me. He must have been in the water for quite a while to be so cold.

Seconds went by. Then minutes.

Anxiety pooled in my belly. What if he was down there drowning? Caught in some trap? And I was here ... waiting like a ninny?

I had to get out of the kayak and see. I was the only one around for miles.

I secured the paddle inside the kayak and pushed myself further into the reeds until the bow stuck. Assured it wouldn't be going anywhere, I clipped off my lifejacket and threw it in the boat as well. Swinging my legs over the side, I tumbled over the side of the kayak and into the inlet with all the grace of a flailing duck. I'd never mastered how to get out of this thing with any sort of dignity.

I sank immediately into the murky water, my feet sinking into the sandy bottom as the water settled up to my breasts.

No gators. There were no gators. Don't think about the gators, and they wouldn't come.

Taking a steadying breath, I dove under the water toward the group of bubbles he'd disappeared under.

Salt water burned my eyes as I forced them open, my hands blindly reaching out for him. My fingers jammed hard against something hard and scaly, but before I could completely panic, strong arms seized me around my waist and pulled.

We exploded up through the water, blondie striding through the water with me in his arms like a proper damsel, dumping me back into my kayak like I was an errant toddler and not a grown woman closer to the three-hundred-pound mark than the hundred-pound one. My tailbone hit the bottom of the kayak hard and the vessel momentarily dipped down in the water before its natural buoyancy bobbed us back up.

I grit my teeth. I wouldn't complain *too* much, because I wasn't sure what I had touched, but it felt scaly and I was pretty happy to be back in my kayak, away from it.

I turned around, but blondie had disappeared back under the water.

Hopefully, it wasn't a gator. I wasn't sure I had the fortitude or strength to wrestle a full-grown man out of a gator's mouth.

Fuck.

I scooted forward and pushed desperately with my paddle to get out of the reeds. I made it back to open water just as

Blondie's head broke the surface.

Thank Christ.

“Hey! What was that about? I—”

Blondie cut off my tirade, grabbing the front of my kayak with two massive hands and pushing. Not expecting such a sharp and sudden change of direction, my body slammed forward, and I almost tumbled into the water again.

We moved backward fast and away from the reeds. Away from whatever he'd been caught in. And whatever scaly thing lurked in the reeds.

I was going to yell at him again, but his eyes brokered no negotiation whatsoever when he quickly glanced behind us. Following his gaze, I caught a ripple in the water following behind him. Us.

From this distance, it looked like a bumpy log.

*Oh fuck, there was an alligator.*

I gripped the edges of my kayak, holding on and settling my useless paddle in my lap. I'd only get in blondie's way, and we were moving. We were already out into the middle of the inlet and then back toward the clump of houses and decks where I'd launched from.

How was he moving so fast? It was deep here; he couldn't touch. I glanced at his determined face, teeth grit in concentration as his muscles worked to push me further away. He hadn't even broken a sweat yet! Damn, he was strong.

“T-thanks. I didn't even see him,” I managed shakily, adrenaline coursing through my veins as I realized how close both of us had been to being on the local news. “I think I touched him though.”

He huffed through his nose, barely breathing hard despite the effort he was putting forth. “I—I owe you a f-favor for the knife,” he replied. “I hate fishermen and their nets.”

I blinked at the full sentence. His speech pattern lilted lyrically, and I couldn't place the accent. It was somewhere between a southern twang and Irish, as strange as that



sounded. Almost as though he knew the correct words, but not how to say them.

I shook my head. “Yeah, you have to be careful in the reeds. That’s why I typically stay out in open water...” I trailed off awkwardly. I usually never ventured into the reeds. Too big of a risk of running into ... things.

“Well, thanks anyway,” I mumbled.

Lights twinkled nearby as dusk embraced us, signaling we were close to my family’s run-down beach house and the small dock I’d launched from.

Only three houses sat in this bit of isolated waterway, and all three families had owned these properties together for about a hundred years. My grandparents were loath to sell like so many others had and let the area fall victim to commercialism and the tourist board. Slowly, the heavily populated tourist areas further south had crept up into this small little coastal town.

From the water, my house looked sad and derelict compared to the much nicer, more updated houses on either side of it. Next to the bright lights and fresh colors of the new houses, mine looked dingy and sagging. Their docks were fresh and made from recyclable plastic material; mine was dark and aged, sagging and prone to give me splinters if I went barefoot. One day the whole thing would probably collapse into the waterway.

I pointed wordlessly at the first one on the left, heaving myself over the side of the kayak, tumbling into the water. There truly was no easy way to disembark gracefully.

I shook my hair out, unembarrassed.

“Thanks again. Did you want to come in? I owe you a beer, I think.” I jerked my thumb at the house, only blushing a little. Shit, was it clean? How bad was the mess? It wasn’t like I’d known that I’d run into a hot guy on the waterway.

He grabbed my wrist, his rough, callused hand pulling me close to him without warning. He caught me against his chest, and the smell of the ocean filled my nose. He smelled like salt

and sand, with a hint of something more; something wild, and ... spicy?

“Do you live here?” he asked roughly, the sound reverberating from his chest more than his throat.

“Yeah. We used to just come part time, but I’m living by myself at the moment. Quarter-life crisis and all that. I’m uh, trying to fix it up.” My mouth snapped shut. He didn’t give a shit about my sad life story.

My kayak bumped up against the old wood dock, but neither of us paid it any attention as we stood next to it in the shallow water.

Those aquamarine eyes glowed in the semi-darkness. And his defined muscles were all right there. Rarely had I met a man strong enough to hoist my ass. Which was super hot, by the way. Most men wouldn’t even try to lift me, let alone succeed.

At this point in my life, I had little fear of rejection. I’d had enough to fill anyone’s cup. What was the worst that could happen, right? Leaning forward, I went for it, hooking my arm around his neck as my lips hovered near his.

He’d either go for it, or jerk away. I was prepared for either.

What I wasn’t prepared for was a complete mauling.

As if a switch flipped, the arm holding my wrist shot around my waist and dragged me against him, the other going to the back of my head and holding me still. He spun in the water, little waves crashing around us as he slammed my back up against the wooden post of the dock.

I ignored the scrape of the rough wood, hoping we missed the sharp barnacles, then deciding it would be worth it if we didn’t. I’d take any amount of splinters or wounds in exchange for a little action. His lips descended onto mine and he assaulted me in the best way possible.

I’d kissed a fair share of guys, but what my blond man lacked in technical precision, he made up for in sheer enthusiasm and passion. I could only hold on as he devoured

my lips, his pelvis pressing up against mine. His kiss was oddly cool, yet stoking a fire deep in my belly. Our teeth bumped together, but I didn't care, surprised and hopelessly aroused by his need. He bit down on my lower lip and tugged, a low growl rumbling from his chest. I cursed my wetsuit, unable to feel much of him.

He pushed me back further, the hand around my waist sneaking up between my breasts and gripping my neck. His thumb pressed against the pulsing vein in my neck, and his fingers easily wrapped around my throat.

*Good god.*

I moaned, my head falling back against the wood, water sloshing all around us. Never in my life had I hated a wetsuit more than in this moment. I wanted to feel his body on mine without barriers. I—

He pulled away abruptly, so terribly abruptly that I sank momentarily under the water. I coughed and sputtered, grabbing onto the side of the deck to keep me in place, cursing as I almost sliced my hand open on a barnacle. I tried to glare at him, but I was still too dazed and confused.

“I must go. Goodbye.”

My mouth hung open as he turned and dove with insane grace back into the water, casually swimming off into the sunset like the lead in a goddamn rom com.

What the—

“Wait a damn minute! Where are you going? There's nothing out there!”

The inlet was part of the intercoastal waterway that winnowed out to the Atlantic Ocean. He was swimming south, and I knew we were the last few houses for a good twenty miles. Where the fuck was he *going*, then?

I held on tightly to the dock, refusing to look away. Refusing to believe he was just ... swimming off into the darkness. And yet he did.

“Fuck. *Fuck.*”

I'd invited him in, but he hadn't taken me up on it. I hadn't found out a single thing about him, not even his fucking name.

I cursed as I realized my kayak was happily floating away. I dove after it, bringing it back and tying it to the dock angrily. I sat on the edge for a long time, my eyes straining to glimpse my mysterious man as the sun dipped below the horizon. Maybe he had a kayak somewhere nearby, offshore. Maybe he was camping in the public park a mile away. People often did.

Wet and grumpy, I staggered to the rusty outdoor shower and yanked on the chain, sending a cascade of freezing cold freshwater over my body. The jolt to my system helped pull my head out of my ass ... a little bit, at least.

Focus on what needed to be done. That's what I always did when life got too much to handle. My gaze turned to the house: once a bright white, it was now dirty and dingy looking. Maybe if I painted it a dark color, that would help? Ha, what a sad, desperate attempt to hide the fact that it was falling into disrepair.

It had been a beautiful, tidy seaside manor once upon a time, but now the front porch was unstable, and the back deck creaked and bowed if you ran across it. Welcome to America, where the next generation is quickly becoming poorer than the last.

I didn't mind the old plumbing and the cracked windows, or how the wind sometimes cut through the gaps in the wood. I thought it was a perfect retreat for a dumpy, nearing middle-aged woman changing careers and with no real prospects in life.

Just like the house, I was a real disappointment to everyone. We were made for each other.

I grit my teeth against the cold water sluicing down my body, but it did nothing to quench the fire in my core.

Stupid men and their stupid mouths.

I toweled off and headed inside, intent on a bagel and a quick date with the vibrator that waited inside my top left

drawer next to my bed. Then I'd attack the house like I wished I could attack Mr. Blondie.

First I'd vacuum, but maybe then I could go get some varnish from the hardware store on the highway. If I stained the deck, maybe that would help ...

Casting another look around the dirty kitchen, despair settled around me like a heavy jacket. Fixing this house wouldn't change anything; it wouldn't help. No matter how much money I spent on it, it was what it was; just like me.

Neither of us could truly be fixed.

As I stomped into the bedroom, dripping water on the worn floorboards, I tried to get Blondie out of my head, but I knew I'd been thinking about him when I took care of myself later. A strong jaw, quivering muscles, and those eyes ...

*Cum gutters.*

I flopped down on the bed and snatched up my toy, refusing to feel any guilt. It wasn't like I would ever see him again, after all.

# THREE

Merrick

THE HORIZON MERGED with the sea as the sun disappeared, night falling. The balmy water gave way to inky cold the deeper I went, but it only warmed my chest. The cold meant home.

Home wasn't *too* far below the surface, but it was deep enough that the humans wouldn't bother us. Our clan kept ourselves in a deep valley just off shore, away from the boats and loud machines the humans used. My palms skirted over the dancing red algae, tickling my skin. I made a mental note to grab some for my cave sometime. I wanted to experiment with grinding the algae up to see if I could make a red dye of some sort. Red was a bright color loved by mers, but hard to come by unless it was a weed of some sort or the scales of my fellow mers.

And understandably, they were quite attached to those.

I dove down into the inky depths, my eyes adjusting as bioluminescent lights lined our homes to guide us. Not that I needed it. My house was one of the largest, since Father was the chief. I swam inside, prepared to be chastised.

“Ah, he wasn't lost after all.” My father paused, his eyes landing on me grumpily. My stomach flipped as thirty or so mers looked up and stared at me. Our home wasn't large by any means; it wasn't much larger than any of the other ones, constructed by stacking stones and plugging the holes with dead coral and using seaweed to cover the cracks. Even now,

my eyes scanned the ceiling, thinking of a dozen different materials that could be used to make the houses more visually appealing—mother of pearl, conches ... but alas. Father once told me this village was supposed to be temporary, but hundreds of years later, we were still here.

None of those musings help the fact that I was late; really, *really* late.

The mers gathered around the large shell table turned and stared. Father rose from the single stone chair toward the back, frowning at me. His dark hair flowed behind him, long and loose today.

“Cutting it close, don’t you think?”

My cousin Barrett’s grin was a bit too malicious for my tastes.

“Shut up,” I hissed, smacking him in the shoulder.

“You’re in trouble....” Barrett lilted in a sing-song voice, not bothering to keep his voice down. He was forty compared to my thirty-five, but I swear he acted like a guppy most days.

At eighty, my father was not so easily amused. “Boys,” he grunted.

We both straightened and focused on the meeting. Other clan heads were present, announcing this as a serious venture. There was my father, head of the Sunfish clan. Bright eyes marked our males, as well as the gold kissed edges on our scales, fins, and tail. My father stood in front of a chair of decorative coral and bone—a chair that *I’d* fashioned for him—and glared imperiously at the others. His dark hair was a complete contrast to mine, held away from his face with a thong made haphazardly of seaweed and shells. I’d offered to make him a proper one for a few of the squids that their territory is famous for, but he refused.

His loss.

Across from him paced the head of the Bluefish clan, his son Aris close by his side. Their waists were covered in the spines of a dead fish, fluttering gently with every sharp turn as the chief paced. Everything about them was tinted blue, from

their scales to their tails. Even their skin carried the hue, which made it more difficult for their males to hunt for a breeding partner. They hadn't had a birth in nearly one hundred years.

But if Barrett annoyed me, Aris was a pain in my ass.

Also in attendance were the Kingfish clan—rumored to be descendants of Poseidon himself, as well as the Spadefish and the Jackfish clans. Their silver spots flashed at me with every small movement. It was irritating.

“The birth rates are declining, even as low as they are,” spat the Bluefish chief.

My father's lips thinned. “I understand your concerns, but we don't have the resources to support *all* of your males coming here to hunt year round. The humans may get suspicious. If the beaches get shut down and they cancel their festival rite, we will all be out of luck.”

Ah, the festival rite. The time of the year when many young humans, both male and female, flocked to our shores. We weren't sure what they were celebrating, but it was a large, loud celebration. They would stay for six or seven nights, drinking and dancing on the sand in tiny clothes that barely covered their bodies. Then they would leave, and not return for a year's time.

It was prime hunting season for us.

“We aren't asking for you to house them indefinitely,” argued the Kingfish chief, “just for the week of the festival. Our males will bring with them goods as payment for their presence. Our shores never have the gathering that yours do. We are all in this together.”

My father sighed, his hair a dark halo as it floated around him.

“I am not convinced our shores are the best hunting grounds,” he replied. “No suitable females have been found in decades, just like your shores.”

My blood froze, remembering my female. I realized I didn't even know her name. That was all right. I didn't need it; I'd be able to scent her out, anyway. I was sure of it.



Barnacles.

“It’s a numbers’ game, Tride,” said the chief of the Spadefish clan. Black scales snaked down his face and tail in distinctive stripes. “Your shores have the largest group of females gathered for their rite. Therefore, the highest likelihood of success. If any of our males do find a partner, we have all agreed to pay you handsomely for your patience. My youngest male is fifty-five!” The chief gestured to his son, whose cheeks reddened with embarrassment. He didn’t look much older than me, despite the twenty years of difference. Such was the way with our blood. We outlived humans easily though the elders claimed we lived longer when the sirens still roamed the oceans with us.

“Fine,” my father capitulated, his fingers digging into his temples. “I will allow the males to gather in our village for the seven nights of the festival only.” He paused as hope flared in the eyes of the other chiefs. “However, I must insist they take care and not draw attention. If any of your males cause trouble, they will leave with no questions asked. I have final say.”

The chiefs all nodded, obviously eager to have the deal sealed.

“Very well.” My father pushed off from his seat, his powerful tail disrupting the sand nearby. The swirls settled back onto the ocean floor and he directed the others, “Please retire for refreshments. I would speak with my son alone.”

The other chiefs drifted quickly from the room. Barrett rolled his eyes and gave me a look, following them out. As a cousin to the chief, he was given a lot of leeway in most things. Most of the time I was wildly envious of him. Perhaps he’d like to switch places?

Aris sneered at me before he followed his father out, his blue tail flipping at me in a sign of disrespect. I ignored him.

“Merrick!” Father called.

I swam closer, unease filling my gut like it usually did when my father wanted to have a talk. “Yes, Father. I am

here.”

His dark eyebrows rose. “*Now* you are here. Am I to expect you to be so dedicated in your pursuit to find a female that you lost track of the sun’s position?”

I winced, unable to hide my reaction from his sarcastic tone. He knew I wasn’t going to the surface to look for a female. We both knew, just as he knew the last thing I wanted was to become chief. It was a silent wound that festered between us, never spoken about, but never able to heal, either. I’d go days sometimes without seeing my father. He was so busy managing the clan and keeping us all safe that he didn’t do anything else. I knew the day I became king, I’d never again have time to work on my art.

I liked to build sculptures using materials I found in the seabed. It seemed silly and pointless to some, but it was the one thing I had absolute control over in my life. I could create whatever I wished: replicas of the fish who frequented our waters or even crude portraits of my friends or the sigils of the different clans. A few of them had even traveled to purchase a few of my works, so I must not be too terrible at it. Father thought it was all nonsense, but certainly hadn’t turned his nose at what the others had brought to barter with, proving that the art had value.

To some, if not him. My opinion didn’t matter, of course.

It was tempting to tell him I *had* found one, but bragging was for guppies.

“It appears there will be more competition,” I offered instead, meeting the green and blue eyes that were identical to mine.

My father drifted back down to his chair, his chin falling into his hands. “Merrick, I know you don’t agree with what we must do.”

My lip curled. “You mean seducing human females, getting them pregnant, then abandoning them?”

His face twisted. “It is preferable to kidnapping them, which our predecessors tried, Merrick, with disastrous

consequences. Would you rather we kill the females? They cannot survive down here with us. We cannot survive up there with them.”

I wasn't so sure about that, but said nothing. My stomach soured like it always did when we argued about this.

“I simply think there must be a better way. One we haven't explored yet,” I insisted, refusing to raise my voice.

He glared at me from under his heavy brow. “Do share if you come up with anything.” His fingers flicked at me; a clear dismissal.

I pushed down the growl in my chest and turned, swimming away as fast as I could without seeming disrespectful.

For hundreds of years, it was how we'd survived as a race. The last of the sirens died out a few hundred years ago, though we still didn't know how or why. Some historians blamed human contamination in our oceans, while others went a different route and argued that the females chose to forsake the sea and live among humans, mating with human men and diluting the bloodline until they simply didn't exist anymore.

It was a ludicrous theory, but they *had* all seemingly vanished at once.

Others said it was dark magick.

Either way, it left us with few options other than to find human females with traces of that lineage in their blood, and mate with them, praying they had a male child.

Then we returned to the ocean, waiting for the birth.

If it was a female, nothing further happened. Female children were raised as humans; indistinguishable despite the small amount of siren blood in their veins.

But the males?

The males born of a siren lineage were always mers, and immediately stolen and brought back to the ocean to join our clan. The celebrations usually lasted for weeks.

Yet there hadn't been one for decades.

I disagreed with the practice. It didn't sit right with me—abandoning human females like that. Privately I wondered if such treatment and attitudes were why the sirens disappeared in the first place.

My father said it was our instincts from long ago creeping in, that the urge to protect and provide was what made the act so distasteful to me. He even agreed with me it was not preferable, but argued we had no choice. If we didn't do this, our species would die out completely.

Just like the sirens.

Some days, I wondered if that was a bad thing. With pollution and the dying reefs, who knew how long we'd last? The behavior patterns of sharks and other marine life were constantly changing because of the environmental crisis. Was our way of life even sustainable? What would it be like to migrate onto land, and live as a human? Would it be so terrible?

It sounded a little exciting.

This was why I preferred building shell sculptures to debating siren policy. It was better than trying to solve all the world's problems.

As I left my home, my nemesis Aris lay in wait for me. Aris puffed his chest out confidently, his lackey clan mates surrounding him and clapping him on the shoulder, laughing. "Merrick! Ready to go hunting next week? I bet I will bring back a female before all of you."

I turned away, fully intent on ignoring him and getting a few hours to myself. It was only a matter of time before the other clans sent for their males and I would be forced to entertain them all as the chief's only son.

"Hey. Art boy. I'm talking to you."

I stopped, shoulders hunched, as Aris sneered at my back. He knew I couldn't be *too* rude; I was the host prince, after all.

“You’re pathetic,” he continued. “All those females on your shores year after year, and I hear you don’t even hunt them. You hunt for *rocks!*”

His lackeys all laughed loudly, the sound grating my ears. I bunched my hands into fists, the gold in my scales gleaming. I didn’t react otherwise.

*Your female.*

Fear shot through my blood, and suddenly I couldn’t get my female’s face out of my head. If I didn’t find her, then the others would first. *Aris* could find her.

Their guffaws faded as I swam away.

“Hey! Stop!”

I paused my tail as I recognized Barrett’s voice.

“They’re assholes. Ignore them,” Barrett sniffed, coming up and laying a heavy hand on my shoulder. He held out a drink with the other, shoving it toward me.

I studied one of my father’s preferred fish bone cups. As with all our drinks underwater, it was contained in a gelatin bubble composed of seaweed. To drink, you would puncture the outside sac with your fangs, and draw it into your mouth. The cup was decorative and showed status. Most mers didn’t bother with them at all, and simply carried the sacks, but I made all of my father’s cups myself.

I accepted it on reflex and rolled my eyes, shoving him away.

“Like I ignore you? I’ve seen how well that works.”

I pumped my tail twice, putting a good bit of distance between us.

He snorted and propelled himself toward me, arms arching over his head as he blocked my path, hanging upside down in front of me. “Come on, everyone’s just excited. We’ll probably get to hunt in packs this time. That will be fun, won’t it?”

I tried to muster up a weak grin, but I couldn't do it. I wasn't excited about the hunt. I didn't want all these extra males around me consuming my time and energy. I thought of my female at the mercy of Aris, or any of the other brutish males who would have no qualms about taking what they needed from her physically and emotionally. Of leaving her there on the shore, possibly hurt and confused.

The cup in my hand shattered as I squeezed it too hard.

Barrett's dark eyebrows bunching into a frown above his eyes. "You good?"

The turn of phrase made my blood run cold, reminding me of my female. I spun around to face him, fire in my eyes.

"You go up to the surface much more often than I do. Don't you?" I asked intently, my fangs elongating and poking through my lips in my fervor.

Barrett flipped in the water, alarmed by my vehemence. "Well ... I don't know about that. But yeah, I'm up there pretty often. I even walk around and talk to a few. My grasp on the language is probably the best. The point *is* to find a female. Gotta talk to them to do that." He laughed.

I blinked. I hadn't realized my only friend was so ... worldly.

"You seem tense. Something going on you haven't mentioned?" Barrett inquired, floating so there was a little distance between us. Unlike most of the other males, Barrett knew I'd inherited my father's temper. Even though I kept it under lock and key most of the time, he was one of the few who'd ever seen it.

"I'm ... fine," I muttered darkly.

With the sudden attention on the shore and influx of rowdy young males, there was only one solution left I could think of.

I'd have to keep a close eye on my female and make sure none of the others found her.

# FOUR

Jesse

“EASY, Nessa. There’s enough for everyone.”

The giant manatee didn’t listen, gobbling up the greens I’d just throw on the top of her water like she’d never get fed again. Never mind she got fed three times a day, every day, for the past decade.

I scowled at her and moved on, dropping the bucket behind me with a crash, and picking up the next two, one in each hand. These contained a congealing mess of fish guts I knew I’d still smell on me tomorrow no matter how hard I scraped my skin when I showered.

I crossed the entryway into the next exhibit, and walked over the metal grates. “Dinner time!”

I dumped the mess from one bucket over the side of the tank, and the three seals flocked toward me immediately: Huey, Dewey, and Louie. I rolled my eyes every time I went into their enclosure. The owner of the aquarium I interned at was a Disney adult of the first degree. He donated all the money, so he got to name the animals.

I made my way to the opposite corner and dumped the second bucket. The last seal was older and rarely felt like fighting the younger ones for food. I fed him separately.

“Eat up, Donald.”

Tasks finished for the day, I gathered my empty buckets and entered the large janitorial closet. I turned the water on and started hosing the buckets down.

Oh boy, if my mother could see me now. Waist deep in fish guts and covered in blood. When I'd imagined becoming a marine biologist, doing grunt work in an aquarium hadn't exactly been part of the overall dream.

Then again, neither had losing my scholarship.

So here I was.

Never mind that my entire life plan had smashed itself to pieces.

*You're going to have to tell them soon.*

I pushed that thought away and stacked the buckets with a little more force than necessary. I'd rather think of happier things.

Like Blondie.

No. Not him. He'd apparently come to his senses after a blistering kiss that had curled my toes and he had fled. No number, no Netflix and chill, no Instagram handle.

Oh well, his loss. I was hilarious and a decent cook: a goddamn delight.

I made it to the locker room and quickly stripped out of my wetsuit. I hung it on the hook to dry overnight and made a quick change into an A-line black cocktail dress that flattered my figure. I pulled on knee-length leggings underneath, applied the barest traces of makeup, and slipped my sandals on. I'd change into my low heels once I got there.

I clocked out and burned it out of the aquarium, my fingers fumbling with the lock on the bike rack, trying to unlock it and get out of here. The lock was old and stuck often, but everything was so close in this tourist city that getting a car made little sense. As if I could afford it, anyway.

“Jesse! There you are!”



Inwardly, I groaned, but the lock popped open into my hand, freeing my bike from the rack. I spun around with a fake smile on my face.

“Archie. I thought all the interns were done,” I stammered.

Unlike the pariah *I* was, Archie was still an official member of our college’s—his college’s—program. As the son of the dean, he could likely murder someone and not get kicked out. I tried not to sneer as he tugged on the collar of his embroidered polo shirt that marked him as part of the scientist division. No cleaning tanks or scooping seaweed for him.

“I have permission to stick around and watch while the scientists do some real work, and not the kid stuff they do when we’re around,” he scoffed, folding his arms and leaning back against the building, a smirk stretching his lips.

I rolled my eyes. “Great. If you don’t mind, I have less than an hour to bike over to Calash for my other job. So I’ll just—”

His hand reached out toward my bike but I grabbed it with two hands and leaned away, recoiling. His touch was so demanding, rude, and completely unwanted.

I swatted Archie’s hands away and swung a leg over my bike.

Archie’s expression soured as he backed away. “If you took me up on my offer, then you’d be back in the program like that.” He snapped his fingers for emphasis, his expression that of a benevolent god bestowing a gift upon some poor, tortured mortal.

Me being the tortured mortal, of course.

Rage flooded my body. Yeah, I knew what his little offer entailed. I tilted my head toward, smiling once more. His body relaxed at that.

*Idiot.*

“And here I thought you’d gotten the hint the first time I knocked out your teeth. You think I wouldn’t do it again?” I leaned toward him menacingly. To my glee, he took a step-

back, half-covering his mouth with a hand. I was one of the few people that knew his pearly whites were fake veneers after the last time he'd tried to catch me alone. It was one of my proudest accomplishments to date—more so than almost qualifying for the state swim meet my senior year.

Seeing Archie's fake teeth reminded me of Blondie's perfect dentals. Those teeth had been the real deal.

"You're a fat, dumb bitch," Archie spat. "You're lucky you didn't get put away for assault. My father—"

"Knew how many witnesses there were to what you said to me, and then what you tried to do. Don't lie," I spat back and swung a leg over my bike, tucking my skirt into my leggings so it wouldn't catch in the chain. I could have let it go at that, but I wanted to twist the knife a little more.

"I wonder what your fiancé would say if I shot her a little text about what you did, and about what you keep trying to do?"

His face went purple with rage, but he fell silent and backed off.

Coward.

"Piss off, Archie," I sneered.

My tires spat gravel up in his face, and I pedaled as hard as I could for as long as I could. Once I reached the shoulder of the main road, I let the tears fall. I had about a forty-five minute ride. Plenty of time to have a small-sized cry, purge what feelings I had for my miserable existence, then put on a smile for customers.

Archie knew how devastated I'd been to get kicked out of the program for something I had no control over. But I'd do it all again in a heartbeat versus taking him up on his stupid offer: he wanted a fuck buddy while his betrothed was away in Spain on a fellowship. Archie claimed that in exchange for my unquestioned willingness and resulting silence, he'd get me back in the program, no questions asked.

I hated rich boys who had daddies in high places.

Most of the time, I told him to fuck off. Other times, it was more difficult. Like tonight, when I raced from one job to the next, desperate to make ends meet. Or when I was cleaning up puke from some snot-nosed kid in the bathroom, and accidentally ran into my old group of fellow students, heads bent at a nearby table, eagerly debating the newest technique they'd learned.

When they saw me, they always got quiet and nervous. Embarrassed, even.

God, it hurt.

Those times, I half-considered it. It would suck, but not as much as telling my grandparents I'd been kicked out of the program.

Actually, I wasn't sure which one of those things would be worse.

I pedaled harder, relishing the burn in my muscles. I didn't care if I sweat through my dress, or arrived with my hair a frazzled mess around my face. It felt good to expel my demons physically, if not in reality.

The evening lights twinkled against the waterfront as I passed restaurant after restaurant, and microbrewery after microbrewery. Festive lanterns hung on outdoor patios, and the sounds of live bands hit me here and there as I quickly passed them. The crowds were light now, but starting tomorrow tourists would start arriving for spring break, or as we referred to it 'hell week.' For us, anyway. The owners loved it *and* hated it because as rude, loud, and demanding as the spring break crowd was, those kids were *loaded*. Many businesses made more from this upcoming week than they did all summer.

The scent of the ocean hit me in the face, along with the smell of rotting fish and seaweed: the Calash docks.

Why did I stay at the aquarium? I'd make more as a waitress.

*You don't care about money.*

And didn't that just suck? I knew I couldn't let go of the aquarium. Doing so meant letting go of my dreams; of me. I couldn't do it, not yet. Plus, the aquarium offered better wages than the other jobs nearby and a bit of health insurance. And I cared about the animals.

Somehow I had to.

At night, I served cocktails and drinks to the wealthy patrons aboard the *Lucky Lady*, a notorious gambling boat that made eight trips out to international waters a week. I hadn't been happy at first, but it was one of the few jobs that was completely compatible with the aquarium.

I hopped off my bike and dug out my lock, attaching it to a rusting bit of metal next to the dock. The water bobbed up and down over the heavy barnacles on the wood, sloshing gently in the tide.

"Jesse! Come on! Captain wants to leave early!"

Groaning, I grabbed my bag. I'd have to finish changing on board.

Racing down the wooden dock, I hopped aboard the boat. Javi met me with a dashing smile and took my hand to help me over the large step to get on board. He was already primed to go, looking sharp in a black suit with a blood red tie. The large stud in his ear sparkled under the dock lights.

"Cutting it close," he joked, but with no real fire. He knew how hard I worked, and everything else about me, for that matter.

"I know," I groaned, leaning into his hands as I got my bearings under me as the boat rocked and swayed in the wake of the larger boats heading out. He gave my shoulders a quick squeeze and I groaned, relishing the mini massage.

"Asshole-in-chief decided to delay me," I admitted.

Javi frowned, letting go of me. "He's still stalking you? You should really tell someone."

"Right. I'm lucky I didn't get charged with breaking his stupid face. I can ignore him. It's under control."

Javi sighed and threw his hands in the air. “Whatever. You’re a big girl.”

He followed me to the back room, and I quickly shucked off my pants and traded my sandal flats for kitten heels. I fluffed out my hair with my hands and turned to him for inspection.

“Well? Not too bad, right?”

Javi stood back, an introspective look on his face and his hand on his hip. A finger trailed his lip as his eyes roved over me. One finger crooked out at me. “Come here.”

I obeyed, stopping in front of him and turning around. His hands deftly took my thick strands of hair in his fingers and he expertly twisted and tucked.

“Got a hair tie?” he asked.

I held up my wrist, and he fished the black band off of me. My head jerked back and forth as he finished up, pulling a few strands free to frame my face.

“Now, turn around.”

I did so, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. Javi knew more about fashion and makeup than I ever could, so I had to trust him. He dove into one of the other worker’s cubbies, coming up with a shade of bright red lipstick.

“That’s Mara’s,” I warned, narrowing my eyes.

“Such a big brain, Miss Science Pants,” he cajoled, smearing a bit on his fingers, then applying it to my lips. “Besides, she’s on maternity leave. She’ll never know.” He studied me. “Perfecto. Let’s go peep on the patrons.”

Javi and I threaded our way through the claustrophobic corridor of the tiny boat and up to the kitchens. We hid behind the push-through doors, peering out through the circular windows to get a glimpse of our patrons for the night.

“Mike said they’re classier than our normal folks,” Javi admitted. And indeed he was right. The first few people to be helped on board were dressed to the nines in tuxedos and long, sparkling cocktail dresses.

I raised a brow. “What’s the occasion?”

“Something with the university. Higher ups doing higher up things.” He watched me carefully for a reaction.

I tried to keep my face blank, I really did, but my heart seized in my chest, my throat tight as faces swam in front of me; the same professors who’d ruined my life.

As more people came on board, I recognized them one by one: the dean of my department, who’d been at the hearing where he’d informed me I was no longer a student. On his arm was his blonde wife, tittering softly and fluttering her eyes at everyone. A few of my professors were also present, looking unsure but thrilled to be there as they moved to take a seat at the tables, since dinner would get served shortly.

The president of the university herself came aboard next, three men (including the dean) falling over themselves to assist her with the step from the dock to the boat. If I wasn’t so triggered, I might have laughed.

“Well then,” Javi huffed.

“You two make better doors than windows,” gruffed Miguel, the head cook.

We moved to the side and I put my back to the door, swallowing heavily. “I don’t think I can do this,” I said weakly.

Javi’s eyes darted back and forth from the guests to me, even as Miguel grumpily pushed an hors d’oeuvres tray into his hands.

“If you want to bail, I’ll cover you. I’ll think of the nastiest excuse: diarrhea, or you were blowing chunks over the side. Or your period! Better yet, your period gave you diarrhea and then you started blowing chunks.”

Miguel glared at me in silent warning, as if I were about to do it all his food. I ignored him. Gratitude heated my insides and gave me warm fuzzies from Javi’s support, but I knew I couldn’t just run away from my problems. As tempting as it would be.

“I can’t leave you alone with all the work,” I protested.

Javi snorted. “Ah, but you forget how charismatic I am. And I’d get all the tips from these rich bastards.”

I pushed him playfully, and he flashed me his debonair smile. The faux-diamond stud in his ear winked at me.

“Still trying to find that sugar daddy to whisk you away from here?” I teased.

He sighed as if living were a burden. “One day my prince will come.”

I laughed and knew I could get through this. It wouldn’t be fun, but I’d survive.

*Like everything else in my life.*

A bell chimed overhead, announcing that we were pulling away from the dock. That meant it was time for drinks and appetizers. I fixed a cheesy smile on my face and headed to get another plate from Miguel.

“Atta girl,” Javi encouraged.

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I MADE IT THROUGH COCKTAILS. I made it through appetizers. We had even cruised most of the way through dinner service with no issues, and the evening was drawing to a close. I took drink orders from most of the patrons without incident, Javi working his magic to ensure I didn’t personally serve or have to deal with anyone who knew me directly.

He was an absolute angel.

But I knew it wouldn’t last forever. There were only twenty people on board, and the two of us served them. It was inevitable it would go wrong sooner or later.

“Excuse me, a refill.”

I flinched as my former dean held out his glass toward me, not even turning his head from the poker game in front of him. Breathing hard, I grabbed the glass and abruptly turned away. A glance up showed Javi was already on his way to intercept me and take the order himself.

A hand landed on my upper arm and I froze. “Hey, you look familiar.”

I swallowed heavily, my eyes flicking up to a face with dark eyes and quivering jowls. Streaks of gray marred his hair and sideburns, the slight glaze in his eyes belying how completely sloshed he was.

That enraged me more than being grabbed. How dare he sit here and gamble and drink while callously ruining lives? How dare he stare me down that day months ago, destroy my life, then not even recognize me!

I snatched my arm back. The rest of the table paused, glancing up at me with interest as well at the sudden tension. From my dean’s right-hand side, my professor’s eyes widened with dawning horror.

*Good.*

I was sick of the bullshit.

“Yeah, you recognize me,” I said.

Javi grabbed the back of my dress, his fingers bunching tightly in the fabric and pulling.

“Ex-nay on the issyness-pay,” he growled in my ear.

I shoved him off and focused on the dean. “You kicked me out of the program claiming I was ‘morally bereft.’ Because you’re all so godly and everything. Well, that was your excuse. We all know it’s because Archie tried to rape me, and god forbid you hold him accountable for anything.”

My hands tightened around the glass as I glared at them all, gambling and drinking, daring them to prove me wrong. It would feel so good to throw the glass against the wall and watch it shatter. Not here, though. Not now. Even if they deserved my rage.

“Jesse, please—”

“And where were you?” I pleaded with the one professor, her face twisted in discomfort. I glared at them all. “No one argued for me. No one helped me. I lost everything.”



This time I started to let Javi drag me back toward the kitchen, but I had one last thing to say. I jerked forward and squared my shoulders. I looked all of them in the eyes.

“Archie Davenport tried to rape me in the aquatics lab, but got caught by a room full of interns. I’m here and he’s still there. Take that up with your so-called ethics. Christian university, my ass.”

Javi yanked me back through the double doors of the kitchen, past Dan, the befuddled cook, and into the large refrigerator in the back. Once the door closed behind us, I burst into tears.

Javi sighed. “Tips will suck tonight.”

“You already collected most of them,” I protested.

“That was stupid of you,” he shot back.

“I know,” I choked out.

“This is gonna have consequences.”

“I *know*,” I bit out, distress shooting through my veins.

“You’re going to get fired,” Javi breathed out, his hands tangling in his dark hair. If he was accidentally mussing his carefully styled hair, shit was bad.

Tears leaked from the corner of my eyes, hot and burning. “I KNOW!”

His arms came around me, and I sobbed. My life was broken and shattered, and it felt so fucking unfair.

# FIVE

Merrick

THE REST of the males arrived within hours, which meant they'd already been on their way, leaving before my father had agreed to let them come. That meant the other clans and their elders had assumed he'd say yes. If my father noticed this, he said nothing.

Overnight, our village, cut into the deep rock at the bottom of the ocean, had gone from housing fifty members of my clan to nearly two hundred. And there were more to come.

“Mer-ick! Up!”

I flinched away from the little mer, muttering an apology. Where had he come from? His tiny tail fluttered behind him, irritated I wasn't paying him any attention. I didn't blame him; normally I loved it when other clans visited with their young.

And there are so few young these days.

“I am sorry, but I'm busy today,” I said.

He sniffed and swam away, likely looking for someone more fun, and less antsy and irritated by everyone around him.

Sighing, I followed the edge of the valley up toward the surface, letting the red algae graze my belly and tail on the way up. The water up here was still quite warm from the hot day on the surface.

I coughed and hacked up seawater as my head burst the surface, the transition from gills to human lungs was always the worst part of going above water. It was night, making my ascent easier as I slipped into the inlet I had first met the siren born in.

She was not there.

That wasn't surprising. Few humans were on the water at night, since it was more dangerous for them and prime hunting time for predators. The moon shone overhead, its beams shining off the water much weaker than the sun, but still with its own beauty. The muffled shine was more familiar to me; it was how the sun filtered down through the water and mimicked the dull glow of sea glass.

I swam toward the cluster of three houses on the edge, frowning at how dark they all were. Was the female not there either?

*The female.*

I had a choice to make.

I could sit here and pout and wait for one of the other males to discover her. Or I could go on land, put on the garments, and ... attempt to find her. Barrett *had* given me a human garment and footwear a long time ago, which I carried in the pouch I wore around my chest in case of a surface emergency.

Indecision twisted my gut. *I would not breed her and leave*, I vowed. She deserved better than what our tradition dictated.

Sudden worry flared in my chest. What if one of the other males had already gotten to her? What if that was the reason she wasn't here?

Red flashed in my vision, fear seizing my chest in a vice grip and not letting go. That decided it for me. I swam to the edge of the shoreline under her dock, and lifted myself on top of it. I strained to pull my heavy tail up after me, but I managed just fine, scooting back until my fin no longer touched the water.

The moment my body felt open air, my scales and fins disappeared, leaving behind only smooth, tanned human skin. The slight webbing between my fingers faded away, and my tail split in half, reforming into legs.

I'd never really practiced with them before. Sitting here in the dark on this crumbling deck, that seemed like a glaring oversight.

I tugged the wet garment Barrett had given me out of my bag, along with the strange footwear. Humans had feet and apparently they were born with a deficiency that forced them to cover them with small shields at all times. Looking at the soft, smooth skin on my new appendages, I could see why. It wouldn't take much to wound them. Why were humans born wounded? The poor things.

Though, it would be interesting to take a few of these materials under the water and see what I could do with them. Surely Barrett wouldn't miss an extra pair of jeans, would he? The material seemed very strong.

I lined the holes in the "shorts" up with my new legs, just like Barrett had explained. It was an awkward shimmy, but I got them up around my waist. Humans did not enjoy displaying their private parts to each other, for some reason. Though they were just as sensitive and exposed as human feet, so I understood the need to cover them for that reason.

Human anatomy made no sense.

I rolled onto my hands and new knees, getting a feel for my balance on all four limbs like a land animal. Slowly, I shifted my weight back onto my legs, balancing on my knees the way I'd seen other humans do. I swayed back and forth wildly.

This gravity thing was going to be a problem.

My two legs had large muscles in them, but they didn't look large enough to support my upper body. My tail was much bigger! Nevertheless, I steeled myself and tried to stand.

I fell over immediately, hitting the deck with my elbow first. A jolt of hot pain raced up my arm, and I grit my teeth in

agony as the wood bit into my delicate human skin.

Slow. Go *slow*.

Again.

I carefully put my legs under me, and slowly raised my body inch by inch, letting myself adjust to gravity's pull on me. They taught us about gravity in guppy school. I hated it.

I wobbled and wiggled, but didn't fall. I kept my arms thrown out to the side like Barrett had suggested. I don't know if it helped or not, but I stayed upright.

Now to take a step.

I slid my brand new foot across the wood. This was a poor decision as small, stinging pains immediately assaulted me. I stopped and hissed in annoyance. It felt like being grazed by a jellyfish. I sat back down and saw bits of wood sticking out of my new flesh.

I understood now why the footwear was so crucial.

I picked the few slivers of wood out, bleeding lightly. I put the flimsy rubber coverings over the bottom of my feet, not seeing how it would help all that much. I stood again, slinging my pouch over my bare chest.

Now I was a proper-looking human. At least, according to Barrett.

I would have brought him along to help me, but I couldn't risk him scenting my female. I wouldn't risk her for anyone.

So here I was, trying not to die as I took my first few steps. I kept them small, with my arms out to balance. I took three, then five. Then ten, and then more, until I made it off the dock and onto dry land.

With a jolt, I realized this was the first time I'd ever been on dry land.

Well, no turning back now.

I carefully walked toward the darkened house, keeping to the edges since I didn't want to scare her if she was inside. Dark was the word I used, but I found over the years that

nothing above the surface was truly ever dark unless one surfaced far, far away from land. The humans used fake lighting that was much harsher than our bioluminescence. They should stick to the light of their moon and fire, though my father could go on for ages about the fire.

Maybe just the moon, then.

Either way, nothing up here was ever as truly black as the deep sea.

I shivered unconsciously.

The house had a myriad of shining windows that reflected many things, but I didn't see another door besides the one facing the ocean, and that one was enclosed.

The female's scent hung heavy here, but not recently. She hadn't been here since this morning. I was unsure where to go, so I simply followed the scent where I could.

My footwear did not seem appropriate for this, since small rocks and twigs easily got stuck in between my foot and the rubber. The rock path in front of me was clearly a road, so I followed it, since her scent went that way as well.

At least I'd get plenty of practice walking.

Perhaps too much. The rubber foot protection rubbed painfully against my skin. Was it supposed to hurt?

The rock path led out to a much harder, firm road that was black and painted with yellow and white lines. A pair of eyes came at me from a distance, rapidly getting closer. It was a loud beast and very large! It—

**FWOOSH.**

It zoomed past me and continued on down the road as I yelped, falling backward onto my bottom. Weakly, I realized it wasn't an animal at all. It was a machine and the two eyes were lights. Just like the lights the larger boats had so the humans could see at night. It was a land boat, of sorts.

Embarrassed, I picked myself off the ground, managing to stand in half the time it took the first time.

I kept walking in the opposite direction that the land boat went, following the scent of my female. My goal tonight would be to get her name and give her mine.

Cars! That's what they called the land boats.

Several more of the car machines passed me, as well as a man on a contraption with pedals. He didn't go as fast as the cars, but he was certainly faster than me. And that machine was quiet and unassuming.

He raised a hand as he passed me, and I raised mine in reflex. He pedaled on.

I kept walking.

The machines didn't seem that safe. Maybe if—

“Need a lift?”

A car snuck up behind me, much smaller than the other ones, its insides open to the air and not contained by glass and metal. A man waved at me, a female next to him and a younger male sitting in the back on padded seats. It was much, much quieter than the larger machines, which made me feel better about not hearing it come up behind me.

“I assume you're heading into town. That's where we're going, and we've got one more seat. It's an awful long walk by yourself.”

I looked to where he pointed, at the back of the car next to the young male. A small, padded space was indeed available, and perhaps it would be wise to go with them. I did not know how far I would have to walk and didn't want to waste time. And my feet hurt in my foot garments. And I wasn't that great at walking yet.

“Yes, thank you,” I said cautiously, taking care to walk extra carefully. I paused at the back of the vehicle, wondering how to arrange my feet to get in.

“What? Got a bad leg or something?” The young male eyed me dubiously as he reached forward with his hand, and I grasped it in thanks.

“Well? What are you waiting for? Lift your leg.”

I wobbled as I placed one foot on the contraption, then leaned on the young male as I brought the other one up next to it.

“Woah, easy man, you’re double my size!”

He practically pushed me down onto the floppy seat, and my hands automatically went around the metal poles by my head. Without warning, the machine took off, and I was glad I was holding on. Otherwise, I might have fallen off when it jerked forward so unexpectedly.

The man in control of this contraption talked the entire journey, his mate joining in now and then. The younger male paid no attention to me. I didn’t understand half of what they talked about. The surrounding lights enthralled me, as well as the smells and new noises as we reached what was clearly the center of all human civilization!

The lights were of all colors, advertising food and other wares. Competing smells of humans and food both fascinated and disgusted me. Rhythmic sounds pounded all around me, and I assumed it to be music of some kind. Humans talked, yelled, and sang. It was all so loud I could barely hear the pounding of the ocean only a quarter mile away. The cacophony of noise was overwhelming. And the *people*. They were everywhere: walking, dancing, laughing, and even doing the human motion of *running*. My mouth went dry at the sheer amount of females who walked by, either with a large group of other females, or with a male, scantily clad.

Now I understood why my brothers preferred to hunt as a pack. There was no being alone here as a human!

“Is this where you want off? We’re going to Sharkey’s over there.” The man pointed at one of hundreds of little buildings, all reeking of burned flesh, and whatever else must pass as food for them.

I took a sniff of the air, still able to trace my female, but barely. With the ocean right here, I figured she must be nearby.

“Yes, this is fine. Thank you.”



I clumsily but successfully de-boarded the vessel. They all raised their hands in salute, and I raised mine as well before they zoomed off.

I strained for that sweet scent I knew my female carried, with spicy undertones and the promise of sunshine and light. It was much harder to place here among the cacophony of food scents and all the other humans, but I wouldn't give up. I followed the path toward the ocean, thankful to leave the hustle and bustle of humans behind. My shoulders relaxed as the noise and amount of humans decreased, and the road gave way to sand.

Finally.

I walked another half mile along the coast until I came upon a massive dock that was much, much larger than the one my female had at her home. Massive ships sat calmly at port out in the water, with smaller ones bobbing up and down gently in the mild surf and along the dock. Giant rocks surrounded the beach, making it difficult to access from the sand.

Her scent was fresh here. More recent. I would simply have to climb the rocks and the dock to reach it.

It took some trial and error, as well as a few wounds along my hands and knees. Human skin was so frustratingly fragile—those rocks would not have harmed my scales at all! The loss seemed minimal, though, so I kept climbing. These stupid human foot coverings were next to useless for such an activity. They were what most of the other humans wore, however.

Then I heard her.

My female.

She was *crying*.

Untapped strength flooded my unfamiliar leg muscles as I practically vaulted over the last rock and rolled onto the large dock. I looked around wildly, finally spying her at the end of the wooden slants, out at the very end of the dock furthest out to sea. A large boat moored there, and a large man was yelling at her. At *my* female!

The audacity!

My first urge was to rush to her and take her in my arms. Whoever made her feel this way would be destroyed. I'd use the might of my clan to—

No. No, you wouldn't. You were a human now. You were pretending.

I strode forward with determination, not pushing myself only because I did not trust these new legs. It wouldn't look good to trip over the side of the dock and back into the water. I focused on my female: she looked so sad, standing there with her head bowed, shoulders small and drooping.

Another smaller male was trying to speak up for her, but the large man yelled at him, too.

I growled in my chest. I was not afraid of this large male covered in facial hair. As I approached, I wished desperately I was more adept at being a human like Barrett. He would know what to do. He would know what to say.

I stepped up to them, my eyes immediately finding her gaze and holding it. Her jaw dropped, shocked. The smaller male blinked at me, his eyes bulging at the sight of me.

Hopefully I hadn't touched water somewhere. Were my scales showing?

I ignored them both in favor of the large man.

"I must speak with her." I pointed at my female.

The large man grumbled and coughed. "Excuse me, but can I help you? We are docked for the evening. The next tickets are available—"

"You are yelling at her and I wish you to stop," I spoke over him forcefully and with feeling so that my intent was clear. They all stared at me, and I puffed out my chest.

No one contradicted me. It appeared I was winning this odd battle.

"You know this asshole?" The large man jerked his thumb at me, but his face was turned toward my female. I didn't

know what asshole meant. I assumed it meant a strong warrior.

The smaller male behind her sputtered.

“Jesse, please introduce me,” he begged her.

Jesse? *Jesse*? That was my female’s name! I would ingrain it into my brain, carve the letters on the grandest shell I could find, and—

“I don’t *know* him. I just met him the other night!” Jesse wrung her hands helplessly at me, but this answer had the smaller male wiggling his eyebrows.

“Ooh? Do go on!”

“Shut it!” the older man sneered. He pointed at Jesse. “I know shit’s been tough, kid, but you can’t act like that in front of customers. It doesn’t matter if they are a bunch ‘o high and mighty dicks and dickesses. Those kinds of people have money, which I need to survive. I’m going to fire you to save face. The university gives me a ton of business.”

Jesse’s lower lip trembled, a fresh wave of tears brimming in her eyes. The smaller male tried to help. “Mike, come on. You know the circumstances.”

‘Mike’ pinched his brow. “And you know I’ll never hear the end of it if any of them come back and see her still working!” He pointed aggressively at Jesse and I growled.

They all stared at me.

“What work is this? Can I help? What will make it better?” I asked. I’d do anything to make this better for my female. If she had to complete work for this large man, then perhaps I could simply do it for her instead. It was understandable she would be upset if she was unable to complete an assigned task. I would help with this, and it would make her happy and stop the large man from yelling. She would see that I was a good protector and would make a good mate.

Mike arched an eyebrow. “You want her job?”

I blinked, not fully understanding. “If you need help, I can help.”

Mike’s demeanor shifted at that, and he eyed me with interest. I wanted to be clear about my intentions, however.

“Jesse stays with me,” I clarified. “And you will not yell at her again.”

Jesse made a choked sound, somewhere between a laugh and a cry of dismay. The smaller male stuffed his fist in his mouth to muffle his giggles.

Was I still winning? This was an odd game.

The larger man was considering my proposal.

“Well ... I need some muscle to help around the ship, to get it going and monitor things. It would let me interact with the customers more. And Christ knows I’m getting old.”

He snorted at Jesse and ran a hand through his hair. I wasn’t sure why; there wasn’t much left on his shiny head.

“I suppose you’ll only come on board if she gets her job back?” he asked me.

Again, he jerked his thumb, but this time at Jesse. He needed to stop that. I felt it was not a polite gesture.

The three of them were looking at me as if waiting for something.

“Jesse stays with me. And I will help you with these tasks,” I repeated, happy to ensure everyone understood my terms.

Mike grunted. “Fine. Be here at five tomorrow.” He harrumphed at Jesse and disappeared back onto a medium-sized boat.

I grinned broadly. It appeared I had won the game after all.

The smaller male rushed forward, practically pushing Jesse out of the way to stand in front of me. I glanced down at him, confused.

“Jesse, tell me everything,” he demanded, still staring at me.

My female blushed red. “There isn’t much to tell. I met him the other night when I was out kayaking.”

I bristled at the sheer lack of information and felt compelled to elaborate. Somehow, I knew this male wasn’t in competition with me for Jesse, but I wished to brag of my prowess to him, anyway.

“I threw her against her dock and kissed her several times. She very much enjoyed it,” I proudly stated.

His mouth went wide in an O shape. Jesse sputtered incoherently.

Humans were odd.

“JESSE!” screeched the smaller male, whacking her on the shoulder. He offered his hand to me.

“Javi. *Pleasure* to meet you.” The way he was looking at me was odd, but not threatening or giving me any sign he wished to battle for this female.

I eyed his hand warily. It contained no weapons or poison.

“Come on. I don’t bite.” He waved his hand in front of me, and I took a guess at what I was supposed to do. I matched my hand to his, and he snatched my fingers, moving the entire hand up and down. Then he dropped it.

I pulled my hand back to my chest, eyes narrowing.

He sighed. “This is the part where you tell us *your* name.”

Ah! How rude of me! I stood up tall, my chin lifting in the air. “I am Merrick, son of—”

I cut myself off, realizing that I couldn’t use any of my titles or affiliations. It would give me away. It would give my people away. My shoulders drooped.

“I am Merrick,” I tried again, somewhat lamely.

“Well, hello Merrick,” the one called Javi said. My Jesse punched him in the shoulder, and he stepped away with a cry.

My Jesse was strong. This pleased me.

She ran her hands through her hair, which was damp with perspiration and curling slightly at the edges. “Look, I appreciate the help. Really, I do. But it wasn’t necessary. And now—”

“We are ecstatic to have you with us,” Javi cut in, moving ahead of her and smiling at me.

I wasn’t sure how to handle this. There were clearly social cues and hidden meanings being tossed around that I was not privy to.

“I’m just gonna skedaddle and leave you two birds alone. Assuming that’s OK?” Javi sent another one of those meaningful looks to Jesse, who sighed and waved him away.

I couldn’t figure him out. He doted on her, but I smelled that he had no interest in mating with her. It was confusing.

“He’s harmless. Mostly,” Jesse responded, glaring at me. What had I done?

“All right. See you tomorrow.” Javi whistled and walked down the dock toward the noisy city behind us. “Do absolutely *everything* I would do!”

Jesse gave a frustrated cry.

I turned back to her, eager. We were finally alone.

# SIX

Jesse

MY NIGHT HAD GONE from utter terror to rage; to despair and shame, and then circling around to shock and confusion.

I'd half convinced myself I'd dreamed up my inlet man from a few days ago, dreamed up everything from his blond hair down to the lithe muscles covering his body.

Yet, here he stood arguing for me and fighting for me.

No one had done that in ... damn, not since I'd lived with my mother a decade ago. Mom had always tried to have my back, even if she wasn't always the most helpful about it.

Sometimes I missed her. Sometimes I was happy to be without her.

I couldn't help but stare, lost for words as this man laid into Mike, who was well within his rights to fire me. But he didn't. He kept me on. And hired the inlet Blondie as well.

Oh, Javi was going to have a field day.

Merrick. His name was *Merrick*.

It was different and unique. Like he was.

Javi asked me something about being OK alone with Merrick. I waved his concerns away.

"He's harmless. Mostly," I assured him.

Merrick would come with me because I wanted answers, but he would not be getting lucky. Well, not necessarily. I had

too many questions, and he was going to answer them. After that? We'd see.

“All right. See you tomorrow.” Javi winked and made his way off the docks and toward his apartment downtown.

Merrick looked far too pleased with himself now that we were alone. I grabbed his hand and yanked him after me as I marched off the dock. His skin still had that cool, smooth texture that was odd to the touch.

“Where are we—”

“What the fuck are you doing? Are you stalking me or something?” I harshly whispered over my shoulder, tugging him down toward the parking lot, toward the pole where my bike was chained up.

Merrick followed me willingly, a wide grin on his face. “Yes, I successfully tracked you here. Where are we going now?”

His honesty was disarming. Refreshing, but I was unprepared for it. I let go of his hand when we reached my bike. With shaking hands, I undid the lock and shoved it into my knapsack.

“How'd you get here? I rode ...” I gestured at my bike apologetically. He had to have driven a car or something to get all the way into town; it was ten miles. I flicked on my headlight and put on my reflectors. People drove like maniacs around here.

Merrick looked toward the thriving nightlife behind us. “I will find something and meet you at your ... house.”

Well, that was quite forward, wasn't it?

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to beat it since single females weren't supposed to have strange men follow them home, after all.

Merrick seemed different, though.

And hot.

And *nice*.



That was a deadly combination forcing me into poor choices.

“Uh ... sure. Meet me back at my place.”

Merrick nodded and with a serious look strode off with determination toward the noise and lights of Main Street. I shook my head and made sure my bag was secure, tucking my dress up into the waistband of my leggings.

I took off a little more forcefully than necessary, the tires skidding in the gravel. With a curse, I wobbled, then regained my balance.

I pushed hard and fast, wanting to feel my muscles strain with effort as my horrific evening flooded back. I wanted to burn through the rage and hopelessness I felt at the inequity of it all. Why should I work like a dog and get punished for things beyond my control when assholes like Archie could live the high life and hurt whoever they wanted?

If Merrick hadn't come along ...

My life out here was contingent on my marine degree. Or had been. It had been two months since they'd kicked me out, and no one had found out yet. Plan B was to start frantically fixing up the house and prove to them I could take care of it. Maybe then, they wouldn't evict me.

If only I had a strapping man around to help me out. Or a dad. Ha. I'd mostly dealt with that trauma ages ago, but sometimes it stung harder than others. According to Gram, no one knew who my dad was, not even my mother. It was something Gram held over both our heads.

I was over all of that, though. I didn't have daddy issues and from what I'd seen, Mom and I were better off without my grandparents' money and all its conditions and strings.

Maybe I was being too harsh on them. They wanted to see me safe and settled—being a single girl kicked out of a program and mooching off of them wasn't exactly encouraging. I could see that. If they found out I'd gotten kicked out, they'd likely make me move back to Ohio with mom, and I couldn't do it.

Not because I didn't love my mom—I did. But I was too old to be constantly bumping elbows with her in her small apartment. Living with her would only hurt our relationship, not help it.

But losing the beach house I'd fallen in love with, and the life I'd become accustomed to? That was a very real possibility. And it was terrifying.

No offense to Mom, but I had no desire to move back in with her and her shabby one-bedroom apartment in Ohio. Not at my age. My grandfather treated twenty-six like an old maid—if he had his way, I'd be married and on my second or third kid already.

Because in his mind that was true success.

Well, for some it might be, and that was fine.

But not for me.

I'd tried that already, and sacrificed my late teens through my early twenties to failed relationship after failed relationship, cycling through assholes and pricks like they were cheap, flimsy bras.

At least I'd finally realized that no one could make me happy but me.

I pedaled on, refusing to dwell on dickheads any longer than I needed to.

I'd rather think about Merrick and what the fuck his deal was. I pondered the blond enigma as I finally pulled up to the gravel road and turned off the highway. I threw the bike down on the front steps, quickly stripping off my reflectors and resolving to deal with them later. I only had a small amount of time until Merrick would be here, and right now, the house looked like a pigsty bachelor haven, and not the beach house of a suave, single lady.

Not that I was suave or anything. But I was single.

I dumped last night's take away into the garbage and after a moment's thought took my arm and swept everything that was onto the counter into the trash. I winced as I filled the bag

and had to get another. I ran around the open kitchen and living room like a possessed woman, quickly filling the second bag and tying it off. Sweating, I took the bags out back and left them.

Running back inside, I quickly fluffed the couch pillows and folded the blankets. I grabbed a cloth and sprayed it with an all-purpose cleaner, quickly running it over the sticky places on the old tile countertop. It took only a few minutes to frantically run the vacuum over the hardwood floors. Damn, they really needed a new stain or some varnish. The golden finish on it was faded and definitely not in style.

I flicked on my wax burner, chucked a cube called ‘cozy’ into it, and ran into the bedroom. I groaned at the mess of dirty clothes and the layer of dust winking at me from the mantle. OK, so maybe I *had* been depressed after getting kicked out of the program.

“It’s fine. We just won’t go back here. It’s fine.”

I shimmied my pants down my hips, but kept the black cocktail dress I’d worn to work on. I turned in the mirror to make sure there was no dirt from the drive home and threw on another layer of deodorant. I scrunched my hair and sprayed body spray everywhere like a possessed pre-teen. Victoria’s Secret Love Spell filled the surrounding air, a holdover from my teenage years. I only used it on special occasions.

And Merrick was fucking special.

I stared at myself in the mirror, despondent. I was a twenty-six-year-old fat girl trying too hard. Tears heated at the corners of my eyes.

“Fuck you!”

Heated voices jerked me from my pity party, alarm and adrenaline racing through my veins as it always does when you are a female alone. I grabbed the bat I kept by my bed from my stint playing softball in junior high and darted toward the front door. I opened it fully at the sight before me: Merrick waving cheerfully goodbye to a golf cart full of women in bikinis, indifferent to their enraged, scowling faces.

“Thank you for the ride!” he called out happily.

They did not seem pleased with him. One in a bright orange bikini with white, platinum blonde hair spied me and scowled. “Fucking fat ass. Weirdo.”

I couldn’t help but flinch at her insult.

Merrick whirled on them, suddenly a terrifying vision of muscles and aggression.

The golf cart sputtered, then chugged down the gravel path. All four women flipped him the bird as they went.

Merrick happily gave it back to them with both hands, waving his arms dramatically after them with a wide grin.

I covered my mouth with my hands, unable to find words as he walked toward me, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“What was *that*?” I demanded, still unsure whether to laugh or cry.

Merrick shrugged. “I asked them to take me for a ride. They seemed happy to do so until we got here and I said goodbye. Hu—people are strange, eh?”

I eyed his chest, still bare except for the old-fashioned leather bag that hung from his neck and shoulders. Muscles for days.

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” I murmured. Those bitches had thought they were getting dibs on a prime bit of ass, only to be used as a taxi service. To me.

A bubble of laughter welled up in my throat, and I snorted before I could help it. Didn’t want him thinking I was crazy, after all.

“Want to come inside?” I offered instead, my voice an octave higher than it usually was.

Merrick just kept smiling as if he was simply thrilled to be here. He followed me up the creaky porch and across the threshold, greedily taking it all in as he turned his head this way and that. His intense interest only spiked my anxiety

further. The house was literally falling apart. He was going to think I was just trash.

Maybe I was; a fat, bastard-born, white bitch with no prospects.

*Stop it.*

I shook my head.

“Sorry it’s a bit messy, I wasn’t exactly expecting visitors,” I offered.

Merrick stood in the kitchen, looking around with an odd sort of wonder. He picked up his foot from the ceramic tile, then placed it back down again.

Was he not from here? Maybe from a third world country or something? That would explain the strange accent and the overall wonder. Maybe I didn’t need to feel as embarrassed of the house as I thought. He looked impressed, if anything.

I relaxed. Slightly.

“Do you want something to drink? I’ve got Diet Coke, or water. Tea, even.” I tried not to babble, but it was impossible. I was so goddamn nervous.

He blinked at me. “I will drink whatever you are drinking.”

I opened the cabinet and retrieved two classes. “Coke it is, then.”

I reached into the fridge and grabbed the two liter, almost colliding with Merrick as he stood directly behind me, peering into the fridge with frightening intensity.

“ ‘Scuse me,” I mumbled, maneuvering around him to get to the counter, trying to squeeze my ass between us in the narrow galley kitchen. I always felt self-conscious about my body in such small spaces.

Quickly, I filled the glasses and offered him one. His fingers brushed the glass and as soon as I let go, he didn’t take it. The glass fell to the floor and shattered, spilling soda and shards everywhere.

Oh my gods. Could this get worse?

“I’m sorry!” I wailed. “Didn’t you have it?”

I put my glass on the counter and scrambled for the paper towels and a bag. We knocked heads as we both bent on the floor to mop at the mess, him daintily picking up a shard of glass and staring at it.

“I am sorry. I am ... not from here,” he muttered, blushing madly. “It was heavier than I thought.”

Third world country it was, then.

“Most people aren’t from here. This place is nothing but tourists in the summer.” I carefully picked up shards of glass and put them in a plastic bag.

I thrust the paper towels at his chest and he took the hint, mopping up the brown liquid carefully as I made sure I got all the glass.

“Son of a bitch!” I hissed in pain, the pad of my index finger slicing open as it found a piece I missed on the floor. I stuck my hand in my mouth to staunch the bleeding, depositing the last bit in the trash can.

Merrick’s hand was around my waist a second later, yanking me through the sticky mess and across the floor, then up onto the counter like I was a Barbie doll. I was so surprised I forgot to be self-conscious.

“You are hurt! Let me see.”

Before I could protest, he held my finger in front of him, his other hand rooting through a small bag at his waist. I couldn’t stop staring at the muscles on his shoulders or the intricate necklace that hung from his throat on a leather cord. Was it an opal? It shined every iridescent color of the rainbow, its beauty distracting me from the harsh stinging of my hand.

Merrick brought some kind of gel pod to his mouth, ripping it open with his teeth. He squeezed it on my finger, and I sighed at the instant relief that happened as the wound tingled and went cold. Carefully, he packed the clear remains

of the gel packet around my finger, molding it around the area like a liquid Band-Aid. Within seconds, it hardened and dried.

I held it up in front of my eyes, admiring it. Was he a marine biologist, too? Was this some kind of new innovative wound care I hadn't heard of since I'd left the program?

"This is what my ... my family uses," he explained. "You can remove it in a few minutes."

Merrick clasped his hand over mine, holding it in place and tucking me further into his broad chest. Was I dreaming? What the fuck was happening?

"You're very forward," I ended up saying, mostly to fill the odd silence that had descended between us. He smelled like the ocean, as cliché as that sounded, but without the stereotypical smell of sunscreen and coconuts. It was authentic. It was real, and it called out to something deep and primal within me. There was a spicy undertone that reminded me of the produce section in the bodega downtown.

I couldn't see his expression above me, but I heard the surprised huff he let out.

"What direction am I supposed to go? Backwards?" he asked.

A bark of laughter escaped me. Merrick was so refreshing. He was nothing like any other guy I'd dated. Except we weren't dating. We weren't even technically friends.

"We may remove it now," he noted cheerfully, quickly peeling back the clear gel on my finger. It had dried to a consistency similar to silicone or rubber.

"What the—" I snapped my mouth shut, stunned to see only a thin pink line where a deep cut had been only moments ago. I stared at it. "What's in that stuff?"

Merrick tucked the dried gel back into his bag. "Extracted jellyfish venom, along with seaweed and a few other malleable components to make the wrap."

My fingers opened and closed reflexively; the skin felt fine, if a little tight. Wouldn't jellyfish venom be bad to put on

a wound?

“Right ...” I managed.

“May I try your beverage again?” he asked brightly, those blue-green eyes practically glowing in the semi-darkness. I needed to turn on more lights than the one candle and my wax burner.

“Why don’t we share mine? Then you can see if you like it or not.” I suggested. I had the feeling this would be his first Coke experience and wanted no more shattered glasses.

I shook my head and held out my glass . He bent forward and tried to take a sip, seeming the flounder a bit as he hovered with uncertainty over the top of the glass. Then his tongue dipped in like a cat’s, and he made a face.

His nose wrinkled and brows furrowed.

“It burns!”

I laughed.

“Not a soda guy, then,” I confirmed, trying not to giggle as his features screwed up like a child forced to eat a piece of broccoli. I downed the rest of the soda quickly, mostly to have something to do.

“Carbonation takes some getting used to.”

With a thunk, my glass hit the counter.

“So, it must be really different where you’re from,” I started, since it was obvious he had to be from somewhere pretty remote. What guy had never tasted soda before? And carried around amazingly effective homeopathic remedies?

Eyeing his tanned skin and long, dreadlocked hair, I guessed he was from a small island somewhere. Perhaps Polynesian? Then again, he *was* blond. Mixed heritage? I wanted to know everything.

“It is very different here. This is my first time in your ... city.” The way he said it, I could tell he was trying to be polite and didn’t care much for the crowds and noise any more than I did this time of year.



“It’s tourist season.” I laughed. “That means it’s loud, chaotic, and filled with too many people. It will be even worse starting tonight.”

I hopped off the counter and opened the fridge, scoring a banana and the last bits of a leftover sandwich from Subway.

“Hungry?” I asked, raising half of the sandwich toward him.

Merrick’s brow raised in a knowing look, ignoring my sandwich offering. “Ah, yes. The ritual.”

I froze in the act of raising the sandwich to my mouth.

“The what now?” I offered the banana to Merrick, who took it reverently, then simply held it out in his hand.

That ruled out a remote island. Didn’t all remote islands have bananas?

“The ritual,” he continued eagerly as if wanting to impress me, “when the young females all descend upon the shore and dance. There is music, and food, and—”

“Do you mean *spring break*?” I clarified, choking a bit. To an outsider, spring break *would* look like one giant cult ritual, wouldn’t it?

*Don’t laugh in his face.*

“Yes, the Break of Spring,” he clarified. “It happens every year.” He looked quite proud to know this.

I finished the sandwich and took the banana back from him to set on the counter for later. The kitchen was narrow, so I had to lean across Merrick to do so. When I drew back, he was staring, all expression gone from his face. Had I offended him? Touched him inappropriately?

“Is that why you’re here, then? For spring break?” I asked, unnerved by his full and undivided attention. I wasn’t used to it, not from guys like him. He was probably here to get some ass, just like most of the buff guys who rolled into town this time of year.

“Yes, actually.”

My chest seized, and I glanced at the floor. And here I thought he'd be different. "Ah. I get it. So ... you're one of those guys who like bigger girls then?"

It hurt to ask, but I had to know. It wasn't anything against him, but I wasn't into that. At all. I left the kitchen and sat down on the loveseat to give myself some space from him.

He followed, brows furrowed. "Bigger girls. What do you mean? You are not large compared to me."

Merrick was either dumb or playing me. I grit my teeth, embarrassed to have to spell it out for him.

"Guys like you, with all your ... muscles. They don't usually go for people who look like me."

He blinked.

I resisted the urge to punch a pillow. "Usually guys like you go for girls like ... like the ones in the golf cart you came here with."

Merrick's nose wrinkled. "The skinny ones with no clothes?"

I nodded hesitantly.

Merrick sat down next to me, letting off a small yelp of surprise when he sank into the cushion. I guess he didn't have loveseats where he was from, either.

He slapped a hand across his defined abs. "This is my summer body. It is warm out, and we do a lot of work during that time. During winter, we must conserve energy. It is too cold to work. You cannot see these then. The fat is good and keeps us warm. I don't need it during the warm season." His finger ran over the taut muscles, and then he looked up to see if I understood.

My eyes narrowed. "So you're telling me you have a winter bod and a summer bod because of your work?"

Merrick grinned. "Yes. Exactly." He stuck his lower lip out. "Those other females? They would not survive long where I live. The cold would get to them." He gave me an appraising look. "You would not die. You would survive the

winter. You're strong and could help others. Like you helped me. And you are much more beautiful and desirable than any of them."

The casual, no-nonsense way he said it had me paralyzed and in shock. I could tell he wasn't bull-shitting me from the serious tilt of his chin, and the intensity of his eyes.

I had to take a moment just to breathe. This wasn't anything like any of the hookups I'd had before. He wasn't like any other guy I'd brought home before. It was too much. All of it. I didn't trust it.

"I-I think I need to go to bed. I'll see you tomorrow at work? At the docks?" I stammered out, my heart pounding in my chest.

Rather than look put out or upset, Merrick simply stood. "Yes, I will see you then. I look forward to spending more time with you."

Suspicion clouded my mind. "Did you only take this job to get closer to me?"

He grinned as if I'd just solved a clever riddle. "Yes. Of course."

Stop. He had to stop being so fucking adorable and honest.

"O-OK. Um. Good night then."

Instead of going back toward the front door, he shot a glance at the back porch. "Do you mind if I go this way?"

Realization flooded me. "Oh, you kayaked when you first got here? Sure. No problem." *What kind of crazy man kayaked into the fucking dark? Well, a second time. At least he was consistent?*

Merrick gave me another small wave and pushed the back door open.

I was floored. He truly intended to leave without trying to push his luck with me? As if he truly meant everything he said?

What if this was proof he was lying? If he thought I was so beautiful, then surely he wouldn't try to run away so quickly, would he?

“Wait!”

Merrick paused and turned back to look at me over his shoulder. I shot off the couch, refusing to back down in case I lost my nerve. I bumped into him, my palms immediately resting on his chest to steady myself. I stared at the opal jewel around his throat, level with my eyes. The colors almost seemed to swirl in front of me. They were as mesmerizing as Merrick himself.

I looked up. Calloused hands cupped my face and held me still. Blonde hair fell against the back of my shoulders, the dreads surprisingly soft against my skin. The scent of salt and the sea filled my nose: seaweed and rushes, sand and sun and that heady hint of something spicy.

“What do you want?” I asked breathlessly.

His lips ghosted against my forehead. “To protect you. To see you safe.”

Something twinged in my heart. “From what?”

The fingers around my jaw tightened. His head dropped further as he nuzzled against my neck. “I will see you tomorrow, siren.”

Merrick jerked a bit as the pet name slipped out, but that was the final straw for me. I was all out of sorts from him being so nice and saying such wonderful things about me. My hand tangled in the back of his hair and pulled, yanking his mouth down to mine.

He gave a slight groan of surprise, then crushed me against him, kissing me deeply and pulling me to him like he was lost at sea, and I was a bit of floating driftwood. His lips were cool and refreshing, his taste of citrus and sun.

The kiss was over too soon, Merrick abruptly pulling away even as he grinned at me. Then he had the audacity to boop my nose.

“If I keep kissing you like this, I won’t ever let you go. You will be mine,” he promised darkly, his voice nothing more than a deep purr.

My eyes narrowed. I was never one to back away from a challenge. “Will I, now?”

His hands tightened around me, and he turned around and slammed me up against the door frame.

# SEVEN

Merrick

SHE FELT like heaven wrapped against me. Soft, warm, and like salvation. What was I doing? I had sworn to protect her from the lusting males that would soon descend upon these shores, and here I was doing the one thing I swore I'd never do!

I should build a shrine to her beauty and strength, a shrine made out of coral and stone, not brittle seashells! What would I use to capture the vivid green of her eyes? Perhaps the sea grass that grew near the shallows—

*Stop it. Focus!*

I had to give her a chance to back away. I had to warn her.

“If I keep kissing you like this, I won't ever let you go. You will be mine,” I pleaded, gasping against her. My instincts roared in my blood, refusing to be quenched. My body shook with the need to take her and claim her, so no other merman would get within a mile of her.

“Will I, now?” she growled, her eyes fierce with challenge. My hormones tumbled in a mess of confusion, a groan bursting from my lips. She was a true siren-born.

I couldn't resist the fresh bolt of need that raced through me. Surely, there was nothing wrong with just kissing, right? A kiss was not mating. A kiss wouldn't put a child in her belly and force us apart.

So, a kiss I'd give her. Or three. Or ten.

At some point, I lost count. It didn't seem important. The only thing that mattered was her legs wrapped around my waist, and the pressure of her core pressed against mine. The way she threw her head back against the door frame, baring her neck to my teeth. How her hands tangled in my hair, greedy and demanding.

She was mine. The others couldn't have her. I'd kill them for trying. Hell, I'd kill them for looking. The very thought sent me toward the edge, nearly feral with need and anxiety. The member at my waist was hard and demanding, making me do things I wouldn't normally do. It was the first time I'd experienced this particular human body part.

It frightened me.

I took a shuddering breath in and purposefully slowed my kisses while loosening my grip. Jesse sighed against me, relaxing as we both regained our breath and composure. I had to leave, now, while I still had my mind.

I brushed my nose against hers for one last touch. "Tomorrow, then."

Ignoring her confused, dazed expression, I forced my legs (getting stronger with each step) to move out the back door and down the stairs. Out across the long grass and straight into the inlet, I shucked off my silly human clothing and shoved it behind a rock to use the next time I came here. I dove into the water and moved my tail as fast as I could, determined to put space between us. I wouldn't look back. I couldn't or else I'd see the same desire mirrored in her eyes. The way her lips plumped and swelled after the attention I gave them, or the way her grasping fingers betrayed her need, as feral as my own.

No, it was better for both of us if I left. I would see her the next evening, when both of us were calmer. Rational.

Resolved, I pushed toward home. I would stop by the sulfur pits to the east first, which would cover any of Jesse's lingering scent on my skin.

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THE NEXT MORNING, I didn't waste any time. I rose from the hollowed out space in the rock in my room, taking care not to wake anyone else. Three other males shifted on the sand, moved into my room to make space for everyone, including Aris. I should have expected it with us both being the sons of clan heads, but that didn't mean I had to like it. Their noses wrinkled in disgust even in their sleep, the sulfur still on my skin pungent.

Good.

I was careful to make sure I didn't disturb the water around them too much as I snuck out.

Being a notoriously hard sleeper, Barrett was harder to wake alone in his room. I had to physically yank on his tail before his eyes opened, scowling and curling his body away from me. The golden specks on his scales winked at me, a match to my own.

“Barrett. I need your help.”

He growled and turned over. I grabbed his tail and dragged him across the sand and nearly out of the room.

“I'M UP! I'm up! Poseidon's nutsack, Merrick!”

I didn't give him any time to recover.

“I need you to come up to the surface and help me. I need more human clothes, but better ones. The foot coverings you gave me are insufficient.”

Barrett yawned, running a hand through his hair, which was a much darker shade of blond than mine. When his brain caught up to what I'd said, he gave me a wry grin.

“Going to join the hunt later on? I could see why you'd want to get ahead of the crowd. Your father already has me taking a group up tonight, but I could fit you in before then. A private tour for my friend, eh?”

I didn't like the sound of a group hunt.

“How many males are here?” I asked warily.



Barrett scratched his chin. “Sixty? More are supposed to come tomorrow.”

I floated for a moment, trying to imagine these males set upon the shores all at once.

“Is that wise?” I asked, wincing.

Barrett frowned. “Well, humans act pretty oddly anyway. Normally, I’d say it’s risky, but with the rite coming up, they’ll blend in more. The crowd gets very large.”

I straightened my shoulders. “They call it spring break,” I informed him proudly.

Barrett lifted an eyebrow. “Seems you’ve been doing just fine on your own.”

I blew a few bubbles into the water. “I need better footwear. Those ridiculous coverings you gave me are not sufficient. I also need something to cover my chest. Most of the males on land cover theirs, and wore blue or brown coverings on their legs.

Barrett blinked. “Jeans, OK. You want some jeans. When do you want to go?”

I vibrated with the need to go now, but I knew that was unlikely. I would have to put in an appearance at breakfast, especially with so many guests. My father would want to know what I was up to.

“Does midday sound agreeable?” I offered.

Barrett sighed. “Sure. I want to be scarce around that time anyway, since they’re moving a bunch of the males into my room next.” He glanced around his space mournfully. I didn’t blame him. As our clan diminished in size, we had grown accustomed to having our own homes and rooms.

That decided, we headed down to breakfast together.

My clan built its home in the valley near a hollowed out mountain that used to be above land thousands of years ago. There were even still tunnels that led to air pockets, where younger males got trained on how to switch from the gills on the sides of our necks to the lungs in our chests. I’d been the

last one to use them for my clan. These days we kept to the mer-built houses of coral and stone and seaweed. I asked Father about it once, but he had only murmured something about the pain of the past, and how the spirits of the sirens still lurked in the caves.

Weird.

The largest room in the cave was usually kept for mealtimes or audiences with my father, but with so many males we had taken to eating outside amidst our gardens, which was a decent swim about halfway to the surface. There, the cavernous structure that helped make our homes stretched up toward the surface. Many plants cultivated where the sun could reach, including algae, seagrass, and kelp. The gardens were a vital part of our existence.

I spotted my father halfway up the mountain, entertaining the other clan heads. They reclined easily against a bed of red algae, laughing at something the head of the Spadefish clan had said. Was his name Gerl? It was rare that all of us were together at once. If I hadn't been so anxious over protecting my female, I might enjoy it more.

"Father," I intoned, bowing my head. The water moved behind me and knew Barrett was offering his respects as well.

"Merrick! Have you eaten yet? We have extra." My father's eyes roved to Barrett. "You too, young man. This is the one I told you all about—the one who specializes in walking among humans. He will take your sons out tonight on their first hunt! He even promised them a ride on one of their boats!"

There was much backslapping and guffaws at this as Barrett flushed and sat down in front of my father at a gesture. Seeing no other available spots, I scrunched myself in next to him.

"Merrick has asked to join the party as well. So we will all be attending!" Barrett announced, happily digging into the bowl of offered prawns and shrimp. Fine netting covered the bowl to keep the food from swimming or floating away.

My father's eyes widened, surprise brightening his face.

"Is that so?" He turned toward me, a spark of something in his gaze.

I looked away, embarrassed. I felt like a guppie, and not a grown mer.

Yes was my only answer. I grabbed a handful of shrimp simply to keep myself occupied.

"That's surprising," huffed Aris's father, shooting me a scathing glance. "Didn't think you'd want to take a break from your ... *art*."

I let his insult roll off of me even as my father's back stiffened. The chief of the Bluefish clan couldn't be directly insulting to his host, after all.

"*Your* clan seems to be his number one customer. Aren't they, Merrick?" Barrett retorted cheekily, keeping an innocent and playful grin on his face.

I wanted to snort with laughter, but kept that in as well. Barrett got away with so much being a cousin to the royal family. The others gave him respect, but he didn't have any of my expectations or responsibilities. Regardless, sometimes I felt my father valued him over me. I may have brought trade into our clan, but Barrett was the one everyone relied on to learn how to navigate the surface.

"Mers do like their trinkets." Waya, head of the Kingfish clan laughed. His comment broke the lingering tension, and I bowed my head again for dismissal. Waya shifted on his bright red tail.

"Very well, off with you," boomed my father, waving us away. Barrett and I didn't wait to be told twice.

We swam up above them, skimming along the uppermost part of the mountain top, weaving in and out of the vegetation. Once we reached the top, we stopped to enjoy the view.

This week it looked much different than normal. Below us, nearly a hundred mers partook in their breakfast, all from different clans. A glance up showed the shimmering surface,

only a few hundred feet away. The mers below looked like tiny crabs swimming here and there.

“So, what’s the deal?” Barrett asked. “You don’t suddenly have an interest in hunting. I know you. I’m surprised your father even bought it.”

I wouldn’t tell him about Jesse. I couldn’t.

“I feel bad for any female who catches Aris’s eye,” I muttered darkly instead.

Barrett laughed. “Ah, so you fancy yourself a protector of the siren born? How gallant! Or you just want to thwart him? Either works for me.”

His teasing rankled me, but I didn’t let it show. If that’s what he wanted to think, then that was fine with me.

He rolled his eyes, apparently seeing that I wasn’t in the mood to play. “Fine then, we might as well go now. The more time I have between you and the other group I’m taking, the better.”

Barrett pushed off the rock and launched himself toward the surface. I followed, nervous and excited at the same time.

We swam in silence, following the mountain range until it rose above the surface, and a large shoal took its place. We followed the line of the shoal north east, finally emerging above the waves in front of a small piece of land.

Both of us took a moment to let our bodies adjust, coughing and gagging slightly as the transition to lungs was never smooth. Barrett cleared his throat and pointed to the land mass ahead.

“That’s Bald Head Island. There’s a tiny clan of humans here, and it’s my home base. Come on.”

We swam in silence toward the shore, circling around to the east side of the island. A large sandbar rose in front of us, a sad, dilapidated wooden shack, the only thing on it aside from a few tufts of grass. The main shore of the island was about a mile inland.

I followed Barrett as he hefted himself ashore, dragging himself across the sand until he was out of the water. The moment our tails had faded away into legs, he stood gracefully and walked to the shack. It took me a few moments of stumbling to catch up.

Inside the shack looked worse than the outside, if that was even possible. Rotted wood and the stink of stagnant water filled my nose, and I drew back. “What is—”

“Keep your voice down. Above the water, sound carries quickly across it. The humans could hear us, even though the shore is far away.” Barrett finished chastising me and headed toward a latch of some kind on the floor. “Found this years ago. It must have been a hiding spot humans used once upon a time.”

To my astonishment, the latch was attached to a door that was lifted. It was made of the same material as the floorboards. If you didn’t know it was there, you would never have found it. How clever.

“Come on.” Barrett jumped down into the hole, disappearing from view.

Alarmed, I swung my feet over the edge and squinted into the darkness.

“It’s fine! It’s not a large drop. Just keep your feet under you, and bend your legs. Don’t keep them rigid. Broken leg bones aren’t fun,” he said.

I sincerely hoped he wasn’t speaking from experience and pushed myself off the ledge.

A quick moment of terror passed quickly as I landed in a crouch, my feet jarring from the impact, but otherwise I was unhurt.

There was a clicking sound, and the hole filled with light.

“Electricity is what it’s called. It’s how humans make all the lights at night. Deadly when mixed with water, though. I still think I like our lights better,” he scoffed.

I agreed. Our lights were softly pulsating orbs, made with injections of bioluminescence collected from plants and fish. The lights of the surface world were harsh and unforgiving.

He gestured. "This is where I hide my stuff. You're welcome to anything if you need it."

Once my eyes adjusted, I realized the hole was filled with ... well ... stuff. Barrett had several chests filled with human clothing, piled haphazardly on top of each other.

"Shoes are over there, shirts, pants ... whatever you want. Find something and then stuff it in this." He held up a large, brightly colored human satchel. I frowned at mine. His would make me blend in more. I turned my attention to the heaping mass of clothing.

"Where did you get all this?" I asked, overwhelmed.

Barrett grinned, flashing a bit of fang at me. Our teeth didn't always change with us when we surfaced. "Oh, you know, here and there. You'd be surprised how careless humans are with their things."

He shrugged and selected a large pair of blueish leg coverings I had seen many other men wearing. I went to the same box and picked out one for me, but darker.

"Those should work. You're probably only a size or two bigger than me. Oh! Don't forget these!" Barrett threw a bright orange scrap of fabric at me, and I caught it in reflex. I frowned, not sure what it was for. Well, if Barrett said I needed it, I would have to believe him. I stuffed it and the jeans into his bag. Now to choose footwear and a shirt.

There weren't too many options, since only a few of the footwear were as long as my feet. The only pair long enough was made of a beige canvas material. Into the bag it went. There was a ball of white fabric in the footwear that I left there. Perhaps it was like the orange fabric, and crucial to wear.

The shirts all looked much too small. Barrett shrugged his shoulders apologetically. We simply weren't the same size, and most of the clothing was meant for him, after all.

Eventually, I found a black shirt that hung nicely off my frame, and we were ready.

“This bag is waterproof, so everything will stay dry on the swim over,” Barrett explained, and we left the crumbling shack behind and dove back into the ocean, heading directly toward the shoreline.

I kept a wary eye on the beach, but it seemed deserted. There was only one road and no human structures nearby. Once on the beach, he explained, “This part of the island is a nature reserve; that means humans aren’t allowed to live here. They are trying to keep the land safe.”

Thinking back to the massive buildings and filth of the human city I’d been in the other night, I could see why that might become a problem. At least some humans possessed a modicum of intelligence.

Like my Jesse.

Barrett threw my clothes at me, pointing things out about them as I struggled to dress. “See the numbers here? They indicate size. Try them on to make sure they fit. The humans call them jeans. Wait! Put this on first.”

He threw a small orange bit of fabric at me. I watched carefully as Barrett showed me how to put the clothing on. It looked like it took an incredible amount of balance as he stood on one foot and deftly slid the other leg through the small holes in the garment. A tiny, tiny garment that went over his human reproductive parts.

“Why do we wear the smaller garment under the larger one? Doesn’t it cover it up?” The orange bit of fabric in my hand easily stretched, but I didn’t see how it would fit any part of me.

Barrett laughed. “Underwear, Merrick. You need it so your human dangly bits don’t get caught in the metal of the zipper.”

I would have to take his word for it. I stretched out the orange underwear and matched my legs up with the holes. I

only fell once before I got my legs inside. Unhappily, I yanked it up over my dangly bits. I frowned, feeling tight and stifled.

He chuckled and turned to continue dressing. “Relax. You’ll get used to it.”

I highly doubted that.

I put on the jeans, proud that I only stumbled, but didn’t fall. They seemed to fit fine. The black shirt went over the top. Barrett beat the extra sand off me and helped me put the odd white coverings on my feet.

“Socks, Merrick.”

Socks. Fine. Then the shoes. Human clothing had so many odd steps to it.

“Do you plan to bring the hunters here as well? This seems far away from the ritual site.” I followed behind Barrett as we climbed clumsily up the sand dunes and toward the road.

“The remoteness is part of it,” he answered. “It’ll give the hunters a chance to literally get their legs under them and practice where the humans won’t stare.”

He pointed up ahead. “There is a boat there that travels between where the ritual takes place and here. There are always many humans coming and going, so they will not notice extra people. Not even a group of hunters.”

Barrett showed me how to ride the ferry and even how to use human money. He had a wad in the bag, which he carried on his back. Apparently, you didn’t need to pay to get off the island, but needed the money if you were traveling to it.

Another human rule I didn’t understand.

The boat was odd. Hearing the rushing of the ocean and seeing it cut effortlessly through the waves was simultaneously exhilarating and frightening. I worried the entire time that water would splash up and hit Barrett or myself, thus exposing us. Barrett laughed at my worries.

The other humans crowded around us closely, and I drew my arms in. It was hard to maintain one’s own space against the crush. I stared at a female who had short, bright pink hair



sticking straight up. She wore spikes on her neck and wrist. An older lady next to her only came up to my chest and talked endlessly about a cat named Simon. The female with pink hair smiled at her, but the grin seemed pained.

“Humans come in all shapes and sizes and different skin tones. They color their hair and depending on where they’re from, they speak differently, too,” Barrett lectured.

“Speak differently? How do they all communicate? Is there a common language?” I asked.

Mers all spoke our own language from birth, but we also learned the human language as well. I’d thought there was only one.

“This language is what *these* humans speak. I’ve heard many other tongues.” Barrett said.

The boat came into the dock smoothly, and soon I struggled against the crowd to stay with Barrett. This gave me the perfect excuse to leave him and find Jesse. “Thank you for the help! I will see you later for the hunt!”

Barrett laughed, not fighting against the crowd as more people grew between us. “I see how it is! You want to scope the best spots. Happy hunting, my friend!”

I let him think whatever he wanted because it worked in my interest. The crowd separated us and carried me toward a large, empty square of road with many of the human transportation machines sitting between drawn, white lines. I looked around in dismay, not recognizing anything from the other night.

“Hey buddy! You look lost. Whatcha looking for?”

I tried to calm my expression of alarm as a large man with a big belly called out to me from where he was loading up into one of those quieter machines. The golf carts, Jesse had called them.

“I am looking to go into the city,” I tried, hoping there was only one.

“You a spring breaker then? Look a little old for that.”

I wasn't sure what the last part of his sentence meant, but he said 'spring break,' so I seized it.

"Yes! That! I am here for the ... spring break."

The man chuckled and sucked on a large brown cylinder that protruded from his mouth. Foul smoke wafted from it.

"Sounds like you need to get into town. The shuttle line starts over there." He gestured roughly across the road where a group of other humans were standing around a sign with a picture of a large machine on it.

"Thank you." I joined the group of humans waiting, listening to their conversations. There were a few older human mates, females with males with gray and white hair. Standing apart from them was a group of five or six men who looked a little younger than me. Their conversation was more interesting than the older mates' argument over where to eat their dinner.

"Yeah, so I heard this year the bonfire is going to be Friday on the beach. It's going to be lit, man."

A male with short, bright green leg garments gestured wildly in the air. Small and dark glass coverings covered his eyes. I wondered if he was injured. Looking around, I noticed that many of the humans wore these small eye shields. Shoes protected their fragile feet, and small shields protected their fragile eyes. It was a wonder they got anything accomplished. My imagination spun with all the things I could make with glass that clear, and that sharp. Most of the sea glass from the ocean was opaque and rounded.

"I can't wait. I bought a new suit and everything." A girl grinned at him in a way that had my stomach twist nervously. If Jesse ever looked at me like that, I didn't know what I would do. I'd likely pin her to the floor and—

"Psh, I'm excited for the food trucks. Denny's barbeque is gonna be there!"

The male didn't seem to notice the female deflate as he dismissed her clear advances in favor of his stomach. Were all human males so dismissive of their females? Perhaps she was

not his mate. That would explain it. Especially with the way the other two males in the group watched her. The other female rolled her eyes and stared down at a small black rectangular device in her hands. She ignored the other males as she tapped on it furiously with her fingers.

“Excuse me, are you talking about spring break?” I interjected when their conversation seemed to lull. Perhaps I could travel with them to where I needed to be.

The female glanced up from her device, her eyes going wide.

“What’s your name?” she asked, her voice lowering significantly in pitch. My eyes couldn’t help but flick to her breasts, which she pushed invitingly out toward me.

“Merrick,” I answered easily enough, keeping my gaze on the males. The way they were staring at me certainly didn’t seem friendly. I didn’t want to offend them by staring too openly at the female, if she belonged to one of them.

“Merrick? That’s ... different.” The female moved in closer. Too close. She put one hand on my chest and I jerked back, alarmed by her boldness.

I liked it with Jesse. On this female, it simply made me uncomfortable. Her hair was a straight sheet of dark brown, almost black. The way her blue eyes pulled at me had moisture appearing on my forehead. The other males closed in, their shoulders tense and rigid.

“I ... no, thank you,” I stuttered, unsure why I said that and what exactly I was refusing. She hadn’t asked me a question or offered anything. The wind changed, blowing her scent toward me. I froze, recognizing the same tang that Jesse’s scent had—a biting heat with a spicy undertone.

No. That was impossible. Well, improbable. Certainly not impossible, but what were the odds I’d found two siren born females on my own?

I didn’t like this female, though. I didn’t like how she looked at me like a predator. Only Jesse could look at me like that. Perhaps Barrett could have this one. Or even Aris. This

female was aggressive and wasn't sensing that I didn't want her hands on me.

Was this what it was like for females when we hunted?

I was saved from further introspection by the large machine that groaned its way toward us, coming to a lurching stop. It was much larger than anything I had ridden with enough seats for all of us waiting, with many empty ones to spare. I waited until the group of young males went in first; the female gave me one disgusted last look before climbing up the steps. They went all the way to the back, so I sat up toward the front.

I thought about reporting back to my father this one siren born, and then immediately dismissed it. I may not like this female, but that didn't mean she deserved to be impregnated and left alone. I would leave it to chance if the others found her or not.

A sudden thought occurred to me. What if the mers who came on shore forced themselves on their females? My stomach soured. Surely no honorable mer would do that, would they? I could not imagine forcing myself on Jesse. I would be heartbroken if she turned me away, of course, but that was still her choice. To force myself on her just to create young?

It made me sick.

I imagined Aris or Barrett finding a siren born. I had a sinking feeling that they wouldn't simply let her walk her away. They would pursue her and not give up until their task was complete.

My stomach turned and twisted uneasily. Was that how I had been conceived? Had my father forced himself on a siren born female?

This was wrong. It was all wrong.

I resolved to monitor the hunters after I spent time with Jesse. I had to make sure they behaved and didn't hurt anyone. Unless that was the unspoken point? We'd been taught at

guppies that finding a siren born was the ultimate blessing and to pursue at all costs.

At all costs.

My stomach rolled. Was my nausea from the erratic movements of the large machine or the realization that my culture was built on pain and violence? My need to monitor the other males warred with the overwhelming desire to keep Jesse safe and away from them all.

I closed my eyes and breathed. I would be on Jesse's boat tonight. It was highly unlikely the hunters would go anywhere near us. I would take her home afterwards and ensure her safety. And perhaps a kiss or two, if she was willing.

Then I would go find the other mers and ensure they didn't hurt anyone.

I gripped the sides of my seat, my course set.

# EIGHT

Merrick

AS I EXITED THE BUS, I glanced back at the other siren born. Her eyes narrowed in disdain, and she flipped the traditional human goodbye gesture at me with her middle finger. I smiled and repeated it. She scowled, but the other males with her snorted with laughter. I stared at her yellow top, brighter than even the yellow tang fish in the sea. I'd never figured out how to harvest a fish color without hurting it, so I let it go.

At least the men near her no longer looked like they wanted to fight me, so I considered that a victory.

Once I was off the bus, it was apparent we weren't in the same city as the other night. This area was populated, but not as densely. I could just barely pick up Jesse's scent, however, so I followed it. It trailed down the road and ducked off at a fork, winding up a small hill and leading to a large building.

I saw other humans walking inside, so I figured it was safe if I did so as well. Large glass doors greeted me, as well as a smiling female. It was very clean here, and smelled like the ocean, but wrong, somehow.

I gave her the human gesture the others all seemed to favor, raising the middle finger of my hand toward her in a salute.

Her smile froze, and her face twisted into anger. My smile disappeared.

“Is that not a gesture of welcome?” I clarified, unsure. I had to pass her to find my Jesse.

She blinked, the anger draining away from her face. “You don’t sound like you’re from around here.”

I was pleased she understood this. “This is my first time,” I confirmed.

The female sighed. “Right, well, just go on then. Happy to share our aquarium with folks from other countries. And don’t give that gesture to anyone unless you don’t like them.”

I frowned, reanalyzing all my interactions with humans where I used that gesture. I shook my head, deciding it didn’t matter. The only part that mattered was how she stood aside to let me pass. I smiled and walked on through.

This place was strange and exhilarating; the large structures that held water and fish both terrified and fascinated me. It smelled almost like the ocean, but ... off. A lingering scent of sickness and decay lightly lay over most of the tanks, but the fish and other creatures seemed well cared for. I was astounded by the large sheets of clear glass. How was it made? How did they keep it so clean? I understood the practicality of being able to see the creature within, but it seemed odd to pen up animals just to be able to look at them. Unless the animals were sick and being treated until they could be released back to the ocean? Yes! That had to be it. And Jesse helped with this!

My pride for her swelled further in my chest.

I ignored the sickness and odd, manufactured scents and focused on the salty spice of my siren. I found my Jesse easily enough, feeding a sleepy old manatee. It was understandable why this animal was here; it was missing one flipper. It would die instantly out in the ocean. I placed a hand on the side of the tank, fascinated by how sturdy the glass was to hold back so much water! The smooth surface was cool beneath my hand.

How did they get it to bend like that? If I learned how to bend glass, oh the things I could make!

“Merrick! Oh my god, you scared me! What are you doing here?” Jesse’s voice sounded alarmed, but I could see the delight that stretched her features.

“I wanted to find you, so I did,” I responded. I didn’t know if it was normal or not for humans to scent each other, so I simply let her think what she wanted about how I found her.

“That’s sweet, I think?” She laughed, getting down from the ladder with the giant pool of water. Behind her, the fish swam to the surface, happily grabbing the food that floated before darting back down to the depths for safety. The manatee floated away, bored now that its meal was over.

“You care for fish here?” I asked, disbelief raising the pitch of my voice. My father had always claimed humans did nothing but kill and destroy, pollute and eat. My mate cared for the fish and animals of the ocean! She didn’t stick them with sharp harpoons or dastardly hooks!

“Well, yeah. I used to be an intern, studying marine biology. I got kicked out of the program for something stupid. The aquarium offered to keep me on, since I already know what I’m doing and all of that.”

She glanced up at me as though waiting for a reaction. I tried to analyze her words and make sense of them. I failed, but understood she was upset and that it wasn’t her fault. Had someone yelled at her like the Mike man from the boat?

“Someone kicked you out? Who are they? I will find them. We will fix this!” I vowed. The thought of anyone laying a hand (or foot) on my Jesse was upsetting.

Her hands flew to her mouth, covering a smile. “Well, it wasn’t like that. It was a stupid religious thing. Well, sort of. The school is religious, not me. That means they can kick you out for stupid shit that normal colleges wouldn’t be bothered by. Anyway ... It doesn’t matter, because they’re all hypocrites, anyway. Follow me.”

Gladly.

Jesse took me down a hallway and into a back room with benches and tall metal boxes. I enjoyed how her wet clothing



clung to her body, but I tried not to stare.

“Do you mind turning around for a moment? I’m going to change,” she asked.

My mouth went dry. Did that mean she was taking her clothes off? Was she going to mate with me? It was too fast!

I turned around quickly, sitting down on the bench and trying to breathe. My mind warred with my body, tearing me in two.

*You can't mate with her!*

But I wanted to.

*No you don't!*

Just breathe.

Behind me, I heard her tugging and pulling, and the sound of her clothing hitting the hard floor. I swallowed, imagining what my father or someone like Aris would do. They wouldn't sit here like a minnow and wait. They would pounce and take what they viewed as theirs. I was sure of it.

But I was not like them. I would not force Jesse to do anything. I would never put her in a situation that would leave her upset and alone. I gripped the wooden edges of the bench. I was not them. Jesse wasn't a vessel to be used and discarded.

“Can you help with the zipper?” she asked. “Usually, I just wait until I get to the boat and Javi does it, but you're here and all.”

I turned around. Jesse wore the same black dress from the other night. I liked how it fell softly around her body, accenting her breasts and showing the strong muscles of her legs and calves. She turned and gestured toward her back, which was bare in front of me, the fabric gaping on both sides.

I figured out quickly what she wanted, gently pulling up on the 'zipper' since I recognized it from my jean leggings. I couldn't help but lean in toward her neck as I pulled it up, covering each bit of creamy skin inch by inch. When I reached

the top, my head was bent, my lips hovering just above the back of her neck.

She turned her head, and I moved with her, my nose nuzzling her throat. She quietly gasped, then relaxed and leaned into me. My hands drifted to her sides, running up and down the soft fabric. She felt like heaven, her body a comforting weight against mine.

I wondered how her breasts would feel. They looked so soft and different from mine. My hand inched upwards from her waist, not wanting to push her into something if she didn't want it.

Apparently, I moved too slowly for her tastes because she seized my wrist and pushed my hand directly on her breast.

I chuckled darkly, the edge of my fang brushing against her skin on her throat. I couldn't help it. The urge to bite and claim was so strong. I focused on her breast instead, feeling its weight in my hand. My fingers played with the little hardened nub at the tip, and her body went rigid against me. My other arm went across her pelvis, pulling her in tight against me. The scent of arousal filled the surrounding air.

“Do you like that?” I whispered, my voice unrecognizable as it purred darkly at her.

She nodded and I pinched that nub. She gasped, and her scent abruptly switched to fear.

I dropped her instantly, as though I'd been burned. “Jesse, what—”

“What have we here?” A human male strutted into the room from around the corner of metal boxes behind me. From the angle, Jesse had seen him first. That had been what scared her, and not anything I had done.

Oddly enough, this male seemed angry. Furious, even. I was just as angry at him for disrupting my time with Jesse and causing her alarm.

The terror rolled off Jesse in waves, her fear a thick stench in my nose. I instinctively stepped in front of her. The male

was shorter than me and not very muscled. If we fought, he would lose.

The thought stretched a smirk across my face and I stood taller, assured of my victory.

“Who the fuck are *you*?” he snarled at me, stomping to get in my face. Or tried to.

He was small, but confident.

I grinned ferally, stepping up to loom over him all the better. Jesse sucked in a panicked breath and clung to me hard, her nails digging into the skin of my forearm.

“Please step away. You’re frightening her,” I warned, my voice a low rumble. If anything, that angered him more.

“You must be new around here,” the small male continued. “That’s forgivable, so I’ll let you in on a few pro tips. My father is a major donor to this institution, so what I say goes. And that bitch right there?” He pointed rudely at Jesse, who flinched. “That bitch is *mine*.”

I assumed ‘bitch’ was not a nice word. Jesse’s breaths came too quickly, her eyes wide and her lips pinched. She refused to let go of me, as if I were the only thing standing between this aggressive male and her.

And maybe I was.

# NINE

Jesse

OH MY GOD. Archie was here, in the girls' locker room. Again. The memory of the last time had bile bubbling up my throat and nausea welling in my guts. The only reason he hadn't been able to follow through last time was the group of other interns who'd come into the locker room at the last moment.

They wouldn't say shit of course, but I knew he couldn't have an audience. He couldn't damage that precious reputation of his.

I tried to breathe through the panic.

This time was different. This time, Merrick was here, and his body language assured me he wouldn't be cowed into silence as he stood strong and sturdy in front of me, easily a foot taller than Archie. He wouldn't leave me alone, and he couldn't be threatened into keeping quiet since he didn't have any affiliation with the aquarium or the university. Nonetheless, I dug my nails into his skin, creating crescent shaped marks. His tangible presence was the only thing helping me hold it together.

Merrick ignored Archie's question of who he was. Instead, he twisted his head back to me, almost as if he were ignoring Archie altogether.

"Has he hurt you?" came the dark, rumbling question. I'd never heard his voice like that before—that *fearless*. It sent a

delightful tingle down my spine and resonated in my core.

“H-he’s tried. Several times,” I choked out, my voice unable to get above a whisper. Merrick didn’t pry off my fingers or move me at all. He just let me hang onto him. His palm found my hip and squeezed, reassuring me and letting me know he wasn’t going anywhere. Oh fuck, that shouldn’t turn me on, but it did.

Merrick turned back to face Archie, shoulders bunching with tension. “Leave,” he grunted.

Archie laughed. “What, are you her brother or something? A cousin twice removed?”

“I am not,” Merrick snarled.

“No way you actually *want* her. Look at her!” Archie laughed and winked as if sharing a great joke with Merrick.

His barb hurt, because it was true. Guys who looked like Merrick never went for girls like me. They just didn’t. Which meant guys like Archie acted like they were doing us a huge favor by hitting on us, then calling us names when we weren’t interested.

Merrick didn’t answer.

Archie just stared at Merrick, his smirk fading as his words failed to garner any type of reaction. The tension was thick enough to choke on.

Archie took another step forward, reaching for me.

Merrick exploded, his fist reaching out and clocking Archie in the face. Blood and a tooth flew from his mouth, and Archie fell right the fuck over on the floor, momentarily stunned.

“Oh my god,” I breathed, my hands covering my mouth. Terror and euphoria warred within me. It had finally happened. A man had stood up for me. Merrick had stood up for me. I was frozen, unable to move.

And Archie had lost another tooth. This was too good!

“I’m calling the p-police,” Archie mumbled, blood leaking through his fingers as he tried to staunch the flow. I glanced at Merrick, who was gazing at his fist in wonder. Archie’s blood covered his fist. “This time you’re both going to jail!”

My girly parts went all tingly. Oh Jesus. What was wrong with me?

“We need to go. Now,” I gasped out.

I tugged Merrick away, crying in relief when he easily followed. I practically ran past my supervisor, only managing a quick apology and that I had to leave immediately. She blinked, but shooed me off.

My hands shook as I unlocked my bike, cursing that it wasn’t a two-seater. I whirled back to Merrick, who saw my panic and simply cupped my face, pressing his lips to my brow. “Ride your little machine. I will be next to you. I won’t leave you.”

Oh my god. If he kept that up, I was going to fall in love with him.

The ride to the docks seemed to pass in the blink of an eye. I was terrified Archie would come after us in his car or that the police would try to stop us. His uncle was a chief of the unit, and I had no faith in anyone being impartial.

But no one followed us.

Merrick had started out loping awkwardly next to me as though running was a strange task for him, but settled into a rhythm quick enough. His steadying presence by my side calmed my nerves and gave me something nice to look at when I could manage it.

“We’re here, Merrick.”

I put my foot down and hit the handbrakes. I eyed the large post I usually locked my bike at, concerned it would give me away if Archie came for me.

No. That was ridiculous. Archie didn’t know about my second job. Almost no one did aside from Javi, and of course, Merrick. It would be fine.

Well, except for everyone from the university who'd been on the boat that night. They all knew. Word might have already gotten around. Maybe Archie did know.

"Jesse. Calm." Merrick stroked a finger down my cheek, and I sucked in a deep breath.

What a wonderful, delicious man. I tied my bike up in its normal spot.

Side by side, Merrick and I walked across the deck. I didn't know why it felt so important to do, but my hand reached out, and I twined my fingers with his. Doing so gave me an immediate sense of equilibrium, and my anxiety halved. He tilted his head slightly at the gesture, but immediately gave my fingers a reassuring squeeze.

Mike poked his head up from where he was checking the knots tying the boat to the dock, giving us both a once over.

"Hmm. Didn't think you'd actually show. Well then, let's get to it." Mike stubbed out his cigarette on a nearby post, and gestured for Merrick to follow him. Those aquamarine eyes held me steadily, one eye raised in question.

He was asking me if I needed him to stay with me. And I knew he'd do it, too, if I asked. Fuck Mike and all of it.

The knowledge gave me the courage to smile and shake my head. Merrick ducked his head and boarded the boat, Mike's voice already booming out orders about rope and riggings. I followed and ducked into the small office, bumping into Javi at the doorway.

"Girl! I see he came back. He must—"

"Merrick punched Archie in the face! He knocked a tooth out!"

Javi's jaw dropped, his head dropping comically. "I ... he what?"

I pulled at the ends of my hair, frustrated.

Javi's face, however, split into a wide grin. "Girl, what are you so pressed over? If you don't marry him, I will."

That got a snort from me, of course.

“And let’s not forget he’s willingly subjecting himself to being Mike’s gopher for you. If that isn’t infatuation then I don’t know what is,” Javi added.

Unease churned in my gut as a small ember of hope stoked itself. I’d gotten my hopes up on guys before, and only ever found pain and heartbreak.

“It’s not so much him I worry about. It’s Archie,” I reiterated, grabbing my apron and tying it around my waist.

Javi rolled his eyes, reflexively undoing my knot and redoing it so the bow puffed out prettily. “I think Mr. Muscles has proven he can take care of himself just fine.”

I bit my lip, unsure.

“Now, let me do your makeup, mess up your hair just so, and let’s get out there. It’s the first night of spring break, so you know what that means,” Javi fussed.

I groaned. “Baby twenty-somethings who are loud, messy, and don’t tip.”

Javi dabbed a bit of highlight under my eye, then booped my nose with it. “Exactly. So smile, and let’s go.”

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I DIDN’T SEE Merrick much as Javi and I bustled around to get ready. I restocked condiments and set the tables, and he lit the candles and did a quick vacuuming, while ensuring the bar was properly stocked.

We finished with ten minutes to spare, and loitered by the main ramp.

“You look constipated. Smile.” Javi admonished me through his own cheesy grin. My own customer service smile stiffened, and twisted into more of a grimace.

“I’m worried,” I snarled back.

Then the first group of men arrived, looking like poster boys for snooty privilege in their button downs and khaki



shorts. I shot Javi a look, but he was already bobbing forward to ask for drink orders.

Urgh.

There ended up being about two dozen of them, which wasn't a lot, but it didn't feel like it. They were loud, drunk, and very grabby. Javi seemed to think it a game to flirt with them without them picking up on it, so I let him to it and stayed away, mostly behind the bar and expedited food. I didn't see Merrick, who was likely being kept outside by Mike, doing the harder physical stuff.

I felt better knowing he was at least nearby, though.

"This is an odd group for sure," Javi remarked during a break, both of us leaning against the wall behind a bar to study them.

"Normal young idiots, but weird. They all have a mild accent that I can't place. They're drunk, but struggle to even hold the glasses and keep spilling everything. It's bizarre."

I frowned. That was ... familiar.

"Diverse group for sure, but they all act like they know each other," Javi huffed. "I get a bad vibe. I think you have the right idea staying here. They keep asking for you."

I rolled my eyes.

"As if," I chastised him.

"They're drunk enough that I don't think they'd care whose ass they grab. Even if it isn't mine." Javi pouted, his lower lip hanging out.

I punched his shoulder. "Shut up. You love a challenge."

He scowled. "Not this one. They're practically babies. And stupid ones who can't hold their drink, at that."

I snorted and got to work on his orders. He took up the first few, wobbling dangerously with such a heavy tray as he went up the steps and faced the open air.

"Easy if you come up, it's windy as fuck up here," he called back.

I got the second tray ready and waited for him to come back. And waited.

And waited.

Perhaps Javi had found someone to chat up among the group. The thought made me grin, but it was quickly wiped away by the realization I'd have to take the second round up myself.

Boo.

Well, best to do it quickly and get it over with. I hefted the tray carefully and slowly made my way up the steps to the upper deck. I could hear the wind before I felt it and kept a firm hand on the tray. I ensured my footing before I took the next step.

When I reached the top, I scanned the crowd. Javi was indeed chatting up a dark-haired twenty-something. I took the last step up, spotting Merrick across the boat one level down near the prow, face screwed in concentration as he fumbled with some rope.

My foot caught the lip of the top step. I was too distracted as I watched the muscles in his forearm bunch and contract.

Fuck.

A strong gust of air aided my fall, catching the underside of my large tray and pushing me forward.

I smashed face first onto the floor of the deck, glass shattering all around me. Alcohol soaked me from head to toe, and every eye turned to me.

“Oh my god! Jesse!” Javi sprinted to get to me, but a few of the guys from the party were quicker, beating him to the punch. Two of them grabbed me, one under each elbow, and yanked me upright. The wind blew once more from behind me, fanning my hair out in front of my face.

“Are you—” The first guy froze. It was like he caught sight of my face and saw some kind of hideous birthmark.

The second one dropped me in shock, physically taking a step back. I grunted as I fell back onto the deck, cutting my

hands and legs on glass.

“Jesse! Oh my god. Here.” Javi elbowed the men aside as he untied his apron and threw it down on the ground to shield me from the shards.

“You ... you ...” The men were all standing as a unit now, staring at me with a mixture of shock and amazement. I felt like a mouse caught by a herd of cats. Had they never seen a fat girl fall before? Hardy har! Everyone yuck it up!

“Gentlemen, it’s fine. Just give us a moment to clean this up.” Javi tried to break the odd tension, moving between me and the guys.

Cuts stung all over my body, and I swallowed heavily at the amount of blood trailing down my arms and legs. I had lacerations everywhere.

“I think ... I think I need the hospital,” I whispered to no one.

The group of men all took a collective step forward. Javi puffed out his chest and put himself between us, trying to herd me down the stairs. A man with hair so dark it reflected blue highlights grabbed Javi by his shirt collar and threw him to the side, away from me. Javi’s head bounced off the deck and he groaned, trying to get back up and failing.

What the FUCK?

“JAVI!” I screamed, taking a stepx back toward the stairs. My foot exploded with pain and I panted, realizing I must have gotten glass stuck somewhere in my sole.

I didn’t know what was wrong with these men. How drunk were they? Why were they looking at me like that? My stomach twisted with nausea. It was Archie all over again.

No. *No.*

I did the only thing I could think of. *Merrick.* I screamed.

The men flinched like I’d physically struck all of them. The sound echoed oddly around the small interior of the boat, sounding louder and more shrill than I’d ever heard myself.

I gripped the railing behind me, trying to take the weight off my feet. Heavy, running footsteps pounded in time with my heart, and then Merrick leaped from the outside of the lower deck up onto the upper one, climbing the rails like it was a child's set of monkey bars. He froze at the top, staring in disbelief at the group of men.

"Merrick?" sputtered one man with brown hair, his jaw dropping slightly.

Merrick didn't answer, merely kept his gaze between me, and the men. Me, then the men. His eyes narrowed in on the blood running down my body in rivulets, and his body spasmed.

"Do you—do you know them?" I asked.

The man closest to me with the dark, blue-highlighted hair actually growled.

"She is mine!" snarled Mr. Blue-hair, and then all hell broke loose.

The man leaped for me, I shrank back against the railing. Merrick jumped from the railing and hit him midair, taking him to the ground.

The other men were shouting now, and all of them were rushing toward me.

I screamed again, but it only jolted them for a second. They came at me like wild animals. From below deck, Mike was yelling, asking what the fuck was going on up there. I screamed for him, hoping he could at least help Javi, who was still struggling to get on his feet.

He took his head roughly, winked at me, and jumped back into the fray.

*Men!*

One man was quicker than the others, his red hair a beacon as he grabbed me by the throat and hair, yanking me into his chest. Hands and fingers tried to pry me from him, and I was too horrified to scream. Merrick was buried under three of them, hair wild and eyes crazy.

Someone grabbed the neckline of my dress, ripping it like tissue paper. That broke the spell for me, turning me from a shocked victim into a pissed off woman.

I kneed the red-head in the crotch and viciously struck out blindly with my elbows. Hands dropped me. Others pushed them aside and reached. I ignored the pain from the cuts and fought like a feral barn cat, scratching and clawing as I was kicked in the back and sent sprawling to the deck.

Mike burst from the stairs with Miguel on his heels, immediately jumping into the fray with no questions asked. Javi waved cheekily at them, spinning and landing an expert high kick to the dark-haired guy, grinning as the man slumped unconscious. Mike laughed as if Christmas had come early, cracking his knuckles as he started knocking heads together. Miguel had an ugly look on his face but also looked strangely pleased with this turn of events.

I tried to crawl back toward the stairs to get away from it all, but someone caught me by my ankles and tugged me backward.

“Come here, female,” a voice cooed at me. My heart caught at a flash of blond hair, but it wasn’t Merrick. Merrick was on my right, *throwing a man overboard*.

Oh well. I’d worry about that later.

This man was more of a dirty blond. I reared my foot back and kicked him in the face. He let go, hissing and spitting.

I didn’t know why these men were attacking, but it was clear they were after me. Were they on drugs of some kind?

“Jesse! I’m—” Merrick’s voice cut off as a man with long, brown hair punched him in the jaw.

I saw red, but what could I do? There were five of us on this small boat. We were horribly outnumbered.

“Fucking bath salts ...” I muttered to no one. Trying to rationalize it wouldn’t help. The fighting needed to stop. If the crazy men wouldn’t stop, and if it was over me for some reason, maybe the best thing to do was ... go away.

I clutched the railing and glanced down at the dark, choppy waters. Faced with a choice between the men and a gator, I'd take the gator.

And yet, I hesitated.

It cost me.

I turned, my gasp of surprise cut short as another man put his elbow around my neck and pressed himself against my back. I rammed my bleeding foot as hard as I could into his crotch, and he shoved me hard away from him.

I overbalanced but it was too late—momentum dragged me forward toward the dark waters in front of me. I squeezed my eyes shut as I fell overboard and hit the water hard.

# TEN

Merrick

I WAS TRYING to figure out how to tie the knot Mike wanted, musing over how I should really incorporate more rope into my art, when Jesse screamed. It wasn't a normal cry—that would have been alarming enough. But the sound she made—it burned through my blood and reverberated in my soul. Every nerve in my body lit up like an eel had shocked me. My feet and arms moved before I'd even made the conscious decision to go to her. I jumped over a wall and hauled myself over the railing to the upper deck without thinking. My 'feet' hit the deck hard and I bent inwards, throbbing pain shooting up my human legs on landing. As guppies they warned us to never "jump" while on land, because it was very dangerous.

I got it, now.

When I landed and looked up, it was to see the mer hunting party staring back at me.

A moment of frozen shock went through. *This* was the boat Barrett had brought them to? What were the odds?

My eyes dragged over to Jesse, wounded. The scent of her blood was fresh in the air, its presence no doubt shocking and astounding the hunting mers. Her hair was stuck to the front of her face, confusion and fear etched in her face.

Aris snapped first, feral madness overtaking him as he lunged for her. I caught him in midair and slammed him to the

floor.

“She is *mine*.” I twisted his arms behind his back. Soon enough, other mers were on top of me, fighting and hitting. Biting and scratching. Trying to show their dominance in their effort to win the female.

Jesse screamed again, and I threw them all off me. Adrenaline coursed through my veins, my muscles quivering with tension. I’d kill them all and have no regrets. Jesse was the only thing that mattered. Though she was doing a fair job of fighting them off herself, and I hardened with arousal. My Jesse was strong! A true siren born!

I’d rip them all apart for daring to touch her.

Barrett advanced toward her, and my anger doubled, tinged with betrayal.

*He didn’t know. How could he know?*

Blinding pain exploded in my back, and I stumbled.

“You’ve been keeping secrets,” Aris sneered, driving a piece of glass deeper into muscle and sinew. It felt worse than a shark bite as it delved deeper into my flesh.

“And you haven’t claimed her yet, have you? We’d smell it. I always knew you were an idiot.”

I dropped suddenly to the ground and rolled, ignoring the glass still stuck somewhere in my back. The moment Aris’s stupid face appeared, I punched him twice as hard as I had that other human who had threatened Jesse. His nose split, and I followed with an uppercut to his head. Aris dropped hard, unconscious. The urge to shake out my hand was strong. Everything hurt on land; jumping, punching ...

I jerked up at a war-cry from Jesse, but I needn’t have worried. Jesse kicked Orion’s human crotch, which we were warned as guppies was a terribly sensitive place to take a blow.

She missed.

Orion pinned her arms behind her back, bending her over the railing of the boat and grinding up against her backside.



Her foot bent in toward her chest and she kicked.

I turned and swept my leg to take down another mer who charged me, eyes full of fury. I didn't have time for this! I had to get to Jesse!

Orion grabbed her neck and turned her head, slapping her hard. I gave a battle cry and roared, but the other mers kept rushing me. I couldn't help her and it was driving me insane. Dazed, she didn't stop fighting. Somewhere next to us, the human Mike joined the fray along with the smaller male.

Jesse cocked her foot back and tried a third time. This time her blow hit home, and Orion screeched like a dying dolphin, clutching his crotch area with one hand, and shoving her in reflex with the other.

I could only watch in horror as the force of the blow carried her upper body over the railing. Feral strength raced through me as I screamed, knocking the other mers away in my haste to reach her.

Jesse crashed into the ocean, slipping quietly down into its depths without even a scream. I bellowed with rage and grabbed Orion with my bare hands, and threw him down to the deck so hard something snapped. I didn't care. He'd heal.

The only thing that mattered was Jesse.

Bleeding heavily.

Alone in the ocean.

“Get her!” the male called Javi yelled at me. I glanced over my shoulder to see between him and Mike. The rest of the hunters were unconscious on the ground. Not bad for two humans and a mer against a dozen feral hunters.

“I will take her somewhere safe.”

“WAIT, YOU'RE BLEEDING—”

I didn't heed the smaller male as I ripped off my shirt, hissing in pain as it pulled on the glass in my back. I ignored, stripping off my shorts, and the stupid orange underwear and the foot garments. Javi choked and gasped behind me, but I didn't have time to pay him any heed. I dove into the ocean

naked, relishing the return of my gills and tail, and the webbing between my fingers. Ah, to have my true vision back!

The cold water whipped over my scales, a cool kiss welcoming me back. My wound burned, but the burn meant it was being cleaned as well, so I ignored it.

I spun desperately in a circle, looking and scenting for Jesse.

*Blood. There.*

I dove under the ship and to the north, her unconscious body was sinking fast. I scooped her up in my arms and pumped my tail as hard as I could due south, toward a secluded place where I normally hunted for shells and sea glass. It didn't matter how remote it was; it was the only place I could think of where no one would find us and that was my primary concern. I had to move quickly, so the ocean had time to disperse her blood and make it difficult for them to follow us.

Because they would follow us. They'd tear heaven and earth apart to get to her.

*Swim. Swim.*

We broke the surface and I coughed, my poor gills confused at the constant flipping between water and air. Panic kept me going, and desperation gave me strength. We were far away from our destination, but I refused to stop and rest, refused to slow down or acknowledge the throbbing wound in my back. My tail and abdomen burned as I struggled to keep her head above water. Her body rose and fell against me, so at least I knew she was still breathing.

I just had to keep it that way.

As I swam, different scenarios flew through my head, each one worse than the next. The mers could return to the clan and report I had a siren born. They could fight me for her or respect my claim. If it was the latter, my father would expect me to impregnate her as soon as possible. Then my life as I knew it would be over and so would hers.

No more art. Jesse would be stuck inside our home, unable to go anywhere as her every move was carefully scrutinized by the clan.

I could already see her sad face and miserable eyes.

Fury burned through my veins.

Jesse wasn't a piece of meat to pump a baby into. And no one would touch her while I still breathed—whether above the sea or below it.

I'd murder Aris for trying.

Darkness fell over the ocean and the wind kicked up, making hard work for me as I battled waves and rough currents to ensure Jesse kept breathing. Underneath the water would be much warmer and calmer, but she wasn't like me.

The small bit of land I was looking for finally came into view as exhaustion threatened to overcome me. I took one last breath of air and pressed my lips to hers like a sucker fish. I dove with her under the water, the noise of the surface disappearing as though sucked into a whale's blowhole. Pain exploded down my neck as my gills slit open, greedily gulping water and converting it into oxygen, which I pressed into Jesse's mouth.

Under the water was calm and quiet, as things should be. I found the opening to the underground cavern easily without needing to see it and swam hard. The underground tunnel wasn't that long, but with Jesse, it felt like ages.

*Please don't let me drown her. Please let this work.*

Darkness pressed in all around me. I knew the way, but with such precious cargo, doubt crept in. *What if you go the wrong way? You can't run into a dead end with her!*

My muscles ached and my gills burned, but I could make it. I was almost there. I nearly cried in relief when I saw the surface, bursting through the water violently as I heaved Jesse onto a rock. I gasped and twitched, my body confused on whether to gulp in air through lungs or gills.

I sank back into the water fully, writhing as my gills worked furiously, trying to figure out which organs were needed.

I took a minute to catch my breath. When the spots disappeared from my eyes, I crawled up on the rock next to her, wincing as my gills faded away and air expanded in my lungs. I sent a silent apology to my body.

One never really got used to it.

This cavern was mine. Or at least, I thought of it as such. It was where I kept most of my artwork and works in progress. This cave was only accessible by the tunnel, which kept humans away, and I highly doubted any other mers knew of it.

The rocks were cool under my scales, but I knew humans were used to different climates. I reached out a hand and placed it on Jesse's shoulder, frowning at how cold it was. Human flesh was supposed to be warm, not cold like mine!

I heaved my lower body out of the water and as soon as I had legs, I stumbled over to my supply chest. I needed all the jellyfish serum I could find to treat her wounds. Maybe that would help her warm up.

My eyes dilated quickly, allowing me to easily navigate in the darkness. Piles of small bioluminescent algae covered the walls here and there, giving enough of a glow to bounce off the reflective glass and shells I had decorated the cave with for practice. It had been a pain getting the moss to grow, but with enough persistence some had taken and now it was illuminated quite nicely. Water dripped steadily from overhead, louder than I remembered.

A horrible thought came to mind; what if the cave collapsed? It wasn't something I had to worry about, but Jesse couldn't breathe under water! She could die!

Poseidon's nutsack.

*Don't think about that now. Treat the wounds first. Panic later.*

Luckily, I had a decent supply since I frequently cut myself on the sharp shells and glass I worked with. I pulled all of it

out and quickly smeared it all over Jesse's legs and arms. Next I dabbed some on the slice on her cheek, and the few cuts that dotted her chest around the swell of her breasts. I picked up her feet, seeing the glass embedded in her flesh.

It was tempting to throw such impractical garments back into the ocean, but the memory of Orion howling as the sharp point of the foot garment met his pelvis would be one I would always cherish. Perhaps we would keep these, then. I put them to the side, since they held such fond memories.

I fetched a sharpened piece of fishbone I used to help manipulate the smaller shells. And I patiently worked to remove the glass out of her foot. My vision swam as I tried to focus, but I forced myself to pay attention. I could sleep later from the exhaustion from battle, or the wound that still bled sluggishly from my back. Or both.

Thankfully, I only had one piece of glass left to retrieve when Jesse woke up.

# ELEVEN

Jesse

I must have passed out when I hit the water. All I remembered was having the air knocked from my chest when my body met the ocean hard. It was as if I'd slammed into a cement wall. The cuts all over my body stung like hell from the salt, a fresh agony I had never contemplated before. And it was freezing.

And dark! I couldn't see! Was I blind?

*Focus on not being dead, first.*

I was on land somewhere, and I wasn't blind. It took a moment to come into focus, but I was surrounded by oddly glowing walls. The more my eyes adjusted, the lower my jaw dropped.

A cave? No, not a cave, a mausoleum! Every inch of rock wall around me was covered by a mosaic of glass, glinting around me in sheens of green, blue, and white. The scenes depicted mermen, which I thought was strange. Where were the mermaids?

The work was beautiful, the subtle shading of the different hued blues and whites forming realistic waves that bordered the top of the cave walls. More works of art surrounded me: chairs made of bone and sea shells, tables, and drinking cups. It was like an artist had closed their gallery and everything had been shoved here for storage. Nonetheless, It felt wrong to

have so many beautiful pieces just sitting here in the almost dark.

The next thing I noticed was the sharp, stinging sensation in my feet. I jerked, nearly kicking Merrick in the face.

“MERRICK!”

With a soft splash he rolled into the water, coming back to the edge toward me with only his upper body visible.

“There was glass in your feet. I was seeing to it,” he offered warily, eyes darting from my feet to my face.

Oh. I sat up slowly, noting the large cast of clear gooey stuff down my arms and legs. More of that neat jellyfish stuff, then.

Merrick must have been busy with me.

I closed my eyes, trying to breathe through the flash of panic that came from being stalked in the past. Was I some kind of weirdo who attracted perverts like moths to a flame? I squashed the small whimper that was bubbling up in my throat. Merrick wasn't like that. He was kind. Respectful. And he had apparently saved me from drowning.

To distract myself from my racing thoughts, I peeled back a layer of the jellyfish bandage on my leg, relieved when there was barely a mark left behind. A small pile of it accumulated by my side as I ripped it all off. I tried not to remember how it had looked, dripping blood everywhere.

“Thank you,” I said softly, knowing Merrick had brought me here and tended to my wounds.

Fuck, it was cold. Goosebumps broke out along my skin and I shivered, trying to curl into a ball and rub myself vigorously to generate heat. My ass was going to go numb in a minute from the ice cold rock underneath me.

Merrick turned and presented me with his back. “Do you mind? I think there is enough left.”

I gasped with shock at the large sheet of glass embedded in his back, up toward his left shoulder blade. Suddenly being cold didn't seem so important.

“Merrick! Oh my god! Why didn’t you use any of this on yourself? You didn’t need to heal *everything on me*. Some of them were minor!” I chastised him, even as I carefully wrapped my fingers around the edge of the shard, not wanting any more cuts myself.

“I’ll count to three. Ready?”

Merrick took a deep breath, his hands curling around the edge of the pool, latching onto the rock. He nodded.

“OK,” I said softly. “One, Two—”

“Wait!” he pleaded.

I froze. “What’s wrong?”

His entire body was tense. “Is it *on* three, or is it after three? Will you pull it out right as you say three, or you go ‘three,’ wait, then pull it?”

This wasn’t an appropriate time to giggle, but I did so anyway. He looked exhausted; he was clearly in pain, and yet I couldn’t help how analytical Merrick was about everything. Even this.

“On three,” I promised.

Merrick nodded, a bit of the tension in his shoulders releasing.

“OK,” I tried again. “One.” I pulled hard, yanking the glass cleanly from his back before he even realized what was happening. Scowling at it, I threw it down against the stone floor, taking delight in watching it shatter. Didn’t want to throw it against the wall and hurt any of the gorgeous art, after all.

Merrick grunted in annoyance at my trick, glaring at me. Giving it right back to him, I bundled up some of the dried jellyfish compound and dunked it through the water once. Like I expected, it had gone liquid again. I slapped it on his back before he could react, then resumed rubbing my own arms as quickly as possible.

Cold, cold, cold.



He sighed at what I imagined was instant relief and he turned back to face me. He lowered himself to the edge of the pool, resting his head in his arms. My lips thinned as he yawned. He almost looked sick. How far had he swam with me while injured? I tried to put aside the slight bolt of arousal, feeling like a stereotypical damsel in distress for the first time in my life.

It was ... nice.

“You ... swam me here? How far away from the boat are we?” I had to ask, because I still couldn’t believe it.

Merrick winced at the high pitch of my voice, but I didn’t see how any of this was possible. I was too big to carry like that. And even if I wasn’t, no man would be strong enough to swim far! Not even Michael Phelps!

Merrick shifted uncomfortably in the water “Uh ... sea turtles. I found a pair of them and—”

“Let me guess; you lashed them together with hair from your back?” I finished viciously, glaring at him.

He looked incredibly confused. “Well, no. That sounds foolish.”

Obviously he wasn’t a Pirates movie fan.

I looked around. Small bits of sunlight caused the murals and walls to shimmer. “Where did all this come from?”

Merrick twitched, squirming a bit. “This is where I create my art,” he offered lamely, gesturing at the walls. “I used that to practice and get the shapes I want. It’s how I learn.”

OK. So Merrick was some sort of secret ocean artist. That I could handle. It was manageable. But everything else?

“And we are very far from the boat,” he finally answered. “I wanted to get away from them.”

“What *happened?*” I begged him. “Did you know those guys on the boat? Oh my god, I hope Javi and Mike are all right—”

I closed my eyes and heard Merrick push himself up from the pool. Hands surrounded my cheeks, one finger landing delicately on my lips. He tucked me carefully into his chest, which felt cool against my puffy eyes.

“Hush. They know I have taken you away to safety. The mer—the *men* won’t bother them further. They have likely slunk away with their tails between their legs.”

Well, that seemed highly unlikely given society’s litigation-happy attitude.

“How do you know that?” I questioned. Then it hit me. “You *do* know them,” I whispered, horrified.

Merrick’s face grew stormy, his grip on me tightening. “I know them,” he bit out.

Well, that certainly explained the similar accents, then. Just like Merrick. “They came here for spring break then? Like you?” I asked.

His lips thinned. “No. Not like me. They are looking for females to ... to have sex with.”

I laughed. Hard and long, the sound echoing around the cavern. Merrick jumped slightly, brow furrowing in alarm.

“Merrick, that’s *every* man,” I hiccupped, wiping my eyes.

He retreated back into the water, away from me. “You don’t understand. It’s ... it’s different.” His face twisted. “I will make them suffer for what they did to you.”

His face twisted with rage, and a warm feeling infused my chest. Right now, he wasn’t my sweet, naive Merrick. He was pissed. Protective. It made my stomach flip and sent tingles through my body in the most delicious way.

I shook my head. He was simply overreacting. Though I had been terrified when that big, black-haired ogre had me pinned against the railing. The more I thought about it, the more nauseated I became. It really was Archie all over again.

I tried to laugh it off. I was strong. I wasn’t helpless. “Stupid shit always happens when you involve alcohol.”

“No,” Merrick argued stubbornly. “They hurt you. I will kill them with my bare hands if that’s what it takes to keep them away.”

His words shocked me, but a warm sensation spread through my chest, and kept moving down my arms and legs, and down to my core. I needed air. It shouldn’t turn me on to hear him threatening other people like that. But God, it did. And I fucking loved it. I needed air. Quickly.

“Where is the entrance? I need to get outside. It’s too dark too—”

“It is underwater,” he began cautiously. “It’s too deep and too long for you to swim yourself, especially injured.”

My hands balled into fists. “Oh, is that so? I was on my school’s swim team, you know.”

Until I’d gotten bullied off for being bigger than the other girls, that was. But still. I knew how to handle myself around the water. I grew up swimming.

Merrick backed into the corner of the cave, the shadows making it difficult to make him out in the water. He ran his hands through his hair, lowering himself into the water until only his head was visible above it, and only if I squinted.

“I would prefer not to have to rescue you twice,” he offered.

I should have been annoyed at the barb, but he looked awful, his skin paler than normal and rings under his eyes.

So, I wouldn’t argue, but no one told me what to do. I dove into the pool.

“Jesse! What—”

I didn’t hear the rest, the water rushing across my body as I dove. Damn, this cave was deep. I tried to open my eyes, ignoring the sting of the salt water. It was pitch black. Stories of cave swimmers being sucked into dark holes by strong currents poked at my mind, and suddenly this didn’t seem like such a good idea. Even if it was to prove a point.

A large hand spanned my belly and tugged. Properly shamed, I let Merrick tow me back to the surface. I flipped my soaked hair out of my eyes, my face heated.

“Well then, Mr. Olympic swimmer, how did the both of us get through the first time—”

Something large and scaly touched my legs, and I yelped. I thrashed wildly in the water, paddling like mad to get back onto the rocky shore and ignoring all of my training and years of swim meets in my panic. I hauled myself over the edge and flipped on my back, rolling and pointing at the water.

“Something’s in there! Get out!” I begged him, my eyes straining in the semi-darkness to make anything out under the water. It was impossible. Every horror movie where the kid gets sucked down by the leviathan raced through my mind.

“Jesse! No! It’s just ...” Merrick’s voice was tinged with distress, the cave too dark to make out his exact expression at the lip of the pool. His shoulders slumped in defeat.

“There is no ... thing. It is just me. I am tired of trying to hide, and it seems inevitable you will find out.”

“What are you talking about?” I laid down on the cool stone, tracing the ridges and dips of the stone with my fingertips. I could easily nap here if I wanted to. At least that would stop the racing thoughts, and I could pretend everything was fine. Normal. Ha!

“I can explain bluntly, if you wish,” Merrick offered, wrapping his arms around my waist and tugging me toward him in the water. I jerked and dug my heels in, not wanting to head back and encounter whatever it was I had grazed.

“Please just tell me,” I begged, tired and confused.

Merrick’s blond head nudged against my lower stomach, almost like he was nuzzling it as he settled against me, hugging me to him like I was his long lost teddy bear. My hands tangled in his dreads, scraping across a few of the shells that were interwoven in his braids.

One callused hand had a vice grip on my hip, and the other slid up from my knee to my thigh. I was embarrassed by how

large my thighs looked splayed out like this, like two large hams at a market.

His sharp teeth scraped my inner thigh, effectively ending my self-conscious thoughts.

“Those men wanted to mate with you,” he rumbled against my thigh. “You call it having sex, right? That is the sole purpose of why they are here.”

It was hard to focus on his words while his hands ran up and down my legs, his tongue tracing the slight pink lines left behind from my wounds. If I was lucky, they wouldn't scar.

“Y-you said you knew them,” I protested. “Does that mean you want to have sex with someone too?” The very thought had my insides squirm unpleasantly. I couldn't imagine him with anyone else.

His head nudged my stomach, pushing me down until I was flat on my back, my pelvis held in place at the edge of the pool. Merrick tried to spread my legs further, only to be stopped by the constraints of my dress.

He growled and tore a large rip in it.

“Merrick!” I gasped.

I gripped his hair in my fingers as his hands and tongue slowly, tantalizingly converged toward one spot: one final goal. My hips tried to jerk upward toward him, but he held me down firmly.

“Yes, I would very much like to have the sex,” he purred. “But unlike them, I won't force you. I won't bury myself in the first female to favor me. I will only sex you. I will only bleed for you.”

Oh fuck. Something was wrong with me. No one had said anything so hot to me in my entire life. I'd never believed a man before when he was trying to talk his way under my skirt. Even the way he'd said the word wrong was so fucking hot. Sex me, indeed.

The look in his eyes was predatory—deadly serious. I believed him. He wanted me. Only me. And he'd fucking

skewer any other guy who came for me. Oh, my god. I was falling for him.

His fingers spread my inner lips without actually penetrating them. Hot air blew over my innermost parts, and my pulse raced beneath my skin.

“F-force?” I gasped out. “Archie—”

“Is not one of us, but if he were, I suspect he’d fit in just fine,” Merrick growled, his voice low and feral.

His nose nudged my center, and I jerked at the intimate contact. Shamelessly, I tried to grind my hips up, but he refused to let me move. He held me down with ease.

“I’ll take that as consent then, my little siren.”

The way his voice vibrated against me was criminal. His tongue stroked the length of my slit, and I pulled his hair while holding in my moan. I felt his answering rumble in my core.

“No, you won’t distract me,” I panted. “Tell me more about those guys. Tell me what I just felt against my goddamn legs. Tell me what you want, following me around like you have.”

His tongue delved inside of me, and I couldn’t contain my moan. He chuckled darkly, squeezing and stroking my thighs as his tongue moved in and out. In and out.

“They are my kinsmen. You felt my tail. And I want to hear you scream.”

I only got the first part of that. Because it was the only part that made sense in my brain, or because his tongue switched from delving inside me to licking slow, languid strokes on my outside edges and who the fuck could think with that going on?

He added one finger, and I thought I might die. My black dress was ruined, the edges frayed and split with white streaks of dried salt painted in random places. The front was ripped all the way down my chest, showing my bra. I didn’t care.

Well, until another annoying, intrusive thought popped up in my head.

“Did you ... did you say something about a tail?” I asked warily, desperate that I had simply misheard him.

Merrick opened his mouth to reply, but I cut him off.

“You definitely said tail. And kinsmen.” My eyes shot to his waist, out of view beneath the dark water.

“Get out,” I commanded, my voice shaking. “Let me see.”

I expected him to laugh. To tell me I was paranoid and exaggerating, because that’s what every other motherfucker with a penis had always told me. There was no fucking way he was serious. Right?

No such luck. Merrick dove into the dark water like a dolphin, the large tail arcing in the air as it followed his body. I stared. The cave was dark, but not dark enough that I was hallucinating a fucking tail.

It was longer than the upper part of his body, and a gorgeous shade of green-blue. As he waved it around in the semi-darkness, the edges of his scales glinted gold at me. He raised his hands and face to the surface, holding them out. Webbing appeared between his fingers, and even his ears were different. After only a few seconds of them being above the air, the extra features faded away, making him appear human.

It was beautiful. He was beautiful.

Merrick backed up to the far side of the cave, his face twisted in anxiety.

“Get back over here,” I demanded, my voice hushed. “I want to see it. Really see it.”

Mermen were real? Mermaids were real? This was a marine biologist’s wet dream. I tried to quell my racing, nerdy little heart.

Merrick cautiously came back toward me, a slight look of wonder on his face. “You aren’t afraid?”

I laughed. “Do you know how little humans actually know about the oceans? Finding out mythical creatures exist within it isn’t so much of a stretch. I feel ... wonder. Excitement. I

want to know everything about your life! Come up here so I can see you properly!”

I paused, realizing I was treating him like an experiment; a very hot, kind, touch-her-and I'll-kill-you experiment.

“That is ... if you don't mind,” I added, remembering ethics in the nick of time.

Merrick hesitated for a moment, then, with a push against the edge, hefted himself out of the water and next to me. I tried not to stare too openly as his gorgeous tail slid next to me. I put one hand out to feel the texture of his scales, but before my hands landed, the scales faded into human legs.

And then there was his quite visible, quite aroused dick. That had scales. I wanted to examine it more, but embarrassment had me flinching away.

Merrick's head tilted to the side, a mischievous grin on his face. “I thought you weren't afraid,” he whispered, voice laced with desperation as he slid back into the water.

“No! That's not it at all. I'm just not used to seeing ... uh, so much.” I gestured to his waist so my meaning was clear.

He huffed and rolled his eyes. “Humans are very strange about their clothing.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “So you're saying you never wear any under the sea? At all?”

Merrick gestured nonchalantly. “Sometimes hunters wear protection around the chest and back and shoulders. The jellyfish sap is quite effective, but stings hurt. Or if we must travel through an area known for sharks. As a people we do not war with each other. Every life is treasured.”

Well, that was certainly progressive for a race that lived in the wild.

“Hold out your hands,” I demanded.

Merrick held his palms out, shooting me a wry glance. I jumped into the pool, grabbing onto him as he automatically brought me to his chest. Feeling rather confident about his



obvious interest in me, I boldly reached my hand under the water and stroked up and down his tail.

He went rigid like I'd just grabbed his now non-existent dick. One had clenched my wrist in a vice-like grip, his eyes nearly popping out of his head.

I withdrew my hand. "What's wrong? Did that hurt?" Leave it to me to assault the poor man just because it was my first merman tail!

He took a couple of deep breaths. "You're going to make this very difficult if you do things like that."

Oh. *OH!*

I held in my snicker only because he looked honestly distressed. He got turned on just from a stroke? And he'd been hard even before that! I felt like a sea goddess. A badass. Someone who mattered to someone. A sexy, desired woman.

I held one of his hands underwater with me, gently stroking the webbing between his fingers. It felt rubbery, but incredibly smooth.

"Jesse," he growled at me, his voice going darker than I'd ever heard it.

"Hmm?" I murmured back, as if totally disinterested. I hopped out of the water and awkwardly climbed back onto the rocks, and patted the spot next to me.

"What are you—"

"Come here," I ordered, sounding way more confident than I felt.

Merrick gave me a look, but easily lifted himself out of the water and next to me, the cords of muscles on his forearms flexed as he moved.

I watched with fascination as the tail disappeared and faded into two muscled legs with his very ... *different* equipment.

I reached out and Merrick gave a long shudder as my hand touched him and explored his length with one long stroke. He

wheezed at the sensation, unable to speak.

“I guess hand jobs aren’t a thing under the sea,” I muttered back, amused and flattered that I could make him feel this way. I glanced down, taking the time to examine him as he groaned with appreciation.

It was a dick, but clearly a special edition dick. While the rest of his legs and body looked normal, his dick was dotted with the same scales of his tail—a deep green-blue color that flashed gold depending on how the light hit it. The scales felt rough and textured as my fingers glided against it, but the underneath and tip were much smooth.

I wasn’t interested in any of that, though. I couldn’t take my eyes from the flared shape of the tip. I couldn’t help but wonder how that would feel inside me. If Merrick was near catatonic with my hand on his dick, what would he do if I put my hot mouth on him?

Before I lost my confidence, I dipped my head down and took him as far as I could into my mouth. He hissed and dug his fingers into my hair, pulling roughly with no warning. Like the rest of him, his dick was cool in my mouth with sharp edges around the scaled bits that flattened obediently as my soft mouth covered them.

“Yes ...” he growled, thrusting into my mouth viciously, unable to control himself. I didn’t flinch, loving how I gagged. I loved how he took control, moving my body as he fucked my mouth, losing his mind as he turned into a feral beast. The flared tip of his dick made it easier to keep him in my throat. I fucking loved it.

I glanced up at him with hooded eyes and a mouth full of dick, and he lost his mind.

With one hand, he pulled me off his dick with a ‘pop’ then yanked me up and smashed me against the wall, my hip harshly pinned to the stone. His other hand wrapped around my throat. His nose nuzzled against my cleavage as he moved up and down, inhaling my scent. His entire body shuddered, and he reluctantly pulled away.

“We must stop.”

I jerked, immediately letting go as shame overtook me. Merrick didn't want me to touch him. Had I forced him, then? I didn't think I'd imagined his desire. Was I any better than Archie or those crazed mermen on the boat?

“Sorry,” I whispered, my throat tight with emotion.

Merrick reared back, confused. “Siren, you have done nothing wrong. I just ... you don't understand everything fully yet. I won't ... I won't take advantage of you until you do. It's important you understand because the others wouldn't wait. They wouldn't give you a choice.”

I took this in. “The ... others? There's more of you. Oh! You mean the assholes on the boat?” I gasped, putting it all together.

Merrick nodded solemnly. “They are here for the spring break. They will try to find siren-born females like yourself. They will impregnate you, then abandon you and wait to see if the child is a girl or a boy. If it is a girl, they will leave you alone. If it is a boy, they will steal the child and raise it among our clans.”

I stared at him, waiting for the punchline to come or for him to smile and tell me he was joking.

He didn't. He just ... waited for me.

I leaned over the side of the pool and threw up.

# TWELVE

Merrick

I KNEW little about human females and even less about siren-born females, but I suspected that Jesse voiding the contents of her stomach into the water wasn't a good reaction after offering her my cock. They taught us as guppies how to sex human females with our human cock because we couldn't do it with our tails.

Either way, it shouldn't make Jessie sick.

Though perhaps it was the information that there was a group of hungry mermen who wanted to plant a baby in her that made her feel ill.

The thought made me feel better about my cock.

I rubbed her back as she finished, her arms trembling as her hair hung over her face. I swept it back with one arm, quickly braiding it and sealing the bottom with a special knot that would keep the hairstyle in place until I released it.

Jesse leaned back against me, patting her hair. "You know a lot of neat skills. Merman and all ..."

Her voice sounded dazed and not at all like her usual self.

This worried me.

"And just what the fuck is a siren born?" she asked.

How to explain thousands of years of history in a way she'd quickly understand?

“You are descendants of our mermaids. They are gone from the oceans. We don’t know why. You are a human with siren blood.”

I paused, but she said nothing. Her jaw dropped.

“I’m sorry to drag you into this,” I continued. “I never—”

I stopped as Jesse jerked immediately away from me. “Is that why you met me in the waterway? You could sense I was this ... whatever I am! Oh god, I fell for your stupid ‘tangled in the nets’ trap. God, I’m such an idiot.”

Alarm coursed through me. “Jesse, no! I had not planned on meeting you at all! I *was* trapped or I would have swum away!” I argued, pleading with her to understand. “I don’t run into human females often! When I smelled you, I just ... I wanted to make sure you got home safe,” I finished lamely, knowing how bad it sounded.

Jesse laughed, but the sound held no amusement. “Right. Like I believe that.”

I wanted to reassure her, but I was wasting time. I had to get back before the stories spread to the other clans—to my father.

“I’m sorry, Jesse, but you’re in serious danger. We haven’t found a siren born in decades, and even now hundreds of mers are descending on your shores. I must return to calm the situation. They all know about you. I am not sure what scares me more: the fact they know you exist now or me leaving you alone for any amount of time. I know they will eventually track you here.”

I took a breath, knowing she would not like what I was about to say, but I didn’t know what else to do.

“Regardless, I’m going to leave you here until I can figure out a way to get you back on land, where it’s safest. Please don’t leave through the underground caverns; you will drown. I will prepare your food before I leave.”

A large drop of water landed on my head. I shook it off.

Jesse shot up. “Exfuckingscuse me?!”

I didn't know what that word meant. "I—"

She stood and glared at me. "You are not leaving me here, fish boy. And I want another shot at those assholes who attacked me! Don't think you can just shove this baby in a corner and ... are you even listening to me?"

I glanced up from where I was already breaking open a few mussels and clams I kept for situations like this in a shallow pool a few feet away.

"No, not really," I replied glibly. If I hit the clam just right, the best parts of the meat would stay stuck to the shell.

Jesse made a choking sound. I would have to explain myself further or she would become more upset.

"If it makes you feel better to keep yelling at me, continue. I think it is more important to ensure you will eat well while I'm gone."

Jesse stared at me in shocked silence, her mouth hanging open as I rearranged a few things around the cave, and made up the small bed in the corner with old nets and canvas.

I stood, happy that she had enough fresh shrimp, clams, and mussels to tide her over, and a bed to sleep. I didn't have any jelly juice packs for her. Which need was more deadly: fresh liquids or the horde of mers hunting her?

Whatever we were doing, it had to be done quickly.

"I will return soon," I promised and went to dive into the water.

"Merrick! Don't you dare—"

I never got to find out what. I dove into the water and straight down into the underwater cave, praying she wouldn't follow. My body writhed as I fought the instinctual urge to breathe through my mouth. My gills appeared with my tail and fins moments later, and I knew instant, glorious relief as they opened along my neck and started filtering air.

I hoped Jesse wouldn't be angry with me for trapping her there, even though she had every right to be. The holes in the cavern had grown bigger since last time, and that made me

nervous. She had no access to fresh liquids, which also made me nervous. All of the hunters were likely scouring the ocean this moment, tracking her blood.

Fuck, as Jesse would say.

*Just do your best to protect her.*

The thought felt like a spear going through my chest, but I shoved it away. I would do what I had to in order to protect her. I recognized that what I felt for her was more than protectiveness—there was an instinctual possessiveness that had already come out frequently.

And I think Jesse liked it.

But if she didn't want any more kisses or didn't want to have my children, I would not force her.

Nor would I let any other mer force her.

The darkness swallowed me as I swam hard, relishing the burn in my muscles as I pushed myself harder. I emerged from the cave into the open ocean, adjusting my tail to rise. I would sniff out the surrounding area, and wait until the hunting party returned back home. That would be the time for Jesse and I to escape back to land.

Hopefully, the blood was too diluted through the water, and the hunters too stunned and injured to immediately follow the trail.

It wasn't much of a hope, but it was the only one we had.

# THIRTEEN

Jesse

THAT MOTHERFUCKER. Not only had he casually dropped that he was a fucking mermaid—er, *merman*—and oh, by the way, those men on the boat apparently were also all mermen who wanted to breed me, but then he abandoned me in this cave!

“Yeah, right,” I mumbled to know one. “He’s just trying to keep me here.”

The man had gills on the side of his neck, and a massive tail! He’d lied. About everything.

Tears welled hotly in my eyes. I’d thought Merrick was different. I wanted to do nothing more than have a good cry, but my eyes shifted to the small feast of raw ocean delicacies. He’d given me food. He’d made up my bed.

No matter how I tried, I couldn’t simply view him as another asshole guy who was just trying to score because she was an easy target.

Merrick cared about me even if I was pissed beyond hell at him.

The thought allowed me to stop crying and take a few deep breaths. First things first, I’d break up some of this driftwood and see if there was anything I could use to start a fire. If I could manage that, it was seafood buffet time. The raw mussels wouldn’t be great, but people ate them like that all the time, didn’t they? And I was still fucking cold.



Happy to have something to occupy my hands with, I moved around the dim cave. A large drop of water landed on the back of my neck.

“Shit!”

Fuck, tit, that was cold!

Wait ... was that running water?

The sound was growing louder and was from a steady trickle to a small stream. Water poured down the side of the back of the cave.

Had it been doing that this whole time?

I put a hand to the slimy wall then tentatively licked.

“Urgh, that’s a hard no.”

Tangy salt and rotten seaweed met my tastebuds. This definitely wasn’t freshwater.

*Wait.*

Merrick had mentioned that the only way out was an underwater tunnel. What if it was more than that ... What if this cave was *in the ocean*?

Claustrophobia and panic kicked in, tightening my chest.

*Don’t panic. Breathe.*

The anxiety edged back, slightly. I focused on the sound of running water, finding it soothing.

Except it sounded a bit more than a gentle stream. Turning around, I put my hand back on the water and water ran all over it, a steady stream that was pooling onto the stone floor and running into the larger pool.

If I was under the sea, and the water leaking in was salty, then that meant—

*Don’t. Panic.*

“Ha, yeah, because the cave I’m in *underwater could be fucking collapsing!*”

What was more terrifying: being here if the cave collapsed or the inky abyss of the pool in front of me? Merrick had swam in it unmolested, so there was likely nothing too monstrous hanging out beneath the black depths.

OK. I was brave. I could do this.

Burning agony assaulted me as the salt water hit my wounds, and I sucked in a pained breath. I was pissed at hell, but could understand he was trying to protect me. Even if he was being an absolute twat about it. If we could just face this together, then I knew we'd figure it out.

*How I wish I could follow him.*

For a moment I let my mind be crazy and imagined the impossible: both of us with large tails and webbed fingers, darting through the ocean together like a pair of fish. It'd be much more fun to see the world this way with him than unconscious, after all.

I grinned despite myself. What a ridiculous notion! And yet ... I yearned for the freedom to just exist with him and only the ocean around me. No bullies. No jobs. No family to disappoint.

Just Merrick, and only Merrick. Oh, how I longed to join him.

A sudden pain burst across my abdomen, tearing a gasp from my throat. I sucked in air, suddenly unable to catch my breath. The pain spread down my legs and I grasped the edge of the rock pool just to keep myself above the water.

Black flooded the edges of my vision as my throat closed and I couldn't breathe. Why couldn't I breathe? White-hot agony raced up and down my lower half, and my fingers lost their purchase on the edge.

*Don't pass out. You're gonna drown.*

I reached out but couldn't find the edge of the pool. Where had it gone? I tried to kick my legs, but they wouldn't work right.... It felt like one large throbbing appendage that didn't work the way I wanted it to.

I sank beneath the water, confused and afraid.

# FOURTEEN

Merrick

I DIDN'T BOTHER TRYING to find the boat or going back to the place where I knew it docked. After sensing the surrounding area wasn't full of pissed off hunters, I vacated the area. The only scent more telling than Jesse's around the cave would be mine, after all.

So I headed straight for home, knowing I was likely already too late. The other mers would have returned by now, angry and calling for my blood. I didn't care, and would make the same sacrifice over and over again if needed.

*Jesse isn't safe yet. Keep moving. Figure it out on the way.*

I didn't make it far into my village before the other mers saw me and screamed with feral anger, over thirty of them rushing toward me. I didn't turn to fight; I simply tightened my arms to my sides and shot as fast as I could like a porpoise through the water, toward my father's throne in the open courtyard. My heart felt like it was exploding in my chest with my effort. If the pack of my brothers got to me first, they'd likely rip me apart before any of their fathers (or mine) could intervene.

Luckily, he was there, holding court with the other clan leaders, all of their faces drawn and serious. I zoomed past him and shot behind his throne like a little guppy being chased by a shark. There was no shame in it if it kept me alive.

“MERRICK!”

My father twisted my ear between his fingers and yanked me back out in front of him and the other elders. The horde of mers pulled up short, seeing their fathers and elders gathered around me, but their ugly looks remained in place.

“He stole the siren!”

“He attacked us!”

“He tried to kill the siren!”

“He didn’t even claim her!”

My father held up the free hand that wasn’t cutting off the blood flow to my ear. Everyone went silent. My heart was beating so frantically against my ribs I worried that all of them could hear it.

“Merrick. Explain yourself.” My father threw me forward, releasing me, his dark hair flowing freely around him.

I resisted the urge to rub my offended ear like a minnow. Instead, I stood firm, but met none of their eyes. I picked a spot of corral far beyond any of them and stared at it. If I could pull this off and get my father on my side, Jesse and I had a chance. “I met her by chance a week ago. I have been ... courting her since.”

The words stuck in my throat like rotting seaweed as the mers mumbled among themselves.

“Courting? What is this courting?” my father asked.

“And it surely does not take a week, ” Aris sneered.

I noted with satisfaction that his nose was now off-center. I wracked my brain, trying to remember if I’d done, or if Jesse had.

“Gally taught us in history classes that courting was part of the old ways. The siren would choose the mer she wanted. Is that not right?” I challenged. It was the only shot I had.

My father blinked.. Whatever excuse he expected me to have, it wasn’t that.

“Lies! You lie!” Aris blurted out, his blue-ish skin tinged darker than normal in anger.

Fury burned through my veins. “No!” I shouted, but there were far more angry, frustrated mers than just me.

My father held up his hand, and the shouting quieted.

“That is why it is taking so long. I am not forcing her!” I shot back, trying to make them understand.

“Then, in the meantime, we should be free to take her if she wants!” declared Aris, puffing out his chest.

I lost my mind as the image of Jesse screaming as Aris forced himself on her plagued my thoughts. I hissed and withdrew my dagger, slamming him up against one of the stone columns and pressing the razor-sharp coral dagger against his throat. My knives were always sharp; to cut and work with my shells.

“She does *not* want,” I bit at him.

The fear in his eyes satisfied me. I shoved Aris away and glared at the remaining mob of mers. They all warily backed up, eyeing me and the elders. None of them had ever seen me like this, not even my father. Merrick was quiet and liked to tinker on his projects. Merrick was meek and didn’t cause trouble.

They didn’t know what to make of this Merrick.

My father raised an eyebrow. “Merrick, I admire this new side of you, but surely you must see you haven’t behaved fairly. Tell us where the girl is, so the others might have a chance to also ... court.”

The very thought of them getting anywhere near Jesse made my blood boil.

“No,” I snarled, a deep, feral part of me awakening that I didn’t know existed.

My father’s eyes narrowed. “Merrick.”

My instincts flared, demanding I protect Jesse from these predators. I raised my knife in my hand and felt the tips of my ears flare out. My spine straightened to allow me to puff out as large as I could, and I bared my fangs at all of them.

Including my father.

“Fuck. Off.”

A collective gasp went up from the elders, but the young mers only growled. Then it happened in the blink of an eye. Aris roared and lunged. Behind him, all the other mers screamed in retaliation, and they fell upon me like sharks on a bleeding baby whale.

My father leaped into action along with the other elders. Fathers struck sons as the scent of blood filled the water, shrieks and groans echoing all around me. I slashed out repeatedly with my knife, uncaring and unknowing if I actually hit anyone. All I felt was rage. All I knew was fear that someone would take my female.

My father intercepted Aris before he reached me and slapped him across the face with his tail, hard enough that he floated upwards and away, unconscious. A rough hand wrapped around my throat and squeezed. I bucked uncontrollably against my father's hand, but he didn't let up for a single moment as red streaks opened up along his arms where I struck him with my blade.

Black crept into the edges of my vision, and my movements slowed. My knife dropped to the seabed.

“Done?” Father asked dryly.

I blinked once to say yes.

“Do you have control?” he asked.

I blinked again.

The hand loosened around my throat, and I doubled over, massaging my neck. My gills pumped furiously to bring oxygen into my body after being sealed shut by my father's hand. My eyes were likely bloodshot. I picked up my knife and shoved it back into my satchel.

“Everyone, sit down,” Father commanded.

Black and bloodied mers sat next to their fathers and clan leaders (me included), temporarily chastened.

“He certainly displays all the signs of a mated male,” shot out Gastor, leader of the Jackfish clan. White scars decorated his tail, with big chunks of scales missing from when he’d had a run in with a boat in his youth.

Aris’s father, Oran, stood angrily. His blue skin matched Aris’s. “How would you know? All we know about mated females is simply myth and legend at this point! None of it matters if he hasn’t actually mated her!” Bubbles flew from his mouth with his vehemence, his son glaring moodily with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Are you shouting at me?” my father intoned darkly, eyes narrowing.

Oran shot a nervous look at the others as if suddenly remembering he and all the other clans were only here because of my father’s good will.

“I just ... I think it odd that we are all here, yet your son has been the one to be stalking and hiding a female,” Oran mumbled, shooting glances at the others to gauge support. He moved back, Aris sulking just behind his shoulder. Like father, like son.

The other clan leaders mumbled among themselves.

My father rolled his eyes.

“We *live* here,” he pointed out, sounding bored. “Of course, it’s more likely he would find one. He is constantly flitting up to the surface.”

Oran continued, never knowing when to keep his mouth shut, much like his son. “I’m just saying your son has never hunted before. Yet the moment we arrive, he’s the first one to scent out a female. Why hadn’t he found her earlier since you all live here?”

My palms itched as aggression leaked through the surrounding water. My father shot me a look. I knew I had to give them something. Perhaps it was for the best that I outed the other female. It was her or Jesse, after all.

“There is another siren born I found,” I offered, biting my lip. “She was on the island Barrett used to bring you to shore.



She will be at the spring break.” I scanned the eager mers, not seeing Barrett in attendance. “She has straight, dark hair and is very ... forward. I think she would gladly take any of you for the sex. Her garment was a bright orange.”

Aris jumped up, and about half the other mers with him. “If she is forward, that means the female is in heat! That is better than Merrick’s female, who must be spurning him. Papa, let me go retrieve this female right now!”

Elders and fathers grabbed their young mers and forced them down to the chairs, ensuring another round of snarls, grumbling, and ear pulling. Gold scales flashed and skin scuffled, fighting for dominance.

My father stood, ending the little spats. “Merrick is sorry for any damage suffered while encountering his female.”

I glowered. No, I wasn’t.

“However,” my father continued, glaring at me to remain silent, “I believe instincts gripped him and it couldn’t be helped. He has rectified the situation the best he can by giving you the location of another siren born. Have all debts been satisfied?”

The young mers appeared more than ready to accept the information of a new, probably more willingly siren born on hand, but the clan leaders didn’t look as happy. I know it looked bad; the son of the host clan had somehow stumbled upon not one, but two siren born females.

I didn’t know what else to do.

Sensing the tension, my father continued, “Furthermore, there is no hiding. Whoever finds any siren born has free rein to them. Even if it is this female Merrick has found. Merrick, do you agree?”

Everyone looked at me, delight in their eyes. They thought they had me.

My hackles raised. If I agreed, then the first one who got to Jesse had her. Well, if they could subdue her. The very thought of watching someone try enraged me and also filled me with

deep satisfaction. None of these mers would know what hit them.

*Focus.*

Realistically, I could agree to this, and lose nothing. Yet it still felt like a dead fish carcass in my mouth.

“Fine,” I grit out.

The mers and clan leaders smiled, thumping each other on the back. I shot up from my seat to leave when an achingly familiar scent filled the air.

*No. It couldn't be.*

“You guys talking about me? Super rude.”

I turned, and swimming before us was Jesse—no longer human, but transformed into the first siren to be under the water in centuries.

# FIFTEEN

Jesse

WHEN I'D FINALLY COME BACK AROUND, I was just floating listlessly in the darkness of a tunnel. Pitch dark. I'd thought I'd known what darkness was, but this was inky blackness on another level. At first, I wasn't even sure my eyes were open as my arms flailed through the water helplessly. I frantically tried to orient myself, then realized I didn't need to breathe. Three slits had opened up along my neck, fluttering when I touched them. It was pitch black, so I wasn't able to see myself, but I could feel the difference in my lower body—inside of kicking with two legs, there was one singular, solid muscle pushing me forward.

No. Way.

Merrick's scent was in the water around me like a beacon. I gave into my urges and followed it, erupting from the tunnel and into lighter waters. I raced toward the surface and broke through it on instinct, immediately regretting it when my gills spasmed in empty air. I tried to take a breath through my lungs but only threw up sea water.

In pain, I backed up underneath the water. I blinked a few times, and my eyes cleared, giving me perfect vision under the sea.

My hands were different, with harder black nails instead of my human ones. Tiny, iridescent webbing stretched between my fingers, and fangs stuck out from my gums.

And the tail.

It was gorgeous and reminded me of sunset; the base color was purple, but the scales flashed and danced with bronzes and golds where the sun hit it. It was a powerful, tightly coiled muscle. I was obsessed.

I was a fucking mermaid.

Why? How? What made me change this time? I'd be in the water and the ocean my entire life, and nothing had ever happened before ... So why now? Did that mean my *mother* was a mermaid? Unsure what else to do, I followed Merrick's scent to what I assumed was his home. I marveled at the stone palace and city stretched out in front of me, like fucking Atlantis. But I was more interested in the large group of mermen standing around, looking like they were about to shank Merrick.

I propelled myself forward, enjoying the panicked squeaks and looks of shock.

"You guys talking about me? Super rude."

Merrick and his men stared at me like they were all considering jumping me. Bile worked its way up my throat. The stench of my fear flooded the surrounding water, turning the taste acidic. Merrick's eyes cleared, and he hissed at the other men, forcing them to back up and give me space.

Right, maybe this wasn't my smartest idea. Merrick had told me to stay in the cave for a reason, and these other mermen were the reason.

Stupid Jesse.

"Stay behind me," he growled at me, but I knew the ferocity of his voice was meant for the other men—er, mers—and not me. With how feral the others looked, I had no problems with this order.

"Merrick," began one of the older mers, his voice croaked and thick with longing. A long, white beard floated behind his shoulder, braided intricately with sea glass beads and shells.

“I—I’ve never seen one before. She’s ...” he choked up, looking ready to cry.

Drawn by this man’s awe, I moved closer.

Until another older mer pushed in front of him. “This differs from the spring break ritual. This is a real siren! He can’t be allowed to have her to himself. If we shared—”

Anger flashed through me, and before I knew what had happened, I raced forward and struck Mr. Salt-and-pepper Beard on the face. Or I tried to. Instead, new instincts guided my fingers as they dug into his skin and pulled, leaving long lacerations that bled freely into the water around us. I drew back, shocked but trying not to show it.

The merman screamed as if I’d just yanked his balls off, but it knocked the others out of the zombie lust they’d been staring at me with. One with greenish-brown hair and the same nose as the old guy I’d bloodied up shot me an angry look and ripped a bunch of those healing jelly packs from the small bag strapped to his back.

I automatically moved toward the older merman with the long dark hair and beard—the one who still looked at me like I was the most precious thing in the world. That one, I trusted not to do anything too stupid.

“Father, back away.”

Oh shit, black-beard was Merrick’s *father*? I supposed I saw a few similarities in the nose and the eyes. And they were both kind.

Part of me paused, and I just stared.

*A father. An actual father.*

“Come here, siren,” cajoled one of the younger ones, snapping my concentration on Merrick’s dad.

My eyes narrowed, and I hissed at him, since it seemed to work well with the others.

It didn’t work with him.

I raised my new claws in front of me threateningly, but his eyes pinned to mine. “I never dreamed I’d see one ...”

I was regretting this whole mermaid thing. There were sixty other mers, and they were all inching in toward Merrick and me, pinning us against a rock.

It was Archie all over again, but this time Merrick couldn’t beat *all* their faces in.

Merrick jerked as my fear tinged the water again, and one desperate thought cycled in my head over and over again: *I don’t want to be here. They frighten me.*

Suddenly I couldn’t breathe, and my hands shot to my neck. My gills disappeared. My tail split into two legs, and I had to squeeze my eyes shut as harsh salt water blurred my vision and everything went dark.

Panic shot through my body as the world around me exploded. I flailed uselessly as Merrick cried out, but I barely heard him through the thickness of the water. He hooked an arm around me and shot toward the surface, or I hoped he had. I couldn’t see. I had no sense of direction.

All I could feel was the burning in my chest as my body strained and pulled. I fought the urge to breathe in, knowing it was the quickest way to kill myself.

*Merrick will save me. He always has.*

There was another explosion, then nothing.

# SIXTEEN

Merrick

PROTECT JESSE. *Get the others away.*

I was still in shock, but my body was acting on autopilot, which was a good thing because there wasn't time to stop and dwell on how Jesse had come to be a full blooded siren in front of me and then back again—not when her tail suddenly split back into two legs, and the gills on the side of her neck disappeared. Panic bloomed in her eyes as her head tilted toward the surface, which was much too far away.

I grabbed her around the waist and raced up, up, up. The other mers shouted and followed behind me, but I couldn't think about them. Every second was precious, every moment a matter of life or death.

*Don't breathe in,* I willed her, but she knew the consequences as well as I did. Jesse was strong. She wouldn't give in. My own breaths were too panicked; I wouldn't be able to give her any of my oxygen when my body struggled to get us up.

The surface was so far away, even as the water around me grew warmer and brighter, the sun from the surface bending down and reaching its arms out to us.

An explosion came to the rescue, propelling us the rest of the way. I broke through the surface first, dragging Jesse behind me, crystal drops of water raining down on us. She wasn't breathing!

Adrenaline fueled my tail as my muscles burned. There was nowhere to go with only the open sea around us. Waves crashed over my head as we bobbed up and down wildly.

“Help!” I called out, choking and coughing as my gills transitioned to my lungs. I don’t know why I bothered. No one was around.

No. No one was around except for the dark shape under the water that hurtled toward us from the north. I gripped Jesse tightly, ready to flee if needed. I relaxed slightly as I realized it was too big to be a shark. A whale: one of the large kinds that didn’t eat meat.

Its massive body broke the surface, revealing a female figure gripping to its back. She tossed her head back to shake out the water, leaving an arc of sparkling droplets behind her as she arched forward. I didn’t have time to gawp at her indigo skin or at the octopus tentacles she had for a lower half instead of a tail. Her heavy black dreads hung nearly to her waist, and were interwoven with beads and gems. Where had she gotten the gems?

Not a siren. But ... What the hell was she?

“Get her over here. Quickly,” she snapped at me.

I could only obey. Jesse always came first, and right now, she wasn’t breathing. I towed her over to the whale’s back, and the strange woman put both hands on Jesse’s face, and muttered something I didn’t quite catch. The strange woman took one tentacle and thumped it hard against Jessie’s chest.

Jesse’s eyes flew open and she vomited seawater. The woman grabbed her with two other tentacles and rolled her on her side, letting her clear her lungs and acclimate to air breathing. Her arms crossed over her chest as she glared at me.

“I don’t know what happened,” I babbled. “One moment she was a siren in front of me, and then she just ... changed back into a human!”

As amazing as it had been to have the privilege of seeing the first siren under the water in centuries, I never wanted



Jesse to risk her safety like that again. She could have died. She almost died!

“It’s part of the bargain ... the magick. I will not confirm until she can speak to me,” the woman said, her voice deep and ethereal.

Jesse stopped hacking and grabbed onto me like a lifeline. I grasped her hand in mine and hefted myself fully up onto the whale with my other arm. The gold finish on my scales glinted in the sunlight. Jesse tried to cover herself, bits of black fabric slung across her breasts and hips in what remained of her torn black dress. I would never understand why humans cared so much about clothing.

“Merrick! I—”

Her hair dripped around her face as she vomited again over the side of the whale while I held her. Shaking, she wiped her mouth. Confusion and pain twisted her features, but she was still never anything but beautiful to me. Beautiful, alive, and unharmed. I gathered her to me in a hug, relieved she was here and breathing.

Her eyes snapped to the strange woman.

“Uh ... sea witch?” she asked, one eyebrow raised as her voice went up in pitch.

The woman smirked, her tentacles undulating as she smoothly slid forward on the whale, making room for us. The whale was warm, its skin hard and bumpy under my scales. I couldn’t say I’d ever ridden a whale before.

“How did you know she’s a sea witch?” I asked Jesse.

She blushed. “A stupid cartoon.”

“What is a cart—” I stopped myself, because it didn’t matter what she was talking about. “You are a sea witch,” I repeated, inspecting this strange woman now that Jesse wasn’t dying in my arms. As I studied the female’s face, something about the way her eyes were set above her nose seemed familiar.

Her skin had an indigo tone, and her tentacles and torso were black. The undersides of her tentacles were a dark pink. Her eyes were the same color as her skin; a vivid indigo.

“We have no legends about sea witches,” I finally said, unsure of what else there *was* to say.

“I have returned because the siren has returned,” she replied tersely, her eyes narrowing at me. “I have and always will protect the sirens.”

“What’s your name?” Jesse asked, her eyes alight with a fire I’d only seen when she was angry or upset.

The woman raised her chin. “Calypso.”

That didn’t mean anything to me, but Jesse let out a small gasp, her eyes widening. Jesse knew something about the sea witch I did not?

“You caused the explosion,” I said, focusing on what I could understand. “You helped me save Jesse.”

The explosion had done a few things: it had propelled me to the surface faster, and it had likely dazed the other mers long enough that they had no idea what direction I’d gone.

Calypso sniffed. “I will always protect the sirens.”

I had so many burning questions, but one stood out above the rest.

“Jesse, how did you ... how did you become a siren? I didn’t know ... siren born can’t ...” I sounded like a simpleton. It was simply unheard of, though. We’d accepted long ago that the siren blood was too diluted in the human population for there to be true sirens again.

“The siren born were giving you mer young,” Calypso pointed out, her tone harsh, “so why would you think sirens themselves were extinct?”

“Well ... because we haven’t seen any?” I said, confused.

Calypso rolled her eyes, but didn’t elaborate.

I shivered despite the hot sun beating down my back.

“I don’t know how I did it,” came Jesse’s quiet reply. Her lips were tight in a line, her brows furrowed in thought.

I was just shocked she wasn’t a catatonic mess next to me. She’d casually switched species and back, all while narrowly escaping being mauled by numerous clans.

And she was shaking off the transition from gills to lungs like she had more practice at it than me! When we did our first trip to the surface around our twelfth year, most mers were a mess after the first physical shift.

Calypso raised one tentacle up, tucking a strand of light brown hair behind Jesse’s ear. Jesse tried and failed not to flinch away from the slick appendage.

“What were you thinking at the moment you changed?” Calypso asked. “What was happening? How did you feel?”

Jesse bit her lip. “I was thinking ... oh god, I was so pissed at Merrick.”

She turned and glared at me. I jerked at the revelation, then remembered I had abandoned her in a dark cave.

Anger was warranted.

Calypso nodded, silently asking her to continue.

Jesse took a deep breath. “I was angry at Merrick and wanted to follow him. He was going to confront the men—er, mers who had attacked me, but *I* wanted to confront them with him.”

Calypso stroked Jesse’s hand thoughtfully. “At the moment, your greatest desire was to...?”

“My greatest desire was to go to him—to be with him to face this together,” Jesse admitted.

My heart swelled even as I bowed my head in shame. I shouldn’t have left her in that cave, even if it was for her own safety. I’d let my fear rule my heart and my head.

“Then you changed?” Calypso asked, clarifying.

“Then I changed.”

Calypso smiled, her tentacles shifting a bit to grip the whale's back.

"It all makes sense."

"Glad it does for someone," I muttered. Both females shot me a mild glare.

Calypso twined her hand in Jesse's as if she were just as afraid she'd disappear as I was. "Do you know why the sirens disappeared, merman?" she asked me, her tone suddenly hard.

I thought back to my school days as a young guppy. We talked a lot about how to chase the siren born on land, but there was never much discussion about why or how the sirens had left to begin with. The way the elders told it, mers had woken up one morning and the sirens were simply all gone.

That made little sense, though.

"We ... weren't taught anything, really," I began. "The sirens just ... disappeared." I frowned. How had I not noticed this glaring oversight before? Had the sirens been gone for so long we had just accepted it without wondering why? Without knowing how?

Calypso scowled. "I am not surprised. Grab onto my friend Sedna. We will retreat to a safe place and I will tell you everything, and hopefully, what will come next."

# SEVENTEEN

Jesse

MERRICK WAS hesitant to go with Calypso, but we didn't have too many choices, and she was clearly a powerful ally. If an entire clan of mer-guys was after us, that could prove handy. That was clear to see in the tension in his muscles, and how his eyes kept darting back and forth between us. Ever since I'd shown up with a tail, he wouldn't look me in the eye, yet I caught him staring at me when he thought I wasn't looking.

I really hoped this didn't make things weird between us, though that ship had most definitely sailed by now.

And I was still pissed he'd tried to trap me in a cave.

*And I was a mermaid. A siren born.*

The word itself caused a shiver to run up my spine in a way 'mermaid' certainly didn't. I was a descendant of ... sirens, I supposed. I could almost wrap my head around that.

I was having more trouble with the whole 'my legs could turn into a tail' thing.

As Calypso instructed Merrick to grab onto the massive whale in front of us, I tried to see if I could do it again, scrunching my eyes closed.

*Tail. Gills. Webbing between my fingers.*

"Jesse?"

I blinked at Merrick, who was looking at me with his head tilted to the side. He held out a hand to help me further up onto the back of the whale. My pathetically human legs remained so, and a quick slack on the side of my neck revealed nothing but smooth skin.

Whatever I had been thinking, it hadn't worked.

"We must hurry. The others will not be stunned for long, and they will hunt for you. We must be long gone by then, leaving no scent behind," he urged.

I nudged him with my elbow as the whale gave a mighty kick of his tail and propelled us forward along the surface. We were out in the open ocean, with nothing to see for miles around. At least the strange octopus woman seemed to know where she was going. And the whale.

The sight of all of that open water tightened my chest. How far away were we from shore? Javi was probably blowing up my phone. If he hadn't already figured out it was still back on Mike's boat in the employee locker.

Oh fuck—what if he'd called the police?

I must have gone white because Merrick wrapped an arm around my waist and hauled me into his chest like I was half my size. We were both on our stomachs. His long, golden-flecked tail stretched out behind him and went down the whale's back.

"I can't stay out here, Merrick. I have to go back home. The police are probably looking for me. If I leave the house empty for too long, they'll call my family and then ... and then \_\_\_"

They'd find out I was kicked out of the program. It would just draw attention to me when I couldn't really explain who Merrick was or where he came from.

No. I'd have to figure something else out.

"Jesse! You are breathing too fast! Sit down!"

But I couldn't calm down. Terrible thoughts raced around and around in my mind, and didn't show any signs of slowing

down. Fingers dug into my hair and grabbed my face, shoving it into the hard planes of a chest. Merrick's scent of the sun and the sea filled my nostrils: salt, driftwood, and peace.

Incredibly, my breaths slowed. My mind calmed. Just in time for Calypso to undulate toward me on those tentacles of hers, a wicked gleam in her eye. My muscles tensed and Merrick growled at her, to which she just laughed.

Then I realized the whale was diving.

"Merrick!"

"I suggest you think back to the desire you had to be with your mer earlier, because air is hard to come by where I live."

*In the stories, the sea witch was evil. This one seems helpful so far.*

But something just still seemed off. Had Merrick and his clan known about her? If not, why? I had too many questions, and no answers. And fucking Calypso? Like the one from the Greek stories?

No way.

Four tentacles shot out and wrapped around my arms and legs, pinning me down to the whale. Merrick lunged forward, grabbing the dagger he had in his pack and slamming it down on a tentacle. Calypso hissed, but two more tentacles shot out and knocked him off the whale, while another replaced the injured one to hold me down.

"MERRI—"

Another tentacle wrapped around my mouth, slimy and cold.

The whale descended, leaving Merrick behind, floating unconscious on the surface. I thrashed and writhed before realizing I was wasting what air I still had. I went still and willed my body to change.

*Come on. You'll die if you don't. Come ON!*

Nothing happened. My legs stayed legs, wrapped in Calypso's tentacles. My neck didn't sprout gills, and I fought

the urge to open my mouth and breathe in water.

Down, down, down we went, until the darkness swallowed us and I was half-convinced I was already dead. Only the persistent burning in my lungs told me otherwise. It was hopeless. Even if Calypso let me go this instant, I'd never make it back up to the surface.

*Killed by a mythical sea creature ... who'd have think it?* I dimly wondered. I just hoped my family didn't end up selling the house because of me...

WHAM.

Something slammed into Calypso and me, and the tentacles holding me let go abruptly. I didn't swim; I couldn't even use my arms and legs. It took all of my focus and concentration not to inhale water, to keep my lungs dry—

Merrick's arms grabbed me, and his lips descended harshly down onto mine.

*Now doesn't seem like the time, unless he's saying goodbye,* I vaguely thought.

A blast of pure oxygen went down my throat, and I jerked in surprise. Merrick grabbed me and sealed his lips to mine again, holding me tightly.

He was breathing for me!

I held him to me as my literal lifeline, internally promising to reward him thoroughly for this later. His tail kicked beneath us, and we shot toward the surface. His chest heaved with effort as he tried to suck oxygen through his gills as fast as possible to give to me, and also keep himself moving.

Then he was ripped away from me, disappearing down into the inky darkness.

No. NO!

The darkness was absolute. I didn't know which way was up or down. I had to help Merrick! I needed to find him! I'd look for him even if it meant using my last morsels of air.



Like a switch being flipped, I felt rather than saw the changes. Instead of two legs jerking out into the black depths, I suddenly only had one long, powerful muscle. I could suddenly breathe as my neck itched, gills opening down my neck and sucking in water. Merrick's scent suddenly trailed out in front of me, as obvious and easy to follow as a blood trail through clear water.

I shot out toward his scent blindly, pushing myself as hard as I could.

Merrick's scent led down into the darkness, then into the mouth of a cave. There was another scent around him—a scent similar to his, but with a cloying, sick sweetness that made me nauseated. The sea witch's scent was there as well, smelling like heavy perfume dumped on a bed of kelp.

Bleh.

I dove into the cave, and then it rose sharply up, up, up. Light filtered back into the water, and in surprise, I broke through the surface. I blinked in the dim bioluminescence light, keeping my neck below the water so I didn't automatically switch to lung breathing just yet.

Merrick rammed into my side, wrapping his arms around me and tugging us away from the sea witch and the male mer by her side. She sat like a queen propped up on a throne of carved rock and coral that jutted harshly out of the water. The dark mer threaded water underneath her, glaring at us with black, glittering eyes.

I hadn't seen a mer with eyes like that until now.

He looked like he could have been from Merrick's clan ... but not. The edges of his scales and fins weren't gilded like Merrick's, but tinged with black that almost made it look like the scales were rotting off. He had large bald patches here and there on his tail, showing scaly, pink flesh underneath. Dark, black hair fell to his waist in dreads like Merrick's. His face was pale and gaunt.

And the tentacles.

They shot out awkwardly from the waist of his tail, small but muscled. There were four, and they hovered around his back and waist, like little snakes waiting to strike.

“There you are, dear!” Calypso trilled as if she hadn’t just tried to murder me. “My apologies for all of that. Caspian doesn’t get out much, let alone scent a siren in the water for the first time in a millennium. No harm done.”

Merrick let out a ragged breath at hearing that, and I didn’t blame him. No harm done ... Was that twice now I’d almost died in twenty-four hours? Not to mention, the sea witch insinuated that this odd mer in front of us was a thousand years old?

I blinked. *That’s what he looked like a zombie mer with tentacles.* Did Merrick even know what a zombie was? Probably not.

Great, now I was trying to stop giggling at the thought of zombie mers.

“You tried to kill Jesse,” Merrick snarled at her, baring his fangs. Ever since I’d changed, he’d gone totally over-the-top feral on me.

I liked it.

“I almost drowned,” I confirmed, not trusting this sudden appearance of yet another storybook character into my life, but also realizing she likely had valuable information.

Her tentacles waved in the air dismissively as she used them to gesticulate indifference instead of her hands, which were busy patting the zombie mer’s head like a well-behaved dog.

“You didn’t drown,” she sniffed. “You shifted. Have you figured out how to control it now?”

I didn’t like her tone. By the rumbling of Merrick’s chest, neither did he.

“Depends,” I replied. “Are you gonna try to kill me again if I haven’t?”

Her eyes lit with a nasty gleam.

“I like this one,” the witch commented off-handedly to Caspian as if Merrick and I weren’t there. “She is a fighter. Unlike her predecessors who simply gave up.”

Merrick tried to tug me away. I didn’t know how to express to him I agreed; this sea witch woman gave me the heebie-jeebies, and I certainly didn’t trust her, but I needed to learn more.

“Can you tell me anything about what I am?” I asked instead, keeping my tone neutral.

“And what he is,” Merrick butt in, eyes narrowing toward the zombie mer. The creature in question snarled and jerked forward, but Merrick held his ground and hissed back.

“Caspian, behave. We have guests.”

The zombie mer huffed but relaxed as Calypso gently ran her fingers through his dark, matted hair as best she could.

“I’d love to tell you all about your boring heritage, but you’ve got a much bigger problem on your hands currently,” she remarked casually. It was as if she was talking about the weather.

“You mean the clans,” Merrick clarified, never one to beat around the bush.

“Yes, frightful males.” Calypso sighed. “If you go back, they’re likely to tear the poor girl apart.” Calypso pouted, tapping her chin with one long, claw-like fingernail. “Or themselves. Probably both.”

She beamed at Merrick and I. This ... Calypso was insane.

“Don’t expect us to hide here because we won’t. My clan won’t hurt her. They won’t let the others hurt her, either. They were just ... surprised when she showed up.”

I bit my lip to keep from snorting. Saying his clanmates were surprised to see me was as close to a bold lie as I’d ever heard him utter.

Calypso shot forward from her throne, tentacles flying toward us as she fought to contain her anger.

“You think mers will protect her? You don’t think they would fight and take and steal to be the one who impregnated the first siren in centuries? You don’t think that the others would immediately kill the male who succeeded? If you go back, they will fight and tear and kill until one mounts her, then he will be killed and the next will mount her, again and again and again until she dies from being raped repeatedly.”

My hands covered my mouth at such a horrifying description.

Merrick drew back. “You sound like you speak from experience, but—”

Calypso cut him off. “I’ve seen what happens when you foolish mers lose your possessions. What do you think happened to the other sirens, eh? Their numbers dwindled and dwindled because their own males drove them to extinction!”

Merrick’s jaw dropped, horrified. was shaking his head back and forth. “No. *No*. That can’t be right. They didn’t teach \_\_\_”

“What’s the matter, little one? Did they not teach you history in guppy school? Didn’t you ever find it odd no one ever said *why* the sirens were gone?”

Merrick looked devastated and traumatized all at once. “They wouldn’t ... They couldn’t ...” He was muttering to himself now, not talking to either Calypso or me.

I put a hand on his arm, and he jumped. “Merrick,” I began softly, “do you think I’m safe with your clan?”

He blinked rapidly, grabbing onto my hand as if it were an anchor. His brow furrowed in thought.

“With the young males ... no. But my father would keep you safe. I know everyone lost their head for a moment, but they weren’t expecting you. I wasn’t expecting you. If I sneak you back in, I know he will keep you safe. The other leaders will keep you safe.”

I wasn’t sure who he was trying to convince more: me or himself. But I did remember the utter reverence with which the

older, white-haired mer had looked at me. If nothing else, I believed in that.

No one had ever looked at me like that before, human or otherwise.

“I trust you, Merrick. If you tell me it’s safe, I’ll go back with you. Just ... maybe give them a bit to calm down first?”

His bright turquoise gaze glowed in the semi darkness of the small cave.

“I ... yes, if I sneak you in and we have my father’s protection, I believe you’d be safe.” He bit his lip. “I want to believe you’d be safe. But you are right. We should wait. Or I should go back first, to ensure they have calmed down.”

I clasped my hand in his. “All right then, we’ll go back.”

Calypso scoffed. “Leave, then. It is so tedious how history repeats itself. Your ancestors trusted their mers, and look what happened to them. You have a chance to save yourselves, and you squander it. Stupid males.”

Calypso’s laughter followed us even as we dove back into the water and out through the tunnel.

Merrick and I swam in silence as he headed back toward his clan. I felt numb with fear and anxiety. Along the way, he kept pointing out things in the water, and showing me how to make small adjustments with my tail and webbed fingers to change my speed or trajectory.

It all felt odd though—as if it were happening to someone else and I was merely a spectator observing. It was clinical and automatic, with no joy of discovery or feeling.

Merrick was scared. And if he was scared in his home in the sea, then I should be terrified.

# EIGHTEEN

Jesse

IT TOOK a few tries to get out of the cave's tunnel system, so absolute was the dark. In the end, Merrick and I had to keep our hands entwined so we didn't lose each other. But the fresh current won out eventually, and we were able to find our way toward the light of the sun.

I had so many questions for Merrick, as I'm sure he had for me, but we swam in silence. Fear and tension radiated from him, and I didn't know what to do to make it better. I was still reeling from my own shock. I was a fucking *mermaid*, though they didn't seem to call them that here.

*Sirens.*

The ocean was beautiful from my new perspective; the sunlight filtered down into the shallow edges of coral reefs and rocky cliffs, throwing light into dancing geometric patterns that swayed with the tide.

Merrick guided me into a tangle of tall, black weeds, and stopped. "Stay hidden in the weeds. I'll be right back. I need to get something."

He zipped away before I could protest, skimming along the bottom of the seabed with a steely determination.

My anxiety skyrocketed as he swam out of sight and didn't return. I tried to tell myself to take a few deep breaths, but I ended up accidentally inhaling water down my throat, and spent a few minutes hacking and coughing it out.

Right, gills.

I focused on my surroundings, calming a bit as I went still, and small schools of fish started to dart around me, nibbling bits of food off the nearby coral and the long strands of seaweed. A large crab scuttled across the sand, leaving a small trail in its wake.

Then abruptly the fish scattered, and Mr. Crab scrambled away, leaving a swirling trail of sand in his wake. I glanced up as a large shadow fell over me.

*Shark.*

I grabbed at the roots of the kelp and lowered my body to the sandy bottom, curling my tail so it hid the iridescent, shining bits.

*Some help that would be; sharks worked off scent, not their piss-poor eyesight. Where the fuck is Merrick?* I was both glad he wasn't here and cursing him for leaving me alone.

The drama was short lived as the shark continued on its way, clearing my patch of seaweed by several feet and swimming off.

I guess he wasn't hungry.

My hands shook as I peeked my head over the kelp. My tail twitched and jerked as if the new muscles there wanted nothing more than to be able to shoot through the water and get us away.

The shadow returned, and I ducked again on instinct.

Fuck. Fuckity fuck fuck.

“Jesse? Are you all right?”

Adrenaline warred with relief in my body. The shark hadn't returned; it was just Merrick.

“What am I supposed to do if a shark attacks me?” I blurted out, needing to know.

Merrick blinked. “Swim fast toward the surface and keep swimming until you lose it. We are faster than them, and they can't stay swimming near the surface for long.” His face went

thoughtful. “Unless you have a spear, and it feels like a fight. Then aim for the gills.”

He nonchalantly went to the satchel at his waist, which I saw was full of dead jellyfish. He pulled one out and thrust it toward me. “Come here.”

I wrinkled my nose but didn’t resist as he squeezed jellyfish goo all over the back of my neck.

“This will hide your scent from the mers. But ...” Merrick frowned at the tattered remnants of the black dress I’d been wearing for work when everything had gone down. Scraps floated around my body gently.

“Your human garments stink like ... well, human. They have to go.”

My eyes bulged out of my head. “Excuse me?”

Merrick grabbed the neckline and ripped hard. The fabric gave out immediately, and an odd, distressed warble came from my throat as my hands immediately went to my chest, ensuring he couldn’t tug my bra off as well.

Merrick froze, his eyes taking on a feral gleam for a half second before he shook his head and they cleared.

“What was the sound you made?” he demanded. “Don’t ... don’t do it again. It made me feel ... violent.”

OK ... that’s normal. I wished again the sea witch hadn’t been so ... sea witchy. She probably would know what the sound was.

“Maybe a distress call of some kind?” I offered up, still clutching my arms to my chest.

Merrick noticed, tilting his head to the side in confusion. “Are you hurt? Why are you covering yourself?”

He sounded so utterly confused I loosened my arms.

“I ... human women don’t show their ... er ...” How could I explain?

“But why?” Merrick asked. “We do not swim with clothes.” He was trying to sneak peeks at my chest even as he



said it, his eyes a mixture of heat and curiosity.

I exhaled heavily (through my gills this time). Clothes would only hamper me down here, wouldn't they? Especially if he was right about the scent thing.

Even so, I turned my back to him as I ripped my bra off, watching it slowly float in the water in front of me. I couldn't just leave it here like litter.

"I will hold onto it for you, if you need to surface." He snatched my bra and stuffed it away in his little satchel. Merrick slathered more jellyfish on my back, the goo cold and slimy. The goo was surprisingly sticky, clinging to my skin even underwater. That made sense if they used it for injuries like Merrick had shown me. He moved on to cover my arms and lower back, and his hands slid around over my stomach. Slowly they moved up as he slathered my ribs.

Then higher.

Merrick's hands froze as they encountered my breasts for only the second time. He'd groped them once before, but through my bra and my shirt.

Never like this.

He pumped his tail once so his body was flush behind me, his hands smearing the goo over my breasts but also slowly, methodically exploring them. An odd pulsing started in my core, but in a slightly different place than I was used to as a human.

His fingers rubbed into my nipples, lingering as he gently circled around and over, then skating his palms over the tips. I leaned back into him as he pressed forward against me. A familiar shape was pressing into my bottom from behind, so I assumed the mechanics would be pretty similar to humans.

The very thought jerked me out of the moment, and I spun around in his arms. He stared unabashedly at me, his hands still covered in luminescent goo. I looked down at his tail, but saw nothing that could have been responsible for what I felt just a moment ago.

“Am I covered? Is this fine?” I asked, trying to snap him out of it.

Merrick closed his eyes, then sniffed. “I believe so.” He opened them again, those vibrant, turquoise eyes catching mine.

He was staring at me.

I fought the urge to cross my arms over my naked chest. I’d *never* been one to show a lot of skin, even when I hadn’t been heavier. To just have my girls floating around in the water in front of me wasn’t easy or natural. I gave an experimental twitch of my tail and zoomed a few feet away. It took my breasts a full second to stop after I did.

No, this wouldn’t work.

“I need my bra back. Can you slather it in goo too?”

Merrick definitely pouted as he dug it out of his satchel and handed it to me, and I fought to hide an inappropriate grin. I would need a better solution eventually (like a sports bra), but for now, the lavender, lacy undergarment was better than nothing. Merrick was a bit handsy as he slathered the straps and cups in goo, and I raised an eyebrow at him.

It did at least feel better not to have my dress scraps floating around me anymore.

“Come on. I don’t like lingering anywhere alone with you.” He shot off to the right, and I hurried to follow him.

# NINETEEN

Merrick

I COULDN'T TAKE her anywhere that there was likely to be mers. So that left one place: the siren shrine.

It wasn't anything grandiose or morbid. It was simply where the center of our village used to be, hundreds of years ago, before the sirens had disappeared. The old structures were now derelict and uninhabitable, but it would be a safe place to leave Jesse as long as the jellyfish paste kept her scent hidden. The clan avoided it out of superstition and shame, but as guppies they took us all once on a trip to talk about our history.

The sight made me sad then, and I didn't feel much better about it now. It didn't make sense to abandon such a stronghold—it would have been a much better place to house all the clans that came for the festival.

Mer were a very superstitious lot.

The old village was much, much deeper than our current one, so far down that bioluminescent seaweed and other plants had been purposefully placed in the village. They grew out of control now, similar to the bright lights of the human city with all the clashing colors and violent tangles. Instead of being cloaked in darkness, it shined like the human city up above. Well, sort of. This light was far more preferable than the blinding lights of the surface.

Nevertheless, it would be perfect to hide in. The glow would help camouflage our flashing scales. And there was something artistic and beautiful about how silent and untouched the city was a shrine and tomb from a different time.

I pushed aside a giant, bright blue plant and ushered Jesse into the half-collapsed stone building behind it. The high seaweed would cover what had degraded from the structure over time. Jesse swam in behind me, wary as she floated around the small space.

“This isn’t creepy at all,” she muttered.

I was learning that when humans said one thing, they actually meant the opposite.

“We used to live here down in the deep to protect our young and the females,” I explained.

She rubbed at a patch of green algae on the wall, revealing crude, red scratches of a mer and a female. Two smaller mers were etched next to them, and a long string of scratches spelling out a name—Meruse.

A child’s drawing from many lifetimes ago.

“I bet this place would clean up easily.” Jesse turned to me, her hair swishing around her neck with the quick movement.

“This is the part where you tell me to stay put again, isn’t it?” she asked, disappointment in her voice.

“I just need to ensure my father is on my side,” I pleaded. “I cannot protect you against everyone. Having the clan leader will go a long way to keep everyone else in line.”

*I hoped.*

But my blood pulsed in my veins, insisting otherwise.

“I will only be gone an hour or so. I promise,” I protested vehemently, putting my fist to my chest to indicate my sincerity.

Jesse bit her lip. “All right,” she conceded, floating down to a flat, curved section on the floor. “I’ll be here. Besides, this

looks fun to explore.”

I turned and darted away, knowing that if I didn't leave her now, I never would. My instincts had been screaming at me since the moment I saw her in her siren form, and they hadn't abated in the slightest. It had taken all of my self-control not to take her when my hands had caressed her bare breasts.

I wouldn't do that though. I wasn't that selfish. If Jesse had every mer in the world to choose from, I would give her that choice. Tying her down to me wasn't fair.

*She is mine.*

I told my instincts to shut up, and swam back to my clan. The trip was long, and I was already exhausted from everything that had happened. Our clan village was much closer to the surface, forcing me to swim up and up, adding to the ache in my muscles. I kept close to the surface for safety, just like they'd taught us. It made it easier to escape large predators. Soon enough, the ocean floor slanted upward, covered in the flowing red algae that indicated I was close. It swayed softly under the water, calm and soothing.

I hoped my father was alone. I drew up close by the door, smelling over twenty old mers.

*Fuck, as Jesse would say.*

He wasn't alone. And not only that, but he was also with the entire council of elders.

I steeled my nerves, and straightened my shoulders. Perhaps this would be for the best. If I could get all the elders to agree to protect Jesse, they could control the younger mers.

I swam through the door, trying to look confident.

Gastor, the leader of the Jackfish clan, had been talking. He shut his mouth immediately as I strode through, the shark tooth necklace around his neck clinking loudly as it bobbed and flowed through his wild gesticulations.

“Where is she?” my father demanded, before anyone else could.

So much for subtlety. My chin snapped up, my fins flaring out in an unconscious gesture of trying to appear larger than I really was. I couldn't even control it. My face flushed, and I struggled to keep my anger in control.

"Hidden, her scent concealed," I replied. "You will not find her without me."

The other elders growled. I wasn't sure why I had been convinced they would help me. Of course they'd rather find Jesse and claim her for themselves and their own clan. Who wouldn't? And what if Jesse liked one of them better?

The thought deflated me, and for half a second I considered leading them to her. She should have a choice after all, shouldn't she?

"My clan will give you all of our wealth and our five guppies for the female," Oran shot out, turning his attention to my father.

I jerked back, shocked. *Give away guppies?*

"Why limit her to one clan?" shouted another elder with white scales, whose name escaped me. "We will all make payment to your clan and we can all share her. Then all of us benefit."

Rage erupted in my veins and before I knew what I was doing I'd pumped my tail and shot across the room, my hands and claws wrapped around the elder's neck. Scales flashed and tails thwacked against my body as they forcibly removed me, still hissing and spitting.

"He reeks of *her*. His pheromones are everywhere."

I didn't know who was speaking. It didn't matter. All of them would bleed for suggesting they pass Jesse around like a prized breeding cow. I'd rip out all of their throats before they touched her.

"Where are the others?" I asked sharply, noting the absence of their scent in the water around the village.

My father arched an eyebrow. "You said there was another siren born on land. We sent them hunting while we decided

what to do with the actual siren in our midst.”

It would be smart to let them think they had any say in what Jesse did or didn't do. Unfortunately, my instincts were louder than my brain.

“She'd rather die than get near any of you,” I sneered before I could think better of it.

My father's eyes narrowed, and the sharp tang of fury flooded the surrounding water. Not just from him but from every clan leader I'd just insulted.

I swallowed heavily, but held my ground. Maybe I could distract them.

“We met the sea witch. She seems to know a lot about what happened to the sirens. If we ask her—”

“The what?” my father asked, incredulous.

“Sea witch,” I answered back. “She had an old mer with him, but something was wrong with him. His scales were black, and—”

“He speaks nonsense. He's gone mad. He's not fit for a female!” Aris's father, of course.

“She's already sunk her teeth into him; he won't give up anything unless we force it,” Gastor helpfully added as the elders tightened in a circle around me.

My father's eyes widened in alarm, but he did nothing to stop them and their voices came at once.

“Merrick, we just want to speak with her,” Father pleaded with me. “Please. We aren't like the other young mers, we—”

Why were they treating me like an invalid?

“Tie him up. Force him to tell us.”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures. She's the only siren—”

“STOP!” I cried out, alarmed.

Hands came at me from all sides, pinning me down and grabbing onto my tail so I couldn't move. I tried to writhe and

twist away, but there were too many of them, and they all knew how to fight better than I did. Perhaps, I should have taken more of an interest in combat lessons when I was younger, instead of always focusing on my art.

Fists pummeled the side of my head, and knives slashed at my face. My arms were trapped at my side. My father made an enraged, sorrowful, keening sound, and dove at his friends. His spear flashed out of nowhere and dark blue blood swirled around me. The elders hissed in pain and suddenly my tail was free.

Did I still have a tail? Everything hurt. I couldn't tell if the blood in the water was mine or from the others.

“GO! Get her away from here!” Father commanded.

I didn't wait to be told twice.

I beat my tail as hard as I could and swam as fast as I could back to the siren shrine. Pain was secondary. The burning sensation in my face and head was secondary. The only thing that mattered was getting back to Jesse alive.

Don't think about the trail of blood you're leaving.

*Just swim.*

Don't think about how your body burns in pain from too many places to count.

*Just swim.*

Just swim.

*Swim.*



# TWENTY

Jesse

THE OLD CITY was odd and a bit tragic, but still cool. The buildings were made from some sort of mixture of coral, shells, and stone, and were mostly all intact from what I could tell after digging through the bioluminescent plants clinging to everything. A quick swim offered me an accurate picture of the town's layout. Or what I supposed was a town. Since travel wasn't limited to one 'plane,' there wasn't a need for roads or meticulously straight rows. The buildings made a circle around each other, spiraling out from the largest, most ornate dwellings to the smaller, more sparse ones on the outside of the spiral.

*Start with the biggest and baddest, obviously.*

I swam into a large opening toward the top of the biggest building, shielding my eyes against the bioluminescence to try and orient my sight better to the darkness. Once past the outer layer of plants and algae, it was mostly dark with only some of the glow filtering into the structure.

Even though the building was tall, there weren't 'floors' like human buildings. Small platforms jutted out from the walls, from where I was all the way down to the sandy bottom. Floating down slowly, I could see where it made sense. When you didn't have gravity to worry about, space could be used horizontally *and* vertically. Barnacles and coral covered every surface that didn't have the glowing algae on it. If there were items left over from another time, the ocean had already taken

care of reclaiming them. Strange lumps were everywhere on the walls and platforms, indistinguishable now from the structure itself.

I settled on the bottom, my tail kicking up sand in frenzied spirals. I stared at both for a moment, mesmerized.

*You've got a freaking tail! It's gorgeous!*

Bunching unfamiliar muscles, I gave an enthusiastic THWACK.

“OW!”

Pain shot through my new tail as I thwacked a little too hard and banged it off a large mound of calcified coral. A large hunk of coral drifted to the sand, dislodged from the larger mound. Curious (but mostly wanting a distraction from my throbbing, painfully stupidity), I picked it up, studying it closely.

At first glance it just looked like another hunk of hard coral, grown over an object left alone for hundreds of years. But ... not quite. Instead of being covered all over by coral, it was covered on both sides with clear spots down the middle—as if the coral grew around two separate objects and not one.

A hinge! It was a box of some kind!

I banged the hunk against the wall.

CRACK.

It broke in half, falling to the sand. Peeking out from the opening was a simple, white necklace made of delicate sand dollars. Gently I picked it up in my fingers, marveling at the untouched white of the shell.

Funny how people went nuts over these things, when all sand dollars were just exoskeletons bleached white by the sun.

But they were delicate, and the fact that one had lain here protected for all this time meant something. Was I the first of my kind to touch it since its last owner?

I'd just about decided to see what other treasure lay nearby when I scented blood in the water. I turned and high-tailed it

out to open water.

“Merrick! Oh my god!”

The necklace sunk to the sand, forgotten.

Merrick swam toward me at an odd angle, trying desperately to stay in a straight line but failing. Dark blue blood trailed behind him from his face and chest, and his gills fluttered and danced as they worked much too hard to pull oxygen into his body. His movements reminded me of catching a fish who swallowed a hook too deep, and watching it twitch and die on the surface after you tried to throw it back.

Fear seized me in a chokehold.

“Who did this? Was it the other guys? Was it because of me?”

His eyes rolled back in his head as I caught him, steadying him against me as his lips moved, but no words came out.

“What? What is it?”

His eyes met mine, full of regret. “Swim.”

My gaze lifted behind him, a dark shadow filling the void as a bunch of mers followed his blood trail like a shark seeking its next meal.

Rage flooded my veins, burning out my fear as I let the indignation rise. These weren't the same mers who had attacked me on the boat, but it might as well have been. How dare these guys think they can just have me and fuck them for attacking Merrick. I'd slit my own wrists before I willingly went with any of them. I didn't care if their whole fucking species died forever.

They advanced on us, and I screamed my fury and anger at them. A harsh, shrieking sound erupted from my throat, vibrating my entire body as I shook with the force of it. Merrick passed out immediately in my arms, and the advancing horde of mers jerked back like I'd simultaneously slapped them all. I pushed harder and screamed louder. Their hands went to their ears as they bent over in obvious pain.

Good.

I wanted them to feel it *all* for daring to interrupt my life and claiming it as their own.

Carefully, I set Merrick down on the sandy bottom and advanced toward the mermen, taking a large breath and screaming again.

They scattered like frightened minnows, still clutching their heads.

I sank back down to the ocean floor beside Merrick, feeling empty and hollow. My anger had burned its way through my body and now nothing was left but sorrow and fear. Merrick needed help, but he'd already used his jelly stuff on me. I had no idea what to do and then the choice was taken from me.

I smelled him before I saw him approach.

My mouth opened to scream again, but I slammed it shut when I recognized the sea witch's little zombie mer. Calypso's zombie mer.

He stared at me with those cold, black eyes, detached from everything around him.

"You! Take me back to her. I need help. Merrick needs help."

He blinked once, then shot forward. I moved protectively in front of Merrick, but the odd mer simply pushed me aside and gathered Merrick in his arms as though he wasn't nearly the same size he was.

I supposed underwater things weren't as heavy.

He swam off.

"Wait!" I called after him, that same warble of distress bleeding through my voice. Merrick had called it a distress call earlier.

The mer flinched for a moment, then kept swimming. I raced after him.

Merrick wasn't so keen on trusting Calypso, but we didn't have a choice. We needed somewhere safe where sharks or other predators wouldn't follow the blood trail, and he needed medical attention, which I couldn't give.

I prayed she'd help us.

---

"DARLING, you've returned! And brought our wayward siren back to us. What's happened?"

The sea witch's voice was laden with sympathy, twisting with alarm as she took in Merrick's bloody and beaten form. I coughed and hacked as I broke through the surface of the water to ascend into her cave, my lung expelling small bits of water as my body struggled to adjust from gills to lungs.

Merrick's body seized as it broke the surface, the odd-looking mer struggling with the transition from water to air. It was awful watching Merrick's body contort and hack as he switched to lung breathing while unconscious.

Hopefully it was something that got better the more you did it.

"The mers attacked him. I don't know why. I—"

"My dear, sweet child. I tried to warn you. But I understand you wanted to hold out hope."

Calypso's tentacles stretched out before her, guiding her down off her self-styled throne and down to me at the water's edge. One tentacle reached out and wrapped around my shoulder in what I guessed was an attempt at comfort. Instead, it just felt cold and constricting, the texture of her suckers abrasive and slimy.

"Can you heal him? He was only trying to protect me!"

I didn't care about who was right and wrong. I needed Merrick to be OK.

Calypso hummed, using her tentacles to turn this way and that. "It's been quite a while since I've healed anything, but something could be arranged."

The odd mer growled beside me and I jumped, forgetting he was there.

Six of Calypso's tentacles raised in the air, questioning. "Is that so? Well, well, well ..."

"What?" I demanded, a bit tense since Merrick continued to bleed in front of me. "Are you going to heal him or not?"

The tentacle around me tightened for just a moment before releasing me and slithering back to Calypso.

"Caspian seems a bit off balance. Go take a rest, dear." Calypso watched fondly as the strange mer huffed and dove beneath water, disappearing into its inky depths.

"Of course I will heal him, my dear. Magick doesn't come free, though. Using so much will weaken me and leave me unprotected."

I jerked. "Oh. I ... Well, I don't really have anything. What would you like?" I thought of the necklace I'd found back at the siren shrine, wondering if she would have wanted that. Part of me had hoped she'd be able to heal him, but I guess it made sense she wouldn't do it for free. No one would do it out of the goodness of their heart where I lived either.

Calypso's eyes brightened as if Christmas had come early. "Don't have anything? Don't be ridiculous! The first siren in nearly a thousand years only needs to bring herself!"

She stared at me expectantly.

"Uh, so what exactly does that entail?" I asked.

Her tentacles were reaching out toward me, but she held them back. "Oh, nothing too serious. I wish to study your magicks, and to do that I'll need to keep you by my side. Together we will learn about what has been lost, and do your foremothers justice by learning all we can."

That didn't sound too bad. In fact, it was very close to what I wanted to do anyway. Except for one part.

"So by 'keep you by my side,' I'd have to stay here. I can't go back home?"

Her face twisted in disgust. “Home? *This* is home my dear. You are a siren, not some filthy human. Why would you want to go back there, with all their garbage and disease and trash that litters our oceans and slowly poisons them as well as us?”

It wasn't a false argument, but it was clear I wouldn't be changing her views on humans anytime soon.

And Merrick was still bleeding.

“Yes, fine, you can study me, just fix him!” I acquiesced, desperate to get her to finally shift her attention to Merrick.

“You will allow me access to your magicks in order to better understand them, and in return I ... *fix* your mer,” she repeated slowly.

“YES,” I grit out, impatient.

Her grin was predatory, which really should have been my first clue something had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

“Done.”

She hissed and the world exploded in a wash of bright magick.

Several things happened at once. My throat swelled as if I were having an allergic reaction. My hands flew to my neck, my human instincts set to panic even though my gills still worked just fine, pumping oxygen into my body. Calypso made a yanking motion at me, and it felt like my insides were being pulled *out*, and I threw up a golden ball of light.

My mouth opened to protest, but no sound came out.

Calypso laughed as the ball of light flew toward her. I dove toward Merrick, putting my hands over the worst of the wounds on his chest to try and staunch the bleeding. The sound of her voice warped and changed until it was *my* voice laughing at both of us.

Oh fucking Little-Mermaid-Christ.

Did this mean I had to stab her with a ship through the chest to make everything all right again? Was I going to turn into some sort of gross shrimp thing now?

I tried to focus on Merrick, but it was hard to do anything when your own voice was laughing at you. I gesticulated wildly at him, ordering her silently to fix him. She'd promised.

“Oh, right. I suppose so.”

I backed away warily as she slid toward us on black tentacles, her body twisting and morphing the closer she got. One by one, her tentacles disappeared, giving way to one smooth, long muscle with two fins at the end—a tail. A suspiciously purple tail, I couldn't even squawk in protest as she transformed into a passable copy of me before my eyes, though never before had I seen my eyes narrow, or my lips twist that way in a sneer.

It was horror on a level I'd never even thought possible. I knew I'd never again see anything as simultaneously disturbing and enraging.

Until she leaned down to Merrick and lovingly nuzzled against him like a kitten, murmuring into his ear. “There's a good boy. Let's fix you.”

That wasn't even the worst part—all of that I could handle. But Merrick's head tilted to the side, and in his pain and delirium he turned and saw her—me—and gave such a happy, wistful smile that my heart broke.

“Stupid boy,” Calypso growled.

Her light, sensual caress on his shoulders became a rough grab, her sharp nails biting into his skin.

His dopey, contented expression morphed into one of agony and confusion. He thought *I* was causing him pain. He thought *I* was the one hurting him.

I'd kill her. I'd rip off each tentacle and make a new necklace out of them.

I'd—

More murderous thoughts were cut off as black ink spread from under her palm over Merrick's skin, sinking into every wound on his body. My heart beat painfully in my chest, and I



blinked as I realized I was feeling light headed. My gills worked furiously as they fluttered against my neck, but I couldn't get enough oxygen.

Merrick's mouth opened in a silent scream, his eyes turning as black as the zombie mer's as black veins spread everywhere throughout his body.

Calypso wasn't healing him; she was making him just like the other zombie mer.

And I couldn't breathe.

I slapped a hand to my gills, but met only smooth skin. I thought desperately of my need to be here with Merrick, to save him from her, but nothing happened. My body didn't respond.

The magick she'd taken from me didn't just include my voice; it was *all* my siren magick.

Once again I was a boring, stupid human again—a boring, stupid human drowning under the ocean.

I surfaced in her tiny cave, gasping silently for air. I hacked and threw up as my lungs adjusted to breathing again. Just as my heart rate returned to normal, cold hands grabbed my ankles and yanked me back under the black waters. All my air escaped my lungs in a gasp of surprise.

Then I couldn't scream. I couldn't fight. I couldn't even *see*. I stopped struggling, realizing I was only wasting valuable oxygen. I had no sense of direction as I was yanked through the water, my mind full of the image of Calypso leaning over Merrick, turning her into one of her lackeys.

*I might as well die right now, then.*

Cold, textured lips met mine and my mouth opened automatically. Cool, crisp air raced into my lungs, and I gulped it greedily.

It was Caspian.

He held me in a death grip against his chest, his mouth pressed to mine as his tail beat frantically below us. Little by little, the darkness eased until we raced out of the cave and

into open water. He didn't stop, though. He shot toward the surface, only stopping once we broke through the top. Silent tears streamed down my face as I breathed in the fresh air, taking in nothing but the open sea around us.

He dove under me and surfaced right in front of my arms, nudging my arms until I hooked them around his neck in reflex. Without waiting, he took off, swimming at a breakneck pace right along the top of the water with me on his back like I was nothing more than a light backpack.

Damn, this dude was strong.

I'm sure he swam for a while, but I wasn't aware of how much time passed. All I could see was Merrick dying in my arms, and Calypso smirking and cooing at him in my voice. I'd almost drowned again, and the weird zombie mer (Caspian, his name was Caspian) was the only reason I was still alive.

My tears were hot as they burned two twin trails down my cheeks.

Eventually, Caspian stopped swimming abruptly, drawing my attention. I gasped as the familiar coastline rose in front of me, one lone dinghy fishing boat bobbing along helplessly in the waves. Caspian gently pried my arms from his neck and pushed me toward the boat.

I understood. He was trying to save me before Calypso realized I was gone. Or maybe she didn't even really want me—just my voice or whatever magick I'd stupidly given up.

It hadn't even saved Merrick.

I turned toward him and opened my mouth, wanting desperately to thank him but unable to.

Caspian blinked and dove under the water, and just like that, he was gone.

The water felt suddenly cold around me, and I foolishly tried to scream. Of course nothing happened. My hands and arms flailed in the air, and I desperately willed the people in the boat two hundred or so yards away to see me.

By some miracle, they did.

I heard shouting and cries of alarm, and suddenly the small boat was racing toward me. I cried silent tears of relief and shame as I realized I was naked in the water except for my bra. A small fishing boat crammed with nine people reached toward me, one face sticking out from the rest.

*Javi!*

I mouthed his name, but of course no one could hear me. He pushed his way to the front, his tanned face whiter than normal with fear and anxiety.

One yelled, “Get the blankets! Move Javi, and quit gawking!”

The boat bobbed wildly in the rough waters as I reached up toward the sea of faces, all of them sharing characteristics with Javi—some with his same square jawline, and others with the same slightly rounded nose. All of them shared his dark coloring and hair.

“Jesse! Girl, you know how to give a man a heart attack,” Javi said.

I sputtered in silent laughter as his arms reached mine and our fingers entwined. He pulled me up, and two larger women pushed aside the men as they grabbed my waist and shoulders, making quick work of hauling me into the back of the boat. A warm wool blanket was passed over and quickly wrapped around my waist and then another around my shoulders. The only cold I truly felt was the ice wrapped around my heart.

Javi said, “We found you. I can’t believe it. We’ll need to call 911 and have an ambulance meet us at the docks. We—”

I shook my head furiously, willing him to understand.

“You’re not OK, Jesse. Have you lost your voice?”

I nodded yes to that, then vehemently shook my head again for the rest.

Javi blinked. “Well, all right. You seem ... oddly fine for being out here for ... two days now.” He eyed me and shook his head.

I gestured to the swarm of people around me.

Javi blushed, then straightened proudly. “The Coast Guard and the police gave up for the day. I couldn’t do that, you know? *Mi familia es tu familia.*”

Everyone around me nodded and chattered excitedly at that last point, and I lost it. I bawled silent, heaving sobs, collapsing as their kindness warmed me more thoroughly than these blankets ever would. The disparity of Merrick’s clan trying to attack me was so at odds with Javi’s family that it hurt all the more.

I mouthed ‘thank you’ at them all, and one by one Javi shoed them away. “We’ll get you to the docks. You’re sure you don’t want to go to the hospital? Not even to get your voice looked at? I need to at least tell the police we found her.”

I shook my head again.

Javi sat down next to me as the boat slowly turned, and headed toward shore. “You know, sometimes the body does weird shit after traumatic events. What happened to you, Jesse? You fell off Mike’s boat and that Merrick guy went after you, then all the other guys went after you, and it was all Mike and I could do to get the boat back to shore and report the whole thing. You know the weirdest part?”

I shrugged my shoulders, already having a good guess.

“No one reported any of those guys missing. No one came looking for Merrick. You were the only one we could really file a report on. It’s like those guys just went into the ocean and disappeared. No bodies, no nothing.”

Javi went quiet, staring out at the water for a while. “You don’t have to tell me anything. I’ll take you home, but the police will probably ask questions. You were in the water for *a long time*, Jesse, and you look like you’ve only been gone a few hours. You should be dead.”

I had nothing to say to that, literally and figuratively.

Javi sighed, and I leaned against him. He gathered me into a hug, and it was exactly what I needed. I clutched onto him as my last remaining lifeline above the water.

“You’ll tell me when you can, yeah?” he asked softly.

I nodded as we raced toward the shore.

## TWENTY-ONE

Jesse

I THOUGHT once I was back in my house, that I'd feel better. That the solid land under my feet would help put all my problems into perspective.

Instead, I couldn't stop thinking about Merrick. And also Caspian.

"Jesse, you're going to wear a trench in the hardwood floors," Javi remarked casually, but his eyes were worried as he watched from a stool at the kitchen bar. "Are you sure I can't call the police? If those guys are still hanging around, we don't want them to attack anyone else."

I huffed in frustration. How could I tell Javi that they were looking for someone very specific?

My friend was smarter than most, though. He pursed his lips, crossing his arms over his chest. "They're looking for someone like you?"

I hesitated, then nodded.

His eyes narrowed. "My family won't stop raving about sirens and Chalchiuhtlicue and—"

I blinked, taken aback by the strange names.

"Sirenas," Javi shot back impatiently. "You know, *sirens*."

I shook my head, twirling my fingers in a backward circle.

He raised an eyebrow. "Chalchiuhtlicue?"

My head nodded.

Javi rolled his eyes so hard I thought he might fall off his stool. “Chalchihuetlicue, or sometimes called Tlanchana. You know, mermaids and shit,” he clarified quickly, seeing my confusion.

Alarm shot through my body. His family thought I was a mermaid? I tried to play it off with a silent laugh, but my face twisted and my fear likely showed through.

Javi wasn't laughing. He wasn't even smiling. “All they could agree on was that you shouldn't have survived out in open water that long. It's been days, Jesse.”

My mouth went dry. There wasn't any way I could lie my way out of this. Nor did I want to.

“Jesse. I don't require an answer from you, even though I know you can't exactly give it right now. My family was more than happy to help you because I asked them to, and it's what family does. I just ...” He paused, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “Jesus girl, I thought you were dead. Mike thinks you're dead. What the fuck happened?”

*It's what family does.*

And that was a kick in the teeth, wasn't it? Where was my family? The grandparents who owned this house would kick me out the moment they got a whiff I'd been expelled, and my mother (the only one who might have answers about any of this) was far away in freaking Ohio.

I needed to call her.

I'd never met my bio dad.

Why was my family so ... I don't know, fucked up?

*Then again ... which family wasn't?*

Even Javi's seemingly perfect family had issues—an uncle constantly in prison, and a fifteen-year-old cousin who'd gotten pregnant.

*Maybe family isn't about what you do or what happens—but how you all respond to it.*

I went to the freezer and yanked the door open, grabbing the rocky road ice cream and a spoon from the drawer. Plopping down next to him at the bar, I stabbed the spoon into the textured cream and took a large bite. I'd probably burned off enough calories flouncing about in the ocean to earn it.

"I'm going to go out on a limb here and assume this ... mermaid stuff is true," he tried carefully, eyes tracking the movement of the spoon to my lips. I slurped up the mint chocolate chip with a flourish.

I snuck a peek at Javi, whose face was still tight with apprehension. I offered him the spoon, but he harrumphed, crossing his leg over his knee.

"Well, that would explain why all of them disappeared in the water miles out from shore, with no bodies washing up. They were all ... mer people too, then. Do you know how insane Mike went, thinking we'd killed an entire boat of guests? He's taken a sudden vacation down the coast, waiting for me to give him the all clear. Wait until he hears this!"

My lips parted in shock. He believed it, then?

Javi threw his hands in the air at my surprise. "You're the most sensible person I know. You wouldn't lie to me about this. And something was definitely off about those guys. Mer people, huh?"

I nodded and he put his hands behind his head, leaning back against his hands, whistling.

"Wonder if Archie might be one of these ... mer people? He'd fit right in, after all ..." he murmured darkly.

I shook my head vehemently. Some people were just pieces of shit. Not everyone needed a valid excuse to be one. I'd already discounted this possibility.

"So ... Can you like ... transform and shit?"

I rubbed my face with my hands tiredly, then nodded. Javi clapped his hands in excitement, and I cracked a grin despite everything. His child-like wonder stirred something inside my chest—the same something that kept me working at the museum and with the children who fell in love with the sea



like I did. It was the same something that had pushed me to come out here in the first place, and dedicate my life to the ocean.

Javi stared at me for a hard second before putting one finger in my face, breaking my reverie. My brow furrowed as he hopped off the stool and rummaged around my kitchen, shouting in triumph as he found a pen and a notebook. Primly he arranged himself back on the stool, holding his notebook and pen like a journalist ready for the big press conference.

“I’m going to ask a lot of questions. Yes or no. Tell me everything.”

---

TWO HOURS LATER, I was exhausted from an interrogation that wouldn’t have been out of place by an FBI operative. Using yes or no questions, I think Javi got the gist of what was going on. I was just thankful he believed me.

“So lover boy is one of these mer guys, but a good one. That’s a relief. I liked him.” Javi paused, his pen hovering over the heavily marked notebook paper. “And he’s in some kind of trouble, but trouble that’s more dangerous than the other mers being on his ass? And your ass, for that matter?” His eyebrows waggled suggestively.

I nodded, weary, slumping on my stool over the counter. I rested my head on my arms and closed my eyes.

“Well, do you think you know where he is? I could probably bully Dario into taking his boat out on a Sunday, though our mom would give us hell for missing church. Sounds like it’d be worth it, though?” Javi eyed me skeptically, and I lifted my head up to think.

Could I find Merrick?

If I still had access to my abilities, I knew I could. I’d be able to scent him and follow it. But now? If I couldn’t shift, I likely couldn’t access anything else either. I was just another human on the surface, deaf, dumb, and blind to everything going on underneath the waves.

My head dropped back to the counter in frustration.

“OK, so that’s a no,” Javi began carefully. “Do you have any other allies that are . . . er, under the sea to help?”

I went to shake my head no, then realized that wasn’t quite true. Caspian had saved my life by yanking me away from Calypso and getting me to the surface. The sea witch certainly hadn’t ordered him to do that.

Hope flared in my chest. If Caspian had free will, that meant all might not be lost with Merrick.

“You’ve thought of something,” Javi pointed out.

I nodded before I put my hands out for his notebook. Hurriedly, I scribbled down the basic details.

*Another mer captured by the sea witch. He helped me escape. He might help me.*

I shoved it back at Javi who spun the notebook around to read. His brow furrowed. “Are you sure you trust this Caspian guy?”

Exasperated, I threw my hands in the air.

Javi sighed. “Yeah, I get it, girl. Not much choice.” He tapped the notebook with his index finger twice, deep in thought. “If you get in the water, do you think he’ll come?”

I pulled the notebook back and scrawled one sentence:

*We have to try.*

Javi blew out a puff of air and raked his hands through his hair. “Right. OK. Sounds like we have a hunting expedition to plan.”

I snagged his wrist with my hand, giving him a worried, anxious look.

Javi covered my hand with his free one. “It’s not a hunt. You know what I meant. Dario would think it’s all awesome and mystical and woo and shit. No one is going to tell the authorities or try to capture your friend for science.”

Logically, I trusted Javi, but hearing him say it aloud helped. I nodded.

“OK. I know you’re worried about your boy toy, but it’s too late to get the boat out now. Eat and get some rest. I’ll stop by first thing in the morning to get you and we’ll head out. Unless you don’t want to be alone tonight?”

It was sweet of him to offer, and though part of me was still afraid, I waved his offer away. I had to get back on this horse myself.

“All right. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I threw myself off the stool and into Javi’s chest, wrapping him in a massive hug. His arms came around me, and it felt so good to have someone on my side that I fought back tears.

Javi gave me a final pat on the back. “I’ll help you, Jesse. I’ll always help you.”

I pulled away, sniffing, and waved as he left.

For a while, I stayed just like that, standing between the hallway and the kitchen like I was on the precipice of something life-changing. And maybe I was.

I marched directly out to the back porch and down to the water’s edge of the intercoastal waterway. I eyed my kayak and reluctantly got into it. I wasn’t afraid to swim in the open water anymore; it seemed laughable to be afraid of what floated near the surface when I knew what truly lurked down below.

I paddled hard down the waterway, past the spot I’d first met Merrick. Tears blurred my vision, but I kept going even as dusk settled around me like a coat. My arms burned with exertion, but it felt cathartic. I didn’t stop until the point of my kayak was at the mouth of where the waterway emptied into the open ocean. I pushed myself up onto the sandy shore and shoved the kayak up so it wouldn’t move.

Descending back into the water, I closed my eyes and tried to relax. My entire body submerged, and I desperately wished I could call out to Caspian.

Darkness filtered in from the sky, the last rays of the red sun clinging onto the horizon, but stubbornly I waited. I knew how good a mer's sense of smell was from my brief time in my other form. If he was nearby, he'd scent me.

*Shit, what if the other mers scented me too?*

Well, I'd have to just deal with that if it happened.

When it happened.

If Caspian truly wanted to help, he'd come.

Hopefully.

Long, agonizing minutes went by, and my legs went numb from being in the cold water for so long. I should have put my wetsuit on before coming out here, but it didn't feel right to wear anymore. Every rustle of the wind in between the long grasses caught my gaze as I scanned constantly for alligators. It would be harder and harder to spot them the darker it got.

*Don't be an idiot. No one is coming.*

My hands balled into fists at my side. I didn't want to leave, but it was getting unsafe to stay. One last glance, then.

That's when the water rippled just slightly, out toward the open ocean. I watched closely, but it didn't move like a gator. Hustling out of the water, I grabbed an oar just in case, though I knew it was a laughable defense if it was one of the *other* mers.

Relief flooded my body as Caspian's head broke the surface of the water, his eyes so dark I could barely see them in the waning light. A grin broke across my face, and I hopped into my kayak. He frowned at it, a question in his eyes. I waved my arm in the universal gesture for 'follow me,' then took off down the waterway.

I made it fifty yards before he bumped the back of the kayak, grabbing the back of it with both hands. The front of my kayak lifted out of the water for a moment at the sudden shift of weight, and I held on as he propelled us forward at twice the speed I'd been going.

Memories of Merrick doing the same overwhelmed me.

When my house appeared in the distance, I turned around and tapped Caspian on the head, pointing. He nodded and slowed his pace. Together, we got the kayak tied back up again, and I sat on the edge of the dock.

We stared at each other.

Then he lunged, launching his body at the wooden dock and pinning me to the wood.

# TWENTY-TWO

Merrick

DARKNESS WAS EVERYWHERE. It suffocated me. It bled into my nose and ears, and my mouth. I breathed it in, and it wound around my heart and squeezed.

In my isolation, there was only one point of light. She was there with her beautiful voice and fingertips reaching out. I'd do anything for her. She owned me.

Fingers stroked down my tail provocatively in a way I'd never felt before. I shuddered, eyes snapping open, but there was nothing to see.

All was black.

“Come now. Come to me.”

Jesse didn't need to ask; she never needed to ask. I would do whatever she wanted. My body floated toward her, the darkness parting just enough for me to see a small pile of glowing orbs on the ocean's sandy bottom.

“They're waiting for you,” she purred, fingertips dancing lighting in the water above them, just grazing and not touching them.

I didn't know what these orbs were, and it didn't matter. They were obviously important to Jesse, so they would be important to me, too.

“Caspian is too damaged. He couldn't do it. But you could, couldn't you? I just have to get you there.” Her voice in my

ear was like heaven, her hands stroking down my tail as we hovered above the orbs. I shivered in delight, my body filled with sensations I'd never felt before.

**\*\*TRIGGER WARNING\*\***

***If dubious consent triggers you, please skip to the next set of \*\*\*\*\****

“That’s it. That feels good, doesn’t it?”

It did. It felt *so* good.

She held onto me, the orbs right next to us as my tail gently touched down on the sand. Her strokes increased in intensity, my body twitching and writhing as it built toward something that was coming closer and closer....

I couldn’t move, I couldn’t breathe, I could only–

“AH!” I cried out in bliss, my entire body releasing in a wave of endorphins and hormones.

“Yes, my precious. Yesss ...”

My eyes snapped open, but Jesse wasn’t looking at me. She was fussing over the glowing orbs, which had a small haze settling over them. And she didn’t really look like herself anymore ...

**\*\*END TRIGGER WARNING\*\***

Before it could bother me any further she turned back to me.

“Sleep, now.”

Gladly.

I let her darkness bleed into every pore of me. I was complete.

## TWENTY-THREE

Jesse

Caspian was nothing but pure muscle and sinew as he slammed into me, taking the air out of my lungs as launched out of the air like a heat-seeking missile and pinned me to the dock. I tried to wriggle out and push him away, but it was useless. The same feeling of alarm and panic overcame me, the experience too similar to when Archie had cornered me in the locker room only a year ago.

No, it wasn't the same.

This time, there wasn't anything I could physically do. I couldn't scream. I couldn't call for help. I couldn't—

I stopped, realizing nothing bad was happening. Caspian was simply lying on top of me, those dark eyes just watching and waiting, scanning for my reaction, his tail hanging into the water. His scales were cold against my skin. This close, I took the time to examine his face further. Past the pitch black eyes, his eyelids and the entire area around his eye was a dark purple, with black, inky veins stretching out from his eye back toward his hairline. With a pang, I wondered if Merrick looked the same now.

I'd thought Caspian's scales were black, but this close they were the same dark amethyst color that ringed his eyes. Black rot clung to each scale, with patches of raw, pink skin showing through in many places where his scales were simply gone, as if rotted away or plucked out.



What had happened to him?

I snapped out of my musings as cold fingers dipped under the elastic of my leggings and pulled. Panicked, I writhed and twisted and punched him in the nose.

Caspian hissed and reared back, but kept me pinned with his scaly hips. He flashed bright white fangs at me, but ceased to tug at my pants. He stared at me, long and hard, not moving. Again, he was just ... waiting.

I took a deep breath, realizing he was trying to tell me something, not rape me.

I held my hands up helplessly in what I hoped was the universal sign for 'what'?

Caspian grunted deep in his throat, placing his hand around his own throat. Then he pointed at mine, stroking one finger down the column of my neck.

I failed to repress the delightful shiver that went through me.

Then his hips thrust against mine again, his meaning clear.

Uh ... what?

Was he trying to say he needed to ... *sex me* in order for us to have our voices back? That made little sense. If he was trying to pull a fast one, he must think I'm the stupidest woman in the world. Nice try, fish boy.

I narrowed my eyes and shook my head.

His tail slapped in frustration against the dock, still submerged into the water. He grabbed his own throat with one hand and mine in his other, bringing his forehead down until it touched mine. The meaning was clear.

*We are the same.*

His hips wiggled against mine, insistent.

I was running out of reasons to say no.

Then again, just because we'd both been fucked over by the sea witch didn't mean we should ... fuck. Not that we

could, with the fishtail and all. And there was Merrick. I didn't think he'd be too thrilled to hear I'd gotten it on with the zombie mer while he was stuck down with the sea witch.

That left one choice. I cocked my hand back and slapped him across the face as hard as I could.

Caspian let out a wounded, surprised sound and rolled off me, splashing back into the water heavily. I panted on top of the deck, waiting. Two hands reached out and grasped the edge, then his dark hair appeared, followed by big, sad black eyes.

My heart constricted.

Caspian slowly climbed back over the edge of the dock, and my amusement quickly turned to fascination and shock. As he hauled himself up, my eyes shot to a very human waist, and the human ass. Muscled legs followed, long and lean.

My mouth snapped shut as I realized my jaw had dropped. He crouched awkwardly on the deck, his new dangling bits swinging in the breeze as if saying hi.

I swallowed.

*That's not going to suddenly change my mind,* I thought. And yet I couldn't look away. Like Merrick, his dick had a ridge at the tip and was dotted with black scales here and there. It looked larger than what should be allowable, with raised nubs along his shaft.

And he was staring at me like I was the most beautiful, captivating thing he'd ever seen.

Oh, man.

I would not let the zombie mer sex me up just because my life was in utter ruin and I needed a good fuck. I had to think of Merrick.

*Merrick is under the sea witch's control now. You lost your chance.*

Caspian crawled one step toward me, then stopped. He waited.

I didn't move.

He took another step. Only inches separated us.

Again, he put one hand around his throat, then put it on mine. My eyes closed as his cool skin wrapped around my neck, the tension releasing from my body. I wanted so badly to let him have control: to let anyone have control. I was done being in charge. I wasn't doing such a good job of running my life. Maybe it was time I let someone else give it a go.

And I wanted to be touched and appreciated. God knows, no human guy was currently waiting in the wings to do so.

Caspian kept pressure on my throat, pushing me back down gently on my back. I let him, and he covered me with his new human-ish body. I was thankful for the darkness that swathed us as his length poked between us. Instinctively, my thighs parted.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and forced his head down to mine, our lips colliding. He tensed in surprise, and I was taken aback when he coughed into my mouth. I sputtered and pulled away, laughing silently.

Hardly romantic, but I understood what he was trying to do.

*I don't need air, buddy. This is something different.*

I shook my head and took his face in my hands. Merrick had taken to kissing like a fish in water (no pun intended), so my hopes for Caspian were high. I just had to show him what to do.

He didn't blink as I lowered my lips to his again, this time slowly moving against him to show him what to do. His mouth parted in surprise and I slipped my tongue inside, moving it against his and pressing myself into him.

A low growl was his response, his hand around my throat tightening with a deliciousness I didn't know I wanted or needed.

Enthusiastically, he took over, pushing and thrusting with his tongue in a way that made my toes curl. His hand on neck

grew tighter and tighter until it was hard to breathe. I tried to pull away from the kiss, but he was insistent, tasting and biting and nipping like he was a world champion.

But I was quickly losing the ability to breathe, after all. I took my hand and gave a small slap to his face. He stopped immediately, his hand loosening. As I coughed and wheezed, his hooded eyes quickly shifted into horror as he realized what he'd done. His own hands flew to his neck, desperately feeling for his gills and realizing they were gone.

He blinked at me a bit sheepishly. I wanted to tell him it was fine, but of course I couldn't. He scooted on his bottom toward me, arms outstretched. Cautiously, I climbed into his lap, my back against his chest. It was nice how he made me feel normal sized. It almost made me forget about the mer dick poking into one of my butt cheeks.

Caspian let out a puff of air on my neck, his arms coming around to squeeze me in a hug. It was ... nice. I relaxed into him just as his fangs bit down and scraped along my shoulder.

Oh ... that was even nicer.

I wanted to groan or moan or give some kind of verbal encouragement, but of course, neither of us could do that. I waited with bated breath as one arm snaked around my waist to hold me, and the other went under my shirt and skimmed my chest, teasing small circles in between my breasts before palming one in his hand. His tongue reached out and licked a long trail down my collarbone and back up to my neck.

Shit, he could have me.

The arm around my waist moved to fondle my free breast, and then he was playing with my nipples, fingers pinching and rolling like an expert.

He ripped my shirt in half and threw it into the water.

My jaw dropped in shock, but he was already onto my pants, holding me in place by my throat with one hand while the other pushed them down my ass and ripped them from my legs.

Into the inter-coastal waterway they went.

It was ridiculous; I couldn't even protest or tell him to get them back. I was naked on my dock with a zombie merman, and he was determined to have his wicked way with me.

And I was going to let him.

I wanted this, but I was sad it wasn't with Merrick. Thinking of him brought hot tears to my eyes, which I quickly tried to blink away.

Caspian froze over me, his hardness prodding into my inner thigh. His black eyes bored into me, one cold finger wiping away a fat tear from my eye. He stroked my hair softly, letting out a puff of frustrated air through his nose.

He laid his head on my chest, resting.

Oh, so he was an empathetic merman. That already put him leagues ahead of those other mers.

This not-talking thing sucked. I wished I could express it wasn't him; I was just so worried about Merrick I didn't know what to do with myself.

Having sex with Caspian wasn't the answer.

I pushed him back, and he huffed in irritation. As if coming to a decision, he picked up my arm and sliced it open with his claw-like nails before I could protest or yank it away. He slit a wound on his own arm, and smashed them together so our blood mixed.

I couldn't scream and Caspian held me firmly, my mouth slamming shut as an odd image of myself filling my head as Caspian moved in and out, in and out, fucking me in his imagination.

*So much heat. So much satisfaction. So beautiful. So fulfilling.*

Something delicious was building inside of me, but I didn't get to explore it any further. In this vision I looked ... beautiful. Was that how Caspian and Merrick saw me? Caspian rolled back into the water.

I sat up, confused and a little pissed, clutching my wound to stop the bleeding. What I wouldn't give for some of

Merrick's goop right now....

A wave of intense sorrow filled me, so intense it stopped me in my tracks. I whipped around and looked at Caspian, who stared at me like a kicked puppy.

Was that ... was I feeling his emotions?

I sent back a question mark toward him, along with my feelings of confusion in case he didn't know what a question mark was.

I wasn't ready for what he sent back.

Like a video playing in my head, I saw him with *her* ... the sea witch. He was tied down as she lay on top of him, laughing with glee while she rocked back and forth over him. Hot shame and embarrassment flooded the vision, along with pain and heartache.

I gasped as the scene dissolved in my mind, leaving me with the same sense of sorrow. So many questions invaded my mind. Had Caspian been with the sea witch against his will this whole time? Had that ... been his only experience with a woman?

Sharing blood with me had clearly opened a connection that allowed us to communicate. I understood that, now. He'd only been trying to have sex with me so he didn't have to hurt me. Though I suspected he *wanted* to have sex with me.

Perhaps another time, after Merrick was safe. And maybe able to join in.

*Shit, that thought was hot.*

Going with my thought of Caspian being abused, I sent my own scene to him: that of him on top of me, thrusting over and over again while pulling my hair, mouth gaping as he came inside of me.

Caspian's lips parted in shock, his eyes darkening with arousal. I felt it the next moment: hot, thick, and overwhelming. He blinked and it cleared. A vision of Merrick being corrupted by the sea witch came next.

Caspian was being noble. How quaint.

I sighed, running my hands through my hair. We needed to tweak this method of communication. My eyes closed as I thought through exactly what to send, and I shot it over to him. First, I showed him rescuing me from the sea witch's cave, and guiding me to Javi's family and their boat. Next, us on the dock again, this time kissing me. Finally, I followed it up with the two of us swimming together, going down to rescue Merrick.

Hopefully that would make it clear.

Caspian eyed me, hope so painfully stretched across his face that I wanted to hug him. The wind whipped around me, and I shivered. I sent Caspian a mental image of me returning to the house, sleeping, and getting up in the morning and putting on my wetsuit and other gear. The sea witch had taken my abilities, so I'd need to prepare to go back to the ocean like a human. I also sent him an image of Javi and his family's boat. Caspian didn't need to exhaust himself carrying me all the way out where we needed to be.

A stab of fear hit me when he saw the image of the boat in my mind, but I reinforced it with images of Javi battling the other mers to save me, and of him hugging me. *Friend*, I tried to say mentally.

Caspian sent back a wave of reluctant acceptance. I beamed at him.

*Come inside with me*, I thought to him.

His head tilted in confusion. I sighed, and sent him an image of him walking inside the house with me in his human form.

Caspian was out of the water and on the dock before I was finished thinking, his long tail fading away to legs as the water dried and sluiced off him. I held out a hand to help him stand, but he didn't take it.

I stood to show him what to do. A flash of determination bled from him, and he crawled forward on his arms and legs.

My head shook and I held my arms out, stopping him. I pulled up on his arms, encouraging him to stand. Caspian sat

up on his knees, then laboriously put one foot flat on the dock.

I smiled and nodded, showing him how pleased I was.

His weight shifted to the leg on the ground, and he wobbled dangerously. I held tight to him, and the other leg came down. He shook and wavered, but I was strong. I held him up until he adjusted, then slowly let go.

He stood unassisted, blinking at me and looking oddly proud. I clapped my hands, then took one step forward, glancing back at him in encouragement.

Caspian took one step forward, and didn't fall on his face.

Convinced he could handle it, I walked slowly to the house, not wanting to look back in case it made him embarrassed or self-conscious. I opened the back patio, and helped him navigate the rotting wooden steps.

He stood on my back porch, staring into the house with curiosity.

*Wait until you see a bed*, I thought.

That was probably a bit presumptuous. I should probably start with the couch.

Grabbing his arm, I guided him over to the couch, pushing down lightly. He stumbled, alarmed and fear wafting from him. I shook my head and sent reassurance back, as well as an image of him sitting on the couch with me.

He took a steadying breath, and allowed me to sit him down. Happy we'd made it, I grabbed a blanket from the stack and sat next to him, snuggling into his side and stretching my legs out on the rest of the couch.

Exhaustion hit me like a freight train. Dully, I registered one of his long arms coming around me, holding me securely against him. No one would be able to sneak up on me while he was here. I was safe to sleep.

With a jolt I realized I hadn't felt safe since the mer attack on the boat. But with Caspian here, I knew I could rest.



As if he could read my thoughts (and perhaps he could), his hand squeezed my shoulders, fingers digging into my skin reassuringly.

I yawned and tucked my head into his shoulder. Sleep claimed me shortly after.

## TWENTY-FOUR

Jesse

POUNDING on the door jarred me awake. I blinked in confusion as dark arms surrounded me, then I remembered. Caspian!

He reacted to my panic, snarling and hurling himself over the couch and toward the door. He tripped at least twice, but didn't let his lack of practice with legs stop him from attacking what he viewed as a threat. It was hard to see as dawn was just cresting over the horizon, bathing my living room in a golden, pink haze.

I couldn't yell at Caspian to stop, so I did the next best thing. I sent my memory of Javi making out with his latest boy fling at a bar toward him.

Caspian lurched forward and froze, a look of shock on his face just as Javi unlocked the door and stepped through.

"Yah!" Javi stumbled backward and Caspian jumped at seeing the man from his head suddenly in front of him. I clapped my hands impatiently and made a 'come here' signal to Caspian.

The mer scowled at Javi but lumbered back to me, taking large and ungainly steps.

"Holy shit. And here I was thinking last night was a fever dream. Unless *this* is the fever dream." Javi's mouth was open as he took in Caspian. All of Caspian, quite naked. He gave me a look.

My own mouth opened angrily before I remembered I couldn't yell at him.

He held his hands up in exasperation. "Hey girl, no judgment. Get yours." Javi gave Caspian another appreciative glance. "I'm guessing this is another one of your friends from ... down *under*?"

I nodded, grabbing onto Caspian's hand and refusing to let go, lest he lunge at Javi or view him as some sort of threat.

"Easy big guy. I don't swing that way," Javi snorted, amused.

Caspian's eyes narrowed, clearly not trusting what Javi said or my memories of him. He took two steps to close the distance between them, dragging me along with him. He buried his fingers into Javi's hair and yanked his head forward, sniffing deeply at his neck. With a satisfied grunt, he shoved Javi away and wrapped his arms around me.

"Woah. I think I'm in love," Javi remarked, staggering to regain his balance.

Caspian lost his protective stance and simply stared. I shook him off and ran to the kitchen island, grabbing my pen and the notebook.

*I think he smelled which way you lean.*

Javi came around and read it over my shoulder. He laughed. "Right. As long as that's squared away." He ran a nervous hand through his dark hair. "We still doing this? Dario and I played sick, but it won't take long for Mom to put two and two together. We better get out on the water before she comes down. He said he'd meet us at the docks."

I nodded emphatically.

"Right." He eyed Caspian again. "Think you can get pants on Mr. Fish Dick over here and get him in the car? I'll drive, obviously."

I rolled my eyes, but tugged Caspian back to my bedroom. I had a few pairs of long, men's athletic shorts since they were often more comfortable for me than the itty bitty girl shorts

that were popular. I found a large and kneeled before him, holding the waistband open.

Caspian frowned at me, staring down at the offered garment.

I sighed and sent him a mental image of a guy putting on a pair of shorts over his boxers.

Caspian grumbled, but put one leg into one of the leg holes. It was the wrong one, but I didn't care. I worked the shorts up his hips, trying to ignore the huge, ridged merman dick bobbing in my face.

Grabbing his hand, I tugged him after me and out the front door, forgoing shoes all together. It would take too long to get him into shoes and used to walking in them, anyway.

Without a word, I yanked open the car door and pushed him down into a sitting position in the seat. He sat obediently, but fought me as I fussed with his seatbelt. An image of him struggling against ropes and the sea witch's laughs rang in my ears, and I froze.

My hands dropped, and I took a deep breath.

He was triggered and traumatized. Compassion was the name of the game, despite his tough exterior and attitude.

"Everything OK?" Javi asked from the front seat.

I put up a finger for him to give me a moment and turned back to Caspian, who only had a wary look in his eyes now instead of pure panic. His hands gripped the fabric of the belt tightly, holding it away from his body. I sent a wave of calm toward him, then sat down in the seat next to him and modeled how to put on my seat belt. I wiggled around to show I could still move, and how the belt moved with me. Then I set an image of a car accident, and how the belt could save his life by keeping him in place, instead of throwing him out of the car.

His eyes darted back and forth in alarm, lips parting with mild horror. I unbuckled and leaned toward him, reaching for the belt again. He shook slightly, but allowed me to buckle him in. I gave Javi a thumbs-up, which he saw in the rearview mirror.

“Oh boy. Here we go.”

Javi peeled out of my stone driveway, zipping down the tiny road with purpose. Caspian’s throat bobbed, and he reached out and grabbed my hand. His grip crushed my fingers.

My free hand found his thigh and stroked lightly, trying to convey it was OK. Hard to get across when Javi was a terrible driver, but the closest pier was only ten minutes down the road. We’d live.

Hopefully.

After the most tense drive of my life, Javi pulled into the parking lot and straight through into a spot, laying hard on the brakes. Caspian and I lurched forward automatically, and I shot Javi a dirty look in the mirror. Seeing Caspian pale and sickly, Javi gave me an apologetic glance. I unbuckled Caspian and opened my door. My merman crawled out behind me rather than figure out his own door. He fell out in an undignified pile of limbs onto the pavement, uncaring as his face smacked into the asphalt. He simply looked relieved to be out of the car.

Not that I could blame him.

“There he is.” Javi pointed to a modest-sized, yet older fishing boat docked several rows out into the water.

I gestured for Caspian to follow me, but took care to stay a step behind Javi. I still felt embarrassed I’d had to be plucked out of the ocean by Javi’s family like a small child. Now I had to meet all of them face to face.

“Hola!” greeted Dario, smiling brightly at me from the deck, where he was busy untying ropes. His eyes lingered with excitement on Caspian.

My eyes narrowed.

He spouted off a quick stream of Spanish to Javi, who rolled his eyes and held out his hand to help me step onto the boat. I jerked my thumb over my shoulder at him, a questioning look on my face.

“Don’t worry about it. He’s eager to get going.”

I reached back for Caspian, but he scoffed at the small boat, preferring to strip off his shorts and dive gracefully into the water. Dario gasped and ran to where he’d disappeared into the water, staring hard. I guess Caspian preferred to swim. It was hard to make him out in the semi-darkness, as the sun was still struggling to rise.

“I won’t hit him with the motor, will I?” Dario asked, glancing nervously at the large blades on the back of his boat.

I scowled at him, indignant on Caspian’s behalf.

“Easy girl,” Javi reassured me, holding me back. “He’s a merman, not a fucking idiot,” Javi scolded his cousin.

Dario put his hands in the air and disappeared behind the wheel. The boat sputtered to life, the engine roaring in quick order. Worry and anxiety bled into my veins. What if Caspian *didn’t* know about engines and boats? What if he’d been down there with the sea witch for so long he had no idea about the dangers of modern technology?

A strange sense of confusion bled through my worry, followed by a clear image of the ocean floor. Glancing up in my mind, I saw the outlines of many boats on the surface above me.

*Caspian!* He was showing me he was all right! Well, that would certainly make this trip interesting.

“Chica! Where we going?” Dario asked, clearly primed for an adventure. I sent a question to Caspian, who responded by popping up in front of the boat, his black tail smacking the water. I pointed to him. Dario’s jaw dropped.

Javi just laughed. “Follow him, obviously.”

The boat lurched forward. The lights from downtown were still on from the evening, casting a glow through the retreating darkness. It was quieter now, but I knew soon it would be alive with the laughs and shouts of thousands of tourists on spring break. Merrick had been so excited to see it. I vowed to show it all to him, just as soon as we brought him back. And the first thing I’d say? It’ll be the same thing I said when we met.

*“Hey, hottie.”*

## COMING NEXT ...

It's the 21st century, and mermaids are real. How do I know?

Because I am one.

The sea witch kidnapped my boyfriend and my voice, and now I have to rely on my friends to get him back, all while being chased by a horde of horny mermen, each eager to be the one to claim and breed me.

Yuck.

That's what being the first siren in hundreds of years will do to you.

I don't take anyone's shit. Once I'm done, these mers and the sea witch won't know what hit them.

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