



Audre & Bash Are Just Friends

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: MEET AUDRE. Junior class president. Debate team captain. Unofficial student therapist. Desperately in need of a good time.

MEET BASH. Mysterious new senior. Everybody's crush. Tall, floppy, great taste in jewelry. King of having a good time.

It's the last day of school at Cheshire Prep, Brooklyn's elite academy—and Audre Mercy-Moore's life is a mess. Her dad cancelled her annual summer visit to his Malibu beach house. Now? She's stuck in a claustrophobic apartment with her mom, stepdad, and one-year-old sister (aka the Goblin Baby).

Under these conditions, she'll never finish writing her self-help book—ie, the key to winning over Stanford's admissions board.

Cut to Bash Henry! Audre hires him to be her “fun consultant.” His job? To help her complete the Experience Challenge—her list of five wild dares designed to give her juicy book material. She'll get inspo; he'll get paid. Everybody wins.

He isn't boyfriend material. And she's not looking for one. Can they stay professional despite their obvious connection?

Total Pages (Source): 15

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 6:50 am

A WHOLE different world existed under the sea—lighting, sounds, even the feeling of otherworldliness. No matter how clear the water, it still played tricks, even on experienced divers.

The colorful tropical fish, artifacts, and the remnants of history buried beneath the waves—along with a mysterious landscape mostly untouched by humans—always gave Kannon a thrill. Parts of the reef weren't very deep, so he had no trouble freediving.

This year for vacation, Kannon and his dad rented a boat and guide to take them to the reefs around the Seychelles. This was by no means the first time he'd gone snorkeling. Growing up along the California coast guaranteed Kannon was comfortable in the water.

The guide had warned them to stay together, but Kannon had other ideas. Besides, he wasn't going that far off. After investigating the colorful reef fish and interesting coral formations—and seeing his dad was distracted—Kannon slowly but steadily wandered off on his own. An outcrop of rocks covered in algae caught his eye, and he went to investigate.

Many of the multihued native fish swam past him, curious as to what he was. It was funny how they circled him. Kannon held his hand out. A few braver fish darted in, nibbled at his fingers, and then swam off. God, what a rush it was. Nothing was better than this.

He drew closer to the outcrop, surprised it was much deeper than he'd first thought. Huh, not an outcrop, but the mouth of an underwater cave. Cool. From a distance it

appeared to be nothing more than oddly shaped rocks. Peering inside, he was unable to see past the murky blackness within.

Curious, he reached his hand out, stretching toward the mouth of the cave. His scalp prickled. A tingle washed through him. The water around him caressed his body as he hung weightlessly, staring at the cave entrance as his dick swelled in his trunks. What the...?

It wasn't as if he made a habit of getting horny while diving, so what the hell? Torn between desire and unease, he hovered in the tropical water. Chills chased up his spine, and goose bumps broke out over his body.

His heart rate sped up—not a good thing underwater—and the feeling of being watched crept across his nerves. Something was in there, and his mind screamed at him to get away even as the urge to reach inside nearly overwhelmed him.

Kannon's body swayed dangerously closer. His nipples ached as the water flowed past, and he had to force himself not to whimper as need struck him. He jerked back. There's something waiting for me, just waiting for me to reach in so it can... what? So it can do what?

Jesus, he needed to get a serious grip on his imagination, and crap, he had to surface too. Lack of oxygen made the decision for him. All this panicking on his part had used up his air—stupid of him.

He surfaced and shook the hair out of his eyes. Wow, is that our boat way over there? Oh man, Dad's going to kill me. Worried about the fit his dad was going to have, he was totally unprepared for the strange guy who popped up next to him, although “guy” might have been overly nice.

Kannon yelped, but the dude across from him just smiled. The androgynous, fey face

wasn't quite human. The long, pointed ears were a good indication, as was the glimpse of sharp little teeth.

Oh, and the gills at its neck.

Azure blue hair floated in the water around shapely shoulders and cobalt blue eyes stared back at him. It was a visage that was hauntingly beautiful, otherworldly, and a tad disconcerting. The creature smiled slightly as if he agreed. It—whatever it was—scared the bejesus out of him.

Then it reached out and dragged Kannon under the water. Oh. My. God. Terror struck, and Kannon fought, kicking furiously as he tried to twist away, but it did no good. The creature was too strong, and its hands were everywhere.

Kannon fought to hold his breath. He needed to get to the surface and... he froze—just stopped fighting as something thrashed behind the other guy, churning up the water. No way. He stared in shock at the, the... its upper part looked like a regular human torso, but the bottom— a tail? That's a... a... no way!

The unbelievable sight of a tail—a long, shimmery tail with iridescent scales—was attached to the guy in front of him. It glistened in the sunlight that filtered through the water. There was only one human-like sea creature he knew of with a tail—and that was mermaids. Or mermen. Merfolk? Whatever. Those were make-believe.

And this make-believe creature was trying to kill him.

Then it kissed him full on the lips, and thoughts of his murder flew out of his head along with every other rational thought. Before he could react, it stopped the kiss and twirled him around so they were chest to back. Well now, if he had any doubt it was male, he had his answer now.

There was no mistaking the hard cock poking him. The merman held him securely as they floated in the water. That marvelous fluked tail slowly flipping back and forth caused their lower bodies to rock together. It was kind of nice and... then the merman sank his teeth into the fleshy area between Kannon's neck and shoulder. Oh fuck! What the what?

Pain exploded through him, and he arched helplessly as he fought not to cry out underwater. But as rapidly as it appeared, the sharp pain faded. The creature's hand gently trailed up and down his chest. Is that a fin below its wrist?

Lassitude invaded him. He knew, just knew, this was where he was supposed to be. He belonged here with the merman. Tingles raced through his body. I'm home. Even the teeth still buried in his neck didn't bother him, but in the distance he heard something. A voice... and it sounded upset. Scared.

It dragged at his mind. He needed to do... to do something. That voice he heard was... was... someone special. He needed to listen to it and... something. The creature looked up and sighed. It trilled softly in his ear then propelled him upward. Water rushed past Kannon, and his head broke the surface.

"Kannon! Kannon!"

The first thing he heard was his dad yelling his name, and the feeling of peacefulness faded. He wanted to cry at the loss, but right then he had other things to worry about. Oh boy, he knew that tone.

Reality rushed back, and Kannon started flailing around in the water looking for that, that... There was no one near. He was alone. His neck stung, his head spun, and he was alone. Sadness retreated, and fear speared him. What the ever-living fuck was in the water with him?

What did it want? Where was it? He wanted out of the water. Like right then. Immediately. Ten minutes ago would've been good. Holy crap, that thing had bit him too. God, was he going to turn into some kind of fish thingy like that merman? Oh. Oh. He clutched his belly. A merman. His stomach cramped and a headache he didn't know was lurking struck like a snake. Whoo hoo, if the waves didn't stop rocking him, he was going to be sick.

“Dammit, Kannon! Get over here. Now !”

Yup, his dad was cussing, and he never cussed. He was in so much trouble. As he swam toward his dad and the guide, he decided not to tell them what happened. They'd think he made it up to avoid getting in trouble.

It was only then he remembered he hadn't been afraid of drowning.

THE SUN pounded down on his shoulders. The fact he wore a black dive shirt wasn't helping matters, but there was no way he was taking it off. Apparently the bite wasn't as deep as he first thought since he wasn't seeing blood all over himself.

He took a deep breath, and the tang of salt in the air stung his swollen lips. Gentle waves rocked their boat—just another day on the ocean, right? Unfortunately that couldn't disguise the horror he'd faced earlier. White sand beaches and hot, sunny weather—what better way to spend a vacation, right? Right ?

Wrong.

“Kannon Michel Thomas!” Charles, his dad, sat on the floor of the boat glaring at him. “Do you have any idea how badly you scared me?”

Bet you weren't as scared as me. Everyone in a five-mile radius knew how badly he'd scared his old man because he resorted to using his full name. His full name . He was

eighteen for God's sake, and his old man used his whole name. His life was over.

"Why? What possessed you to go that far out?" His dad folded his arms over his chest.

"I'm sorry, Dad." Kannon flopped back on the deck. Time to face the music. "I didn't mean to. I thought I saw some interesting rock formations and—"

"And you just had to investigate. I get that, but in the meantime you scared ten years off my life. We've had the talk about being safe while snorkeling years ago. Do we need to go over it again? One minute you were close by and the next you were just gone."

Kannon looked down blinking steadily.

Sighing, Charles hugged Kannon. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry I yelled. I was terrified when I couldn't find you."

Oh man, his dad must have thought he was on the verge of tears. Actually, he really was, but not for the reason his dad thought. Kannon wrapped his arms around his dad, hugged hard, and then backed off. How uncool would it be if someone actually saw him hugging his dad—even if the old man needed the hug? Hell, who was he kidding? He knew he needed it too.

"I know, Dad, I'm really sorry. I didn't realize I'd gotten that far out." Well okay, that wasn't exactly true. He had totally planned to sneak off. He'd just gotten more than he bargained for.

"There are sharks, and jellyfish, and... and other things out there that can kill you." His dad rubbed his shaved head. "I know you love the water, but the ocean can be deadly."

Dude, you have no idea. Kannon shaded his eyes and squinted at his dad. “Please don’t be upset with me. You’re right. I shouldn’t have gone so far off.” Yup, now he felt lower than a sea slug’s belly.

“You’re a teenage boy, of course you didn’t think.” His dad lightly ruffled Kannon’s wet hair. “I might have gotten a little upset when I couldn’t find you, and maybe I overreacted a little bit. Just promise me you won’t go out so far tomorrow. As tempted as I am to restrict you to the resort’s pool area, I won’t.”

Kannon fought to hide the horror he felt. “Oh, ah, I thought we were going sightseeing tomorrow.” The last thing he wanted was to go back in the ocean.

“Well, we can if that’s what you want. Tell you what. We’ll talk about it over dinner. I imagine all that exploring has got you hungry.”

Kannon scooted over to where his dad sat. All he wanted was to get off the water and back to their bungalow. “Yeah, I could eat a whale.”

His dad’s sharp crack of laughter echoed over the boat. “Boys,” he mumbled. “Hollow from the toes up.”

Before the boat motor started, Kannon could’ve sworn he heard what sounded like an angry slap of a tail against the water. He wasn’t tempted to look. Nope, not even remotely. He was terrified of what might be looking back at him. Trepidation licked along his spine.

His mind still questioned what he’d seen while under the waves, but his lips stung from the kisses, and his shoulder ached where that, that... thing bit him. Good thing his dark dive shirt covered the mark. His old man would’ve had a cow if he’d seen his shoulder.

What would he have told his dad? Oh that? That mark? Well see, this merman came out of nowhere, dry humped me, then bit me. Excuse me while I binge on raw seafood. Don't my scales look extra scaly today? Sorry my fin got in your way. Will this shirt go with my gills? I'll be flopping around in my room if you need me. Oh, and how was your day?

What he saw just couldn't exist, could it? His growling stomach shoved all thoughts out of his head. Well, almost all thoughts. It stood to reason his close call would've taught him something, and it did.

Stay away from the ocean.

CHAPTER ONE

FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

KANNON WALKED through the old, run-down house one last time then shut off the lights. He'd buried his dad that morning, and now this chapter of his life was over. After locking the front door, he strolled down the sidewalk that stretched in front of his childhood home. He and his dad had grown apart ever since he developed a fear of the water.

His dad never did understand Kannon's sudden phobia of the ocean. When he asked about it, Kannon refused to talk about why he felt that way. He had to give the old man credit, though. He'd tried. The fear got worse after he left for college.

Stay away from the ocean.

A hot breeze lifted his hair, not that it did any good. Sweat trickled down his back, distracting him. Jeez, he'd forgotten how hot the South was in the dead of summer. As he hurried to his car, he wished he'd tied his hair back that morning.

Not that he had anyone to impress. He was thirty-three, didn't do relationships, and had no life to speak of outside of work even though he was well-liked by coworkers. Most of his relationships didn't last more than six months, and the sex was... well, the earth didn't move for him or for the other guy.

Stay away from the ocean.

He'd come back to deal with things—there was only him, after all. He never knew his mom, and he had no siblings. Since he was a Realtor, he used his contacts here to show the house, which had finally sold.

He'd taken two weeks off to deal with the closing and cleaning the place out. Now he was done, and he had a week of vacation left. So of course his best friend, Brett, called. They'd roomed all through college together.

Kannon wasn't shocked to hear Brett was going to marry Brooke. He was surprised to hear they planned to do it that upcoming Saturday. She and Brett had been together for the past ten years. Brett met her not long after he moved to the islands. Brett wanted Kannon to be his best man.

Kannon cursed silently as he drove out the driveway for the last time. Leave it to Brett and his last minute announcements. Once he returned to his hotel, he got on his iPad and checked flights. It was late Sunday afternoon, and the next direct flight left late Monday morning.

That would put him on the island Tuesday. Brett owned Blue Waters Resort, one of the largest resorts in the Seychelles. It was right down the beach from the one he and his dad stayed in when he was eighteen.

So much for staying away from the ocean.

"STILL AS beautiful as I remember." Kannon stood in the doorway, staring at the dazzling blue water through the windows.

He closed the front door to the sweet little guest bungalow that was his for the next few days and dropped the keys in a chrome bowl sitting on a table by the entrance. Lord, he was tired. He just spent roughly seventeen hours on a plane trying to get here. Crossing to a bank of sliding glass doors, he opened them.

Sun, sea, and sand surrounded him—even if it did freak him out that the ocean was right there . Turning his back on the view, he focused on the living and kitchen areas. They weren't large, but it didn't matter since it was just him. Kannon made a quick tour of the place and found the bath and bedroom. Both were cozy with a comfortable feel.

He dropped his suitcases in the bedroom. “Well, now, that's nice.”

The room featured a four-poster king-sized bed with sheer white mosquito netting and white bedding. Very romantic. It was a shame he had no one to enjoy it with. He returned to the living area. The bungalow's deck was furnished with a wicker table and chairs.

Nature surrounded the bungalow on one side and a small, private infinity pool overlooked the ocean on the other. There were a few lounge chairs for sunbathing near the pool. A beachside outdoor shower right on the beach made it complete.

A knock on the door caught his attention, and moments later he heard his name shouted. Damn, he hadn't even changed clothes. Throwing his suit jacket over a chair, he walked out front, loosening his tie. His best friend sat in a golf cart on the walkway, grinning.

“About time you got here.” Brett turned off the golf cart.

“You say that like you've been waiting long. I haven't had a chance to change even.” Kannon stepped over to the golf cart.

“Well, technically, I have been. I've been trying to get you out here forever.”

The sun had kissed Brett's already dark skin, and his short black hair was an artful mess from the sea breezes. His sleepy, sinfully dark bedroom eyes lingered on

Kannon, a smile tilting his full lips.

Brett was just a little under six feet and muscular. Jesus, the man was sexy, but also straight as an arrow, and apparently about to marry his lovely girlfriend. He and Brett were the same age even though Brett looked younger. Or maybe he just felt older.

A breeze with just a hint of salt teased Kannon, and he ran his hand through his hair. “You know why I haven’t come before now.”

“Yeah, I’m still in shock to see you standing here.”

“Me too.” Brett knew what a big deal this was for him. He’d told Brett he’d had a bad scare in the water years ago, but he never told Brett a thing was responsible. Or that it dragged him under the water. Or kissed him. Or bit him. “So what were you doing? Watching for me?”

“I’m the one who sent someone to pick you up from the airport and bring you out here. So of course I was watching for you,” Brett said.

“Thanks for that, by the way. I’ve about met my quota on making decisions for a while. I just... I just... yeah. Shit.” Kannon pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes stinging.

Brett hopped off the golf cart and hurried to where Kannon stood. “Hey man, it was the least I could do. I know things have been rough lately.”

“Rough. Yeah, that’s a good word for it.” Kannon let Brett hug him. He was so glad to see his friend. “It’s over now. The house sold, his estate’s settled, and I’m done with it all. Want to come in? I’m going to change. I’d offer you a beer, but, um...”

Brett released Kannon and followed him inside. “I stocked the kitchen for you. You

won't be fixing any fancy dinners, but you won't starve either."

"In that case, help yourself," Kannon threw over his shoulder as he walked to the bedroom.

"Why, thank you." Brett's laugh sounded behind Kannon. "Think I will."

Kannon dug in one of his suitcases until he found khaki shorts and a light blue knit shirt. Returning to the living area, he found a beer waiting for him on the kitchen counter. Brett was outside sitting in a lounge chair with a glass of water.

"Comfy?" Kannon asked as he joined Brett in one of the loungers.

"Better believe it, but I can't stay. Otherwise I'd be having a beer too." Brett sipped his water. "By the way, I'm having some friends over tonight, sort of a pre-wedding party—nothing official. If you're up to it, drop by."

Kannon crossed his feet and stared out over the ocean. "Maybe. How far is the resort from this bungalow?"

"About a mile. This one's on the outer edges of the property. Sorry, but that was all that was open."

"No problem. I guess you still own the penthouse?"

"Yup. I haven't found a reason to move. Yet. Brooke might change my mind."

"A woman's prerogative, right?"

"So I've been told." Brett checked his watch then finished his drink. "Okay, duty calls. There's a golf cart in a shed around behind the bungalow. Most of them don't

come with transportation, but this one's so far out I thought it'd be a good idea. The key is on the wall in the kitchen by the pantry. You got my cell number?"

"I do. If I need anything I'll call you."

"Good deal. If I don't see you tonight, I'll drop by tomorrow."

"You don't need to babysit me, man."

"I know, but we haven't seen each other in a while. You only have a few days, and then you'll be going back to your life again, so quit your bitching."

Kannon saluted Brett with his beer. "Bitching quit. Now go on and get back to work, slacker. I may drop by later."

"Good." Brett stood. "See you later."

"Later." Kannon watched Brett leave from his comfortable position on the lounge.

In the distance the waves lapped at the beach. He sipped his beer as he contemplated the water. The ocean was beautiful, there was no denying that. Beautiful and deadly—and he'd been running from it for fifteen years.

That day so long ago still haunted him. Haunted him, intrigued him, and invaded his dreams. Kannon absently touched his shoulder where the merman bit him. It had healed fine, but left a scar that was hard to miss when he went shirtless.

A tingle spread through his body as he touched the mark—and it was most definitely a mark. Happily that was the only thing he ended up with. He didn't crave seafood, hadn't suddenly been able to breathe underwater—okay, that would've been cool—or sprouted fins or a tail.

Now he was back where it all began.

This was the one place he'd sworn never to return. He was no longer scared over what happened. Or angry, though he had been for a time. No, anger over what happened wasn't why he stayed away. He'd felt drawn to this place from the start. And that... well that scared the crap out of him. Something here was waiting for him.

And he was here now.

He stayed outside, arms resting against the wooden railing as he watched the sun slowly dip below the horizon. He debated going to Brett's for the party, but he wasn't in the mood to be social.

Instead he stayed outside and watched the water. He really wanted to take a walk on the beach and feel the warm sand between his toes. Why the hell not? Dropping his sandals on the deck, he walked out to the soft, dry sand. He wiggled his toes and sighed. So nice.

Each step he took felt a little like he was slipping backwards as his toes sank into the sand as he made his way across the beach, heading toward the waves, but he didn't enter the water. Not yet. Instead he strolled down the beach, lost in thought.

He spent the rest of the day walking the beach and thinking. After a while he saw the lights from the resort. Laughter drifted on the evening breeze. I didn't realize I'd come this far. He'd also lost track of time and night was falling. It sounded like they were having a good time, but he didn't want to join them.

He turned around and returned the way he came. Tomorrow he'd meet up with Brett and Brooke. But for tonight all he wanted was solitude. He returned to the bungalow, took a shower, and unpacked.

After the fifth yawn in a row, he decided it was time for bed.

CHAPTER TWO

DUSK HAD long since passed. Darkness blanketed the land, and, with it, protection from prying eyes. The full moon shone brightly on the rippling waves. Nisha's head broke the surface and he bobbed in the water, his long hair floating around his shoulders.

A lengthy tail battered the surface in annoyance. Nisha watched the human called Kannon walking along the beach. Sometimes he'd just stop and stare restlessly out over the reflective surface of the ocean, his hands in his back pockets, the water splashing so close to him.

Then he'd started off again. His human seemed sad. And distracted. When the lights of the resort came fully into view, Kannon turned back. Obviously his human wasn't in the mood for company. Good.

Nisha's webbed fingers played with the necklace that held several shark teeth around his neck. He dove under the water, his tail slapping the surface. Time and distance had allowed him to see that maybe what he'd done that day to Kannon could've been a little scary.

But he'd seen the human in the water, and his scent—that scent called to him. He couldn't resist that call any more than the tide could resist the moon. If he'd been more rational, he would've known his actions would scare the human, but he wasn't. Rational, that is.

Of all the things he was expecting that day, finding his mate was not one of them. He

certainly wasn't expecting his mate to be human. That, in and of itself, rocked his world. While he didn't regret finding Kannon, he did wish he'd thought things out better.

The last thing he meant to do was scare Kannon. Not to mention his actions made mating with the human much, much harder. Things would go easier if Kannon came into the water, but if necessary, he'd go onto land to claim what was his.

With a sigh, Nisha gave up any hope Kannon would suddenly throw caution to the wind and venture into the ocean. Nisha watched from the safety of the waves as Kannon returned to the bungalow and eventually went to bed.

Perfect.

He swam to an underwater cave he often used to transform. Once there, he beached himself. Grunting from the pull of gravity, he pulled himself backward until he managed to clear the water. Leaning back on his elbows, he let his weight rest on his arms.

Staring up at the cave's ceiling, he waited. His body was so much heavier out of the water, and he hated the feeling. His long tail slapped restlessly against the sand. As he waited, he noticed his skin drying out. Finally. Now the fun part starts.

Bracing himself, he waited for the tearing to begin. Within minutes the bottom of his tail tingled, then ripped. Clenching his teeth against the scream that threatened to spill forth, he forced himself to let it happen. The flipper part of his tail split, and the tear continued up his body.

What seemed like ages passed as the two parts separated and slowly morphed into... legs. Fins altered themselves into feet, and the pain of the transformation came to an end. During all this, his long, pointed ears and sharp teeth changed to a more human-

like form. The fins near his wrist disappeared too.

He wiggled his toes, flexed his ankles, and bent his knees. He gave his body a few minutes more to adjust as the pain receded. Standing on these two sticks humans called legs, he waited until he adjusted to the sensation of standing on solid land that didn't move with the current of the ocean.

Taking a step, then another... he grinned. His fingers brushed his naked skin as he searched for the waterproof bag at his hip. Good, it was still there. He made his way up the path that led away from the water and up to the land.

Standing in the cave's entrance, he checked for any wandering humans. Seeing no one, he set off for a certain bungalow that held what he wanted. Outside the door he looked around, but nothing stirred. He picked the lock and slipped inside.

Quietly he made his way to the bedroom. There he stood staring at the human before him. Such beauty. His human face was a study of perfection. Kannon had a strong jaw and full pouty lips of the palest pink.

A narrow nose graced his face, and a dusting of freckles covered his cheeks. He opened the bag and scooped a small bit of the powdery substance into his hand. Carefully he bent down and blew it into the face of the human.

"Just relax," Nisha whispered.

The powder that covered Kannon's face was quickly absorbed into the skin. It was a mixture he made of certain toxins from fish that would leave Kannon in a twilight-type sleep but aware. Kannon's nose crinkled. He snorted, and then sneezed. Nisha watched as Kannon struggled to lift his arm to rub his nose. Slowly his eyes blinked open.

“Shh. You are fine, mate. Just relax. ”

Kannon squinted. “Who, um... who are you?”

“You know who I am. You’ve only been running from me for fifteen years.”

Kannon gasped, his head tossing back and forth upon the pillow. “But, but, you... you don’t exist.”

Nisha rested his hand on Kannon’s shoulder, and he slowly calmed under Nisha’s touch. Once his human settled down, Nisha lifted the sheet that covered Kannon and exposed his nudity.

Kannon’s partially opened eyes tried to focus on him, and his mouth moved as if he was trying to speak. Nisha moved closer. “Hmm?”

“There’s no such thing as, as... ” Kannon reached up. “As mermen. No such thing, but... so b-beautiful.”

Nisha let Kannon touch his long hair, then wrapped his hand around Kannon’s fingers and lowered them to the bed. “Yes, you are.”

“Meant... meant you.”

“Thank you.” Touched, Nisha patted Kannon’s hand, and then moved back so he could drink in the sight of his human’s body, starting at his toes.

Gods, the freckles were killing him. They were everywhere and so damn sexy. He lifted one of Kannon’s feet. The one closest to the big toe was long, longer than the others. How very interesting. He leaned close and flicked his tongue over it.

A small puff of air escaped Kannon, the sound close to a giggle, and Nisha smiled. “Like that?”

“I... I, oh yes. I do, yes.”

“Want me to continue?”

“Oh God, yes!” Kannon licked his lips. “T-this must be a dream.”

“Make no mistake, Kannon. This is no dream.” Dying to touch, he focused on the dark auburn hair on Kannon’s legs.

He ran his hand up the muscular limb, squeezing the muscles. The soft hair crinkled under his touch, and the muscles twitched under his hands. So strong and hard—so well-defined. Human legs fascinated him.

That wasn’t all that fascinated him. He moved his hands up Kannon’s body until he reached the juncture between pelvis and leg. There, in a nest of auburn curls, lay his cock. He lightly ran his finger down the length. He heard Kannon moan, and his shaft began to rise. How odd for it to lie outside his body.

“Do you want me to continue?” Nisha asked again.

“Please, oh please yes. Touch me.”

Oh, he intended to. Besides, he found all this hair so sexy. For the moment he left Kannon’s cock alone and ran his hands over Kannon’s chest, then up to his shoulders. Here the freckles were much more abundant.

He promised himself that at some point he’d take the time and connect the dots... with his tongue. Kannon’s arms were lightly muscled and covered in a fine dusting of

auburn hair. Even his hands were interesting. Kannon's long fingers and short nails intrigued Nisha.

Nisha's hands roamed over Kannon's body, and Kannon shuddered. "So good, so good."

Nisha slowly moved back to Kannon's chest and the freckles there. A few dark auburn hairs circled his little brown nipples. His fingers trailed closer, and then plucked at a nub, toying with it until it hardened to a stiff little point.

A soft sigh escaped Kannon's lips. "Oh, oh, that's so nice. So good."

Wanting to get closer, Nisha moved onto Kannon's bed and leaned over, drawing a nipple into his mouth. His necklace fell forward and rubbed against Kannon's chest making them both jump.

"Holy crap, what... w-what was that?"

"Just my necklace. Nothing to worry about." Nisha gently sucked the nub, pulling it farther into his mouth as his other hand rolled Kannon's neglected nipple.

"Ooh," Kannon whispered.

Nisha released the hard little peak and brushed a hand down Kannon's chest toward his groin. Wrapping a hand around Kannon's shaft, he stroked, the insistent urge to taste nearly overwhelming him. Giving in, he leaned even closer and kissed the dome-shaped head. His tongue licked across the slit.

"Mmm." Kannon tried to thrust his hips.

Nisha chuckled softly. Kannon moaned his displeasure when he couldn't move, and

Nisha smiled. His mate was very responsive, it seemed, and he loved that. It would make things interesting later.

He rolled Kannon over onto his stomach and arranged his arms on either side of his head. He turned Kannon's head gently so he wouldn't be face down on the mattress. Reaching under Kannon, he made sure his erection was comfortable, then settled between Kannon's legs.

Oh would you look at that. Delighted, he studied the birthmark on Kannon's left ass cheek. It was the size of a dime, reddish-brown, and perfectly shaped like a heart.

"You have the cutest little birthmark on your ass." Nisha couldn't resist placing a kiss on the mark. The skin might be soft, but Kannon's ass was taut. Unable to resist, he spread Kannon's cheeks apart and blew softly.

"Ahhh," Kannon groaned, and chill bumps exploded across his skin.

The small puckered hole quivered. Quickly he stuck his finger in his mouth and wetted it as much as possible, then gently eased it inside Kannon, searching for his hot spot.

"Aw, jeez, burns," Kannon mumbled.

Well, he couldn't have that. He wanted this to feel good, not hurt, so he needed to give Kannon something else to focus on. Withdrawing his finger, he managed to get Kannon onto his back and then arranged Kannon's legs how he wanted them. He swallowed Kannon's cock and then eased his finger back inside Kannon's ass.

Nisha raised his head as he continued to bang Kannon's hot spot with his finger. Kannon tightened on his finger, and he knew his mate was close to coming. "Nisha. My name is Nisha. Know my name as you come for me."

“N-N-Nisha!” Kannon wailed as come shot across his abs.

Nisha eased his finger out from Kannon’s ass and released his softening dick. “Very good. Very, very good. Next time, though, you will beg for me. Sleep now, my mate.”

With one last kiss, Nisha cleaned up the evidence that Kannon had come. He draped the blanket back over his mate and left.

NISHA WALKED from the bungalow. Off to the side he noticed another figure waiting for him on the beach. Well now, this could be interesting.

“Nisha, a moment, please.” Brett stood a few paces away.

“What can I do for you?” Nisha stepped into the moonlight.

“Is he okay?”

Nisha swallowed the first smart-assed remark that came to mind. He reminded himself, yet again, this was Kannon’s friend. “Of course he is. He’s my mate. As such, that means I am incapable of harming him.”

“Yes, but... I...” Brett swallowed heavily.

Nisha crossed his arms over his naked chest. Even though he was nude, except for the waterproof pouch, he wasn’t embarrassed. Nudity was no big deal among his kind. “You know this. You are, after all, mated to my sister, Brooke.”

Brett ran his hand through his hair. “I know! It’s just... He’s my best friend. What happened all those years ago really messed him up.”

“I know that, and I deeply regret it. That doesn’t explain why you’re out here waiting for me on the beach. Or why you’re outside his bungalow prowling around.”

“He didn’t show up tonight, and I... I...” Brett sighed. “I was just going to check on him, but I saw the lights were out. I was getting ready to leave when I heard him yell. It took a second for me to realize it was a yell of pleasure... then I knew what was going on. You picked the lock to get in, I take it?”

“Yes. If you knew it was a yell of pleasure, what exactly do you want to talk to me about?”

“I would ask one thing, and listen to my reasoning, please.”

“Then speak, but tread carefully.”

Brett took a deep breath. “I mean no disrespect, but God, Nisha, did you use that damn powder on him like Brooke did on me?”

“That ‘damn powder,’ as you call it, makes things easier.”

“Jesus God, no it doesn’t! Did you forget how I reacted? That powder takes away a human’s ability to consent. Not to mention you broke in! Consent is a very big thing with us, Nisha, and Kannon was unable to consent to any of that in there! I’m sure you’re going to find out at some point just how he feels about that.”

“I don’t see—”

“Yeah. I know. You don’t see, but that’s... well, that’s going to come back on you, but... Do you plan to claim him immediately? Have you already? I know you just came from his bungalow.”

A low growl sounded from Nisha. “Careful, Brett.”

Brett took a step back, and then caught himself. “Dammit, Nisha, don’t growl at me. I know you want to claim him, but you need to give him time.”

“Time? I waited fifteen years, isn’t that enough? I swear, you humans are endlessly aggravating.”

“Oh, don’t get me started. You want to talk about aggravating? Let me tell you about aggravating —”

Nisha held up a hand to stop the words pouring from Brett’s lips. “Yes, yes, I know. Save the lecture on how your species and mine do not think alike. I’m aware. I’m also going to give him time. Why else do you think I’m not carrying him out with me now?”

“Okay, okay. I just... I remember how freaked out I was after finding out about Brooke. I know he’s your mate, and I know you won’t hurt him, so I’ll stop worrying about this,” Brett said.

“There was nothing to worry about to begin with.” Nisha turned back toward the bungalow. “How long is he scheduled to stay?”

“Just until Saturday. He’ll probably leave after the ceremony or the next day at the latest.”

“Then I will give him until the wedding.”

“Oh, fuck a duck!” Brett yelled. “What part of ‘giving him time’ did you not understand?”

“Lower your voice,” Nisha snapped. “This is not up for debate. He has a few days, Brett. At the end of that time, I will claim him. In the meantime I will try to get him accustomed to me.”

“Jesus, a few days.” Brett sighed. “I’m not going to talk you out of this, am I? Fine. Just remember I tried to warn you. And, and... he has no one now. His dad died not long ago.”

Nisha frowned. Brett was really pushing, which was a first. “I’m sorry to hear that. It appeared he and his father had a close relationship. Of course I’m just guessing. I had, um, other things on my mind that day.”

“I bet.” Brett laughed, then sobered. “They were close, but they grew apart after that summer. They didn’t have anything in common. Kannon left for college, later he graduated... and they just never reconnected, I guess you could say.”

“Then that’s my fault. I am sorry for that. Since you seem to be worried, I will tell you this. If it wasn’t for his dad that day, I would have taken Kannon then. I knew he would return, and I’ve waited for him. He is mine to care for, and I will. I want him to be content. Now, this discussion is at an end. Stop worrying over my human, Brett.”

“Okay, okay! I just want him to be happy.”

“He will be.”

CHAPTER THREE

“NOTHING?” STUNNED, Kannon stared at his lap.

He woke expecting to find a mess. Years had passed since he’d had a wet dream, but he remembered the unpleasantness of damp sheets. Instead there was nothing. Zip. Nada. He’d have bet money he came last night, but instead he was as dry as the desert.

“Seriously?”

The vividness of the dream left him shaken, but thrilled him too. He didn’t remember much about it except for a name—but it lurked at the foggy edges of his mind, refusing to come to him no matter how hard he tried to recall it.

Also the color blue figured prominently, but he was unsure why. The one thing he did clearly remember was the other man owned his body and made it sing in ways Kannon had never experienced. Pushing his thoughts aside, he hurriedly dressed.

He fixed a cup of coffee and walked outside. A warm breeze curled around him. He flopped down in a lounge chair and stared at the ocean while the sun climbed higher in the sky. The jungle around him was alive with the sounds of birds singing.

He sipped his morning coffee, enjoying the various sounds. When his stomach growled, he went inside. Putting his cup down on the counter, he looked around to see what there was for breakfast.

Not satisfied with anything he saw, he glanced back out the window, an evil thought crossing his mind. I bet Brett isn't up yet. Maybe I should wander over there and see what he's doing. He rinsed out his coffee cup and put it in the sink.

After a quick check by the pantry, he found the key to the golf cart then grabbed his wallet and slipped on his sandals. Moments later, he was heading down one of the flower-strewn sidewalks that led to the resort.

Once there, an employee flagged him down and gave him directions as to where to park the golf cart. He parked it, pocketed the key, and walked into the open lounge area of the resort. It was busy, so he went out to one of the pools instead, found a lounge chair, and sat.

It wasn't like when they were in college and he could scare the crap out of Brett by banging on his door. But hey, a cell phone was the next best thing. He crossed his ankles, dialed up his best friend, and waited.

After about the fifth try an agitated voice answered the phone. "You better be dead, or dying, because if you're not? I'm going to kill you."

"Good morning to you too, sunshine." Kannon snickered when he heard a groan come from the other end of the phone. "I take it you partied a little bit too hard last night?"

"Oh my God, I'm getting too old for this."

"Funny, you used to say the same thing in college."

"Did you call just to harass me?" Brett demanded.

"Yep."

“What the hell was I thinking dragging your ass all the way here to my resort? I hate you.”

Kannon burst out laughing. “Hate you too, buddy.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. By the way, where are you?”

“I’m at one of the many pools you have around here.” Kannon looked around, but he had no idea which pool. “Why don’t you get up, get dressed, and come down to the lounge? I’m starving, and I thought we could have breakfast together. Is Brooke up yet?”

“She’s... I think I remember her saying she was going for a run this morning. I’ll give her a call, and we’ll meet you at the resort’s main restaurant. It’s called Sandals.”

“Cool name.”

“Thanks. Brooke came up with it. Grab one of the employees and ask for directions. Tell him your name and that you’re my best man. He’ll take care of you.”

“How long are you going to be?”

“Give me thirty minutes to shit, shower, and shave, and I’ll meet you there.”

“Sounds like a plan. See you shortly.” Kannon hung up.

Standing, he looked around for an employee. He barely walked thirty feet when a small, trim, attractive woman dressed in shorts, running shoes, and a tank top changed direction and headed his way. Heads turned as she walked by. While she was indeed very pretty, what drew several pairs of eyes was her short sky blue hair and

cerulean eyes.

“Hey, Brooke.”

“Kannon!” Brooke threw herself at Kannon for a quick hug. “I’m surprised to see you up and about this bright and early. Sorry we missed you last night. Did you get settled? Did you find everything okay? Have you eaten? I was just on my way to get Brett up and go get breakfast. Would you like to join us?”

Kannon laughed. “Well, let’s see. I’m an early riser. I wasn’t in the mood to party last night. Yes, I got settled okay. Brett stopped by and showed me where everything was when I got here. Nope, haven’t eaten yet, but I just talked to Brett. He’s going to meet us at Sandals in about thirty minutes. And how are you?”

Brooke’s laugh was light and airy. “Come on, I’ll walk with you to Sandals. I’m starving.”

They chatted on the way to the restaurant, the tropical sun blazing down on them. Kannon held the door open, and Brooke preceded him into the restaurant. The cool, sweet air immediately washed over him.

“Oh! Oh good, he’s here. There’s somebody I want you to meet.” Brooke grabbed Kannon by the hand and dragged him along behind her.

Oh God, please tell me she’s not fixing to set me up on a blind date. Anything but that. It’s too early in the morning to deal with that kind of horror. Kannon gritted his teeth, but followed along.

He pushed a few of the potted fronds out of the way as they ducked and weaved around tables. Brooke finally stopped, and he almost stumbled into her. It wasn’t that she suddenly stopped. Oh no, it was more to do with who sat at the table. It was all

Kannon could do not to stare.

Déjà vu swept over him. He shivered, but it wasn't due to the restaurant's cool air. The stranger's azure blue hair tied at the nape of his neck drew his attention. The color was fascinating, as were the cobalt blue eyes staring back at him.

He'd seen that hair color before, and recently too, but not on the cute woman standing next to him. He just couldn't remember where. The color was definitely striking, but it fit the man. There was this fey, otherworldliness look about him. Ethereal.

Unlike most people he'd seen on the island, the man sitting at the table didn't sport a dark tan. The stranger was, in a word, simply gorgeous. He wore a white, thin shirt that was open at the neck. Kannon noticed the natural braided hemp cord that held several shark teeth.

He frowned at the necklace. Hadn't he seen something like that recently too? But where? The other man cleared his throat, and Kannon felt heat creeping up his face. Another curse of redheads: blushes. Now if he could get the floor to open up and swallow him, his day would be complete.

"Kannon? I'd like to introduce you to my brother, Nisha. He's here for the wedding." Brooke pulled Kannon closer to the table. "Nisha? This is Kannon. He's going to be Brett's best man."

Nisha stood and held out his hand, a slight smile gracing his face. "It's nice to meet you."

The hair stood up on the back of his neck. That name... he knew that name from somewhere. Adrenaline flooded his body. He couldn't make up his mind if he wanted to climb the guy and hump him, or run screaming from the place. His body trembled, and his hands were clammy.

“Um, Kannon?” Brooke asked.

Horried, he saw Nisha still had his hand out the entire time he'd been standing there ogling him. He grasped Nisha's hand and shook it. “It's nice to meet you too. Did Brooke say your name was Nisha?”

Nisha's smile grew. “Why yes, she did.”

Why can't I place that name? A tingle raced up his arm. Kannon looked down and gulped. Nisha's hands were long and lean, and his grip was firm without being painful. Everything about him is long and lean... and holy crap, that smile! It kind of looks like he has fangs too. Okay, not really fangs, but his canines are a bit longer than usual.

“Come on, Kannon, let's sit down.” Kannon held Brooke's chair for her then sat. After she was seated, she waved her hand at a passing waiter who immediately came over. “We need a couple more menus here please. We're expecting Brett too.”

“Yes ma'am.” The waiter hurried off.

“Okay, why don't we... Oh, hold on for a moment.” Brooke fished her cell phone out of her pocket. “That's Brett's ring tone. Give me just a second.”

Angling slightly in her chair, Brooke answered her cell.

“So Kannon, is this your first time to the island?” Nisha asked.

The waiter put down a glass of water in front of Kannon. He picked it up and took a quick sip, his mouth suddenly dry. “I vacationed here a long time ago. I haven't been back until now, and the only reason I'm here now is Brett's wedding.”

“Oh? Are you one of those who prefer cold weather vacation destinations? Or do you have something against sun, sand, and sea?”

Kannon took another sip of his water and put the glass down the table. “Actually, neither. This is the first vacation I’ve taken in years. In fact I’m not really sure you could call this a vacation.”

“Everybody deserves a little time off, don’t you think?”

“Maybe. But the reason I took this time was because my father passed away not long ago, and I had a few things to finish up concerning his estate.” Kannon unwrapped his silverware and started playing with the napkin. “Then Brett called, and I headed down here.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your father.”

“Thank you.” Kannon caught himself slowly shredding the napkin so he threw it on top of the table. Stupid nerves.

He jumped when Nisha clasped his hand. That tingle ran up his arm again, and he gasped, his eyes widening. Subconsciously he licked his lips, and it thrilled him when Nisha’s eyes dropped down to his mouth.

Then Nisha’s gorgeous, oddly blue eyes meandered up his face until they were staring at each other. For a moment Kannon thought the other man was going to do something insane—like reach across the table and trail his thumb across his bottom lip. Or maybe pull him across the table and kiss him. What was even more insane was how much he wanted that.

His breathing increased, and arousal curled in his belly. Nisha’s eyes held him captive. They were such a gorgeous, deep dark blue that reminded him of...

something. He just wasn't sure what, but it sat on the tip of his tongue. Those eyes were so blue. They couldn't be real. They had to be contacts because human eyes weren't naturally that color.

Human eyes?

"Brett's on his way. He should be here shortly."

Kannon jerked, and pulled his hand away from Nisha's now that Brooke had broken the spell. Why had he thought Nisha's eyes weren't human? Where had that come from?

"Good. That's good." Kannon grabbed his glass of water and took a big gulp.

"Yes, good," Nisha said.

That was sarcasm if he'd ever heard it. The waiter picked that time to return and drop off their menus. Kannon grabbed the closest one and flipped it open, grateful to have something to do with his hands. What was it about this guy? He made him nervous and edgy. There was just something about him that wasn't quite right.

"So," Brooke said, breaking the silence. "The wedding is going to be held next Saturday evening, right before the sun sets. We're going to have it on the beach. Some of the resort's employees are helping set things up, but we aren't doing much."

"What about a tux?" Kannon asked. "Am I supposed to be wearing something like that? If so, we have a problem because I didn't bring mine. Can I rent one on such short notice?"

"Oh no, we're not doing tuxes," said Brooke. "Much too hot for the beach. What Brett and I decided was to have you wear simple white pants with the cuffs rolled up

above your ankle with a teal short-sleeved dress shirt. I'm thinking we'll leave the shirt untucked too. We're going for a casual look."

Nisha rolled his eyes.

"Hush, you," Brooke said.

Nisha tilted his head as he looked at Brooke. "Didn't say a word."

"Not with your mouth, no." Brooke sniffed. "That eye roll of yours says volumes, though. Anyway, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted—"

Nisha turned to Kannon. "By an eye roll, mind you—"

"My maid of honor will be wearing a simple teal dress that comes down to the knee. We're all going to be barefoot."

If there was any doubt they were brother and sister, that little exchange just ended it. "I have the pants, but not a shirt that color. I guess I need to go shopping, huh?"

"No worries," Brooke said. "The place I bought the other clothes and the dress has shirts that color and in all sizes. What do you wear? A large?"

"Yes," Kannon said.

"I'll just call them up and tell them to send it out to us. It should be here later today."

"She's really good at 'calling' them up, as my credit card bill can testify." Brett squeezed Kannon's shoulder as he moved around the table and sat down next to Brooke. "Hey, everyone."

“Oh, hey!” Kannon glanced at Brooke’s smiling face. The woman was most definitely in love.

“Sorry it took so long for me to get here.” Brett ran his hand through his freshly washed hair. “I, ah, might’ve had a tad too much to drink last night and am moving a little slow. Have we ordered yet?”

“We were waiting on you,” Nisha said.

“Waiting on me?” Brett snorted. “Since when do you wait on anybody, Nisha?”

Brooke huffed. “Don’t you two start. Do you see our waiter, Brett? If you do, flag him down so we can order. Oh, and I’ve already introduced Kannon and Nisha.”

“I see,” Brett said. “Well then, let’s order. I’m hungry.”

CHAPTER FOUR

NISHA COULDN'T keep his eyes off Kannon.

Brett leaned back and patted his full stomach. "Man, I feel much better. That's what I get for—" Brett's cell rang out. "Dammit, who's calling me now? Swear to God, I haven't even finished my coffee yet."

"I feel sorry for whoever's on the other end of that phone," Brooke said.

Brett yanked his phone out of this pocket, opened it, and stuck it to his ear. "This is Brett Navarro." A frown immediately crossed his face. "I see. No, no, you did the right thing. I'll be there in a moment. Tell our guest I'm on the way, and I'll take care of it."

"Trouble?" Brooke asked after Brett hung up.

"We have a very wealthy, very high profile client checking in, and there seems to be a problem with his suite." Brett rubbed his temples, and then waved at a waiter. "I need to take care of this. Maybe the four of us can get together later tonight. Kannon, do you have plans?"

Kannon glanced at Nisha. "Oh, ah... I don't know if—"

"Sure, why not?" Nisha said.

"Good. I'll check in with you later and make plans." The waiter returned, and Brett

asked for a very large to-go cup for his coffee. Once he had his drink, he gave Brooke a quick kiss and left.

“I have to go too.” Brooke patted her lips with a napkin and also stood. “I have a meeting with one of the chefs to talk about the wedding cake. And I need to order your shirt. Nisha? Why don’t you show Kannon around our lovely resort?”

“Oh, oh... Brooke, no. That’s not necessary. Besides—”

“I’d love to,” Nisha said.

“Great! See? Nisha doesn’t mind. And the bill is on us, so you guys can leave anytime and go explore.” Brooke gave Nisha a quick hug and hurried off.

Kannon stared at Brooke’s quickly retreating back before turning to Nisha. “Jeez. Look, man, please don’t feel like you have to do this. Brooke shouldn’t have done that.”

Was Kannon kidding? This was perfect. The first opportunity he had, he was going to do something really nice for his matchmaking sister. “Do you know anybody on the island? Outside of Brooke and Brett, that is?”

“Well, no. But—”

Didn’t think so. “I really don’t mind. In fact, I think I’d enjoy showing you around.” Nisha enjoyed the color that warmed Kannon’s skin.

“If you’re sure?”

“Absolutely. I can’t think of anything I want to do more.” Well, yes he could, but he didn’t think hauling Kannon over his shoulder and out to the water would go over

well. And after he got to the water...

“You have nothing better to do than babysit me?”

“I have nothing better to do than spend time with you.” That was pretty blunt. Hopefully Kannon would pick up the hints he was dropping. His mate planned to leave after the wedding, and that wasn’t happening.

“Oh? Oh. Um, that sounds good, then.”

Kannon blushed again, and Nisha wanted to pin the man against the nearest wall and kiss him senseless. Instead they made their way outside, and Nisha looked around. Not far from them there stood a small stage that had been set up for coconut demonstrations for the guests and anyone else on the beach.

“Ever open a coconut before?” Nisha asked.

“Um, can’t say that I have. If I want coconut milk, I could buy coconut milk.”

Nisha shook his head as he rested his hand on the small of Kannon’s back and urged him along. “Come on. Looks like they’re about to start a demonstration. One of the islanders is going to show the crowd how to open a coconut with just a simple rock.”

Kannon jumped and quickly turned to look at Nisha. “Really? Aren’t those things incredibly hard to open?”

“There’s a trick to it. Did you know coconuts have a ‘face’?” Nisha guided Kannon along. He was pleased to see Kannon didn’t shy away from his touch.

“What do you mean a ‘face’?”

“You’ll see.”

A native of the island walked up on the stage and began his spiel. The small crowd was at once engrossed. Whoever the guy the resort had hired was good. He was young and muscular with plenty of charisma.

He cracked jokes and quickly had the crowd engaged in his demonstration. He went on to tell that several months ago they had a visitor at the resort who tried to open a coconut with a lawnmower. A lawnmower. The crowd roared with laughter. Nisha shook his head. Humans did the craziest things.

The temptation to keep his hand on the small of Kannon’s back was great, but he resisted. He didn’t want to scare Kannon off. Nisha wasn’t human, and he really didn’t understand them, but he’d seen enough with Brooke and Brett to know humans were touchy about this thing called consent. Or so Brett kept telling him. He didn’t get that either, but then, humans were funny.

“Ah, I see. It does have a face. And the nose is the softest part, huh?” Grinning, Kannon elbowed to Nisha. “I didn’t know that.”

There was a lot Kannon didn’t know, but that would change soon enough. Kannon watched the demonstration, and Nisha watched Kannon. His mate was totally engaged in the show. Wonderment crossed his face as he watched the guy up on the stage.

The demonstration ended, and the crowd broke up. They’d been out in the hot sun for a while, and Nisha wondered if Kannon was thirsty. “Ever have fresh coconut juice?”

“Depends on what you mean by fresh.”

“Straight from the coconut.”

“That’s fresh, all right. In that case, can’t say that I have.”

“We need to fix that.” The demonstrator was cleaning up after his presentation. “Come with me, I have an idea.” Nisha grabbed Kannon’s hand and started toward the front of the stage.

Kannon trailed behind him. “What are you doing?”

“Getting you something to drink.”

Nisha and Kannon approached the man who’d just finished the presentation. Nisha cleared his throat. The man was looking at something under the stage.

“Excuse me.” Nisha tapped the man on his back. “My name is Nisha, and this is my, um, friend, Kannon. May we have one of the coconuts there behind you? My friend has never had it straight from the source.”

“Oh, well, those are only for the demonstration.” He straightened and turned around to Nisha. His eyes widened, and he gulped loudly. “Oh! I did not... Oh goddess, I had no idea... Please, forgive me. Of course you may have a coconut.” His eyes dropped down to their joined hands. “Oh, you... him. Please, take as many as you want.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Kannon looking between him and the islander. “Only need the one, my friend. No need to worry.”

A couple minutes later, Kannon had managed to crack open a coconut. “Ha! Look at that baby crack. I did it!”

Kannon’s cackle of delight tickled Nisha. “Indeed you did.”

Soon Kannon was drinking coconut juice.

“Good?”

“You better believe it. Jeez, I had no idea how different it would taste, which is kind of stupid now that I think about it. I mean... it is fresh. Nothing beats fresh.” Kannon took another sip. “I swear, this is the best thing I’ve ever tasted. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” Nisha took the rock from Kannon and opened his coconut. “I wish we had a straw.” Two straws and one coconut. That would be lovely.

“That’d be cool.” Kannon wandered over to the shade of a palm tree. “By the way, did you know the guy who was giving the presentation?”

Nisha froze. “No, why?”

“I was just wondering. He seemed rather surprised when he saw you.”

“Oh. The hair attracts attention.” Nisha winked at Kannon.

“It’s gorgeous. It’s the first thing I noticed when Brooke introduced us. I love it, but I don’t think I could get away with dying my hair that color. The contacts are really cool too. Does all the attention not make you nervous?”

“Not at all. But I’m glad you like it.” Never crossed his mind it could be natural.

Once they’d finished he took the coconuts back to the islander, who bowed to him. Nisha fought to keep his face blank of emotions. Funny how the islanders always knew what they were, but this was one time he wished they hadn’t reacted to him. Kannon kept giving him odd looks.

Time to get his mind off what he saw. “Let’s drop by one of the gift shops and pick up some sunscreen.” Nisha took Kannon by the elbow and walked him back toward

the resort. “You’re starting to get a little pink.”

CHAPTER FIVE

ALL THOSE things sounded fun, but there was something else Kannon really wanted to do. “I’m going to be here a few days, so maybe we could do that stuff later. What I’d really like to do is... um... You’re probably going to think this is silly, but what I would really like to do is take a long walk along the beach with... with someone.”

Nisha shot Kannon a strange look. “We’re on a tropical island with sandy beaches, gentle breezes, warm weather, and beautiful blue water. Why would I think that’s silly?”

“Well, it is kind of silly because I have a slight—shall we say—fear of the ocean.” That wasn’t completely true. He wasn’t afraid of the ocean, he was afraid of what was in the ocean—his destiny.

“I see.”

“I really don’t want to get into why, but I’ve avoided the ocean for the last fifteen years,” Kannon said. “Now that I’m here, though, I suddenly find myself wanting to get closer to it.”

“Then a walk down the beach is exactly what we’ll do.”

Kannon followed Nisha down to where the water met the sand. He didn’t want to just walk down the beach—he wanted to walk down the beach holding hands with another man. Where had this romantic side of him suddenly come from?

He slipped off his sandals. Holding them, he walked closer to the water as a small wave hit the beach. It was almost as though the water reached for him. Entranced, he moved closer. The water rushed up and splashed on his ankles, and then flowed down and back over his feet. The waves swirled around his ankles.

“Nice, isn’t it?”

Nisha stood next to him, his sandals held in his hand too. It did feel nice, but more importantly, he’d managed to get in the water this time.

“Yes.”

“Well, come on, then.” Nisha took Kannon’s other hand, and they slowly strolled down the beach. “As we walk along, keep an eye open for seashells. Maybe we’ll go to that arts and crafts event later.”

Kannon looked down at their hands, and then back up at Nisha. “Um...”

“Problem?” Nisha asked.

Kannon waited until several small kids ran past them before he answered. “No, not so much a problem—more of a question, I guess. Nisha, exactly what’s going on here?”

“What’s going on here is I find you attractive.”

“You’re attracted to men?” There wasn’t anything about Nisha that shouted gay to Kannon, but he knew better than to judge a book by its cover. Through his life he’d met several men he wouldn’t have pegged as gay.

“Yes, I’m attracted to men, but I haven’t been serious about anybody in a long, long time.”

Kannon's stomach rolled uneasily. "You're looking for a serious relationship?"

"Am I looking ? No. But I will say I know what I want, and I won't let anything get in the way of my desires."

Kannon couldn't shake the feeling Nisha meant something when he said 'looking,' he just didn't know what. He appeared very determined. Kannon could believe that once Nisha found the person he wanted, he'd do everything he could in order to keep that special someone. Kannon sensed the strong-willed, decisive personality that lurked under the charisma Nisha exuded.

Nisha shook their joined hands, drawing Kannon's attention. "As I said, I'm attracted to you, very attracted. I want to get to know you, spend time with you. And yes, I want to fuck you through the mattress."

Kannon stumbled to a stop as the sandy beach suddenly did a fine imitation of quicksand and sucked his feet in. His cock swelled in his shorts.

"If you're agreeable, that is."

"If I'm agreeable? Oh my God, am I ever agreeable." Still holding hands, Kannon turned sharply and started heading back the way they came.

Nisha chuckled as Kannon pulled him along. "I take it you're very agreeable."

"Can't get much more agreeable than what I'm feeling at the moment."

"There's no hurry, you know. I'm not going anywhere."

"But I am." He picked up the pace, pulling Nisha down the beach. Nisha didn't try to talk to him anymore, and he was glad. He already felt like a dork.

Finally he saw the resort. Still holding Nisha's hand, Kannon quickly made his way to where his golf cart was parked. He pulled the key from his pocket and faced Nisha. "I know you said there was no hurry, but I'm only here for a few days. That's all the vacation I took. After Brett gets married on Saturday, I'm leaving. I have a job to get back to."

Nisha lifted their joined hands and feathered a kiss across Kannon's knuckles. "A lot can happen in a few days."

"Maybe." His hand tingled. Tingled.

Kannon let go of Nisha's hand and sat in the golf cart. He put the key in the ignition, but he didn't turn it on. "But I'm not worried about a few days. I'm worried about right now. Are you coming with me?"

Nisha walked around the golf cart and got in. "I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be."

When the straw hat Nisha had given him slipped off his head and landed on his back thanks to the air rushing past, Kannon reminded himself to slow down on the way back to his bungalow. The last thing he wanted to do to was run over some poor guest and have to stop and wait.

He didn't want to sound uncaring, but... yeah, there was a sexy guy sitting next to him. His heart thumped and nerves bombarded him as he stopped in front of his bungalow. They were here. He was really going to do this. He was going to let some guy he didn't know fuck him. And he was okay with that. Sort of. Maybe.

God.

"Hey, it's okay." Nisha covered Kannon's hand with his own. "Nervous?"

“Yeah, as silly as it sounds, I am.” With a quick squeeze, he pulled his hand from Nisha’s, the crazy thing tingling. “I don’t make a habit of doing this.” No point in telling the other man he never did this.

“Me neither.”

If Nisha was telling the truth, that made him feel better. Of course, he had no idea if what Nisha said was true. Just because he didn’t take random men home didn’t mean... oh jeez. Kannon rested his head against the steering wheel .

“Aw, man.” He was sorely tempted just to beat his head against the dash.

“Let me guess.” Nisha ran his hand up and down Kannon’s back. “You don’t have any condoms.”

“Unbelievable. Just unbelievable. I’m so sorry, but no, I don’t. I don’t make a habit of doing this, so I’m unprepared.” Kannon did tap his head against the steering wheel a few times for good measure. “ Why didn’t I think about this while we were still at the resort?”

Nisha pulled him back away from steering wheel. “Stop that before you give yourself a headache.”

A slightly hysterical laugh bubbled out of Kannon even as his cock jumped at that authoritative tone. “That would be just perfect, wouldn’t it?”

Nisha’s lips twitched. “Let’s take a step back for a moment. Things got rather intense rather quickly. Why don’t I run back and buy condoms? There are several little shops at the resort that sells all sorts of items like that.”

Kannon scrubbed his hands over his face and peered at Nisha. “How do you know

that?”

“It stands to reason, and it’s also good marketing. Tourists always run out of stuff or forget things. A good business manager makes sure the resort has everything a guest could need so they don’t have to leave and go to town.”

At least one of them was thinking. “Yeah, yeah, that makes sense. I guess I’m just not thinking straight.”

“It’s been a couple hours since we ate breakfast. While I run back to the resort, how would you feel about whipping us up something quick and light to eat?”

“I can do that.”

“We can eat, relax, and just talk. Kind of let things cool off. How does that sound?”

“That sounds perfect.” Well it would, if Nisha actually came back. Had he chased the other man off acting like an untried virgin? So much for being cool and suave. He got out of the golf cart and stood by the driver’s door, fighting to keep the defeated look off his face as Nisha approached him. He was such an idiot. “Okay, I— oomph !”

Kannon yelped as Nisha backed him against the golf cart. He slid one hand behind Kannon’s neck, and his other hand came to rest on the small of his back. Wide-eyed, he stared as Nisha boxed him in. Of their own accord, his arms came to rest around Nisha’s waist. Nisha tugged him even closer.

“I will be back.”

“H-h-how did you know what I—”

“It was as clear as the cute little freckles on your face. I will be back. Understand?”

“I... yes.”

Nisha slipped one leg in between his and gently urged him to widen his stance. He hadn't noticed before now, but he was an inch or two taller than Nisha. Not that it seemed to matter. He might be taller, and a bit more bulky, but he was most definitely not the one in control.

Nisha leaned closer and let his lips gently brush against Kannon's. The whisper-light touch sent tingles through Kannon's body. He wanted more, but something told him not to try to take control. So he waited... and wanted. Oh, how he did want.

“Very good,” Nisha purred.

Nisha nipped at his lips, and he eagerly opened up. The kiss was sweet, slow, and sexy. Nisha's mouth moved against his in a dance that excited him. Still letting Nisha lead, he waited. Eventually Nisha's tongue slipped inside and slowly explored him. He moaned, urgent. Restless.

There was a hint of power, of restraint, that lurked just outside the bounds of the soft, sweet kiss. Kannon whined pitifully. The kiss was beautifully tempting, but he wanted that edge of danger he could feel Nisha holding back. He moved impatiently against Nisha. More. Please, more.

Nisha stopped the kiss, but didn't pull back. Instead he spoke against Kannon's lips. “Want more?”

“Desperat—”

Nisha grabbed his ponytail and jerked his head back, and Kannon's mouth fell open. He groaned, delighted. This, this was what he wanted. Nisha's mouth slanted over his again and again... demanding, taking.

Helpless to do more than to hold onto Nisha, Kannon stood in Nisha's arms. The kiss was hot, demanding, and everything he ever dreamed of. He'd had other kisses before, but none like these. None were as overwhelming as this one. It wrecked him.

Nisha's mouth moved to his ear, and he blew gently. Kannon shivered again as Nisha's hot breath feathered across the sensitive skin. His cock throbbed, and he panted helplessly as Nisha trailed wet kisses across his jaw and down his neck. Kannon rubbed his stiff cock against Nisha's.

"I will come back to you. I will always come back to you," Nisha whispered as his hand dropped down and clutched Kannon's ass.

Somewhere in the back of Kannon's mind, a warning bell went off. He wasn't sure why, but for some reason those words seemed like a threat. Maybe not a threat, but more of a promise—with teeth. Nisha let go of Kannon's hair, and Kannon rested his forehead against Nisha's. Both of them stayed there, together, inches apart, panting heavily.

"So much for letting things cool off," Nisha's voice wavered.

"Yeah, that didn't work so well did it?" Kannon heard the slight quiver in Nisha's voice. The kiss had affected him as much as it had Kannon.

"I better go. Hopefully the ride to the resort will help get rid of my, um..." He glanced down. "My problem."

Kannon stepped back and gently rearranged his aching cock. He admired Nisha's bulge. "While you're at the resort, why not get your swimming trunks? This bungalow has an infinity pool."

Nisha stepped into the golf cart but stopped and turned to look at Kannon. "You

sure?”

“I, um, I’m not sure I’m ready for the ocean, but I have no trouble with pools.”

Nisha sat down in the golf cart. “We can do that. But will you at least think about going into the ocean?”

“I might. Maybe. I might go as far out as my knees. Maybe.”

“Okay.” Nisha turned the key and started the golf cart. “I really would like to go swimming in the ocean with you. I’ll grab my swim trunks while I’m at the resort. Maybe a change of clothes too?”

Kannon well understood what Nisha was asking. “Yeah, grab an overnight bag to bring back with you.”

“I will. Thank you.” With a wave, Nisha drove off.

Kannon stood by his bungalow, watching him drive away. He couldn’t shake the feeling something big was bearing down on him—that he was racing toward something he could no longer avoid. He was attracted to Nisha. Very much so. But there was something about the other man that made his nerves jangle.

“I am so overthinking this. It’s sex, nothing more.”

He planned to spend the next few days screwing, seeing his best friend get married... and then he’d go back to his life, where he intended to start living a little. He was cutting up a tomato for their sandwiches when he heard the golf car return. Nisha walked in the door. I could get used to this. The thought stunned Kannon, and he struggled to keep his face blank. Where did that come from?

“Hey. Hope I didn’t take too long.” Nisha held a small duffel and a plastic bag.

Kannon’s face heated. He had a pretty good idea what was in the bag. “No. Perfect timing, actually. I was just cutting up a tomato for the sandwiches.”

“Oh, good. I’m hungry. What should I do with my duffel?”

Kannon laid the knife on the counter, picked up a dishtowel, and wiped his hands. “Come on, I’ll show you where the bedroom is.”

Kannon was aware of Nisha following him. “Just set it over there on the floor by mine.”

Nisha looked around the room and whistled softly. “Nice. I particularly like the bed.”

Heat crawled up Kannon’s face, and he knew he was blushing. Again. “I said the same thing when I first saw it.” He also said he wished he had someone to share it with, and it looked like he’d got his wish. “So, you said you were hungry, right? Ready to eat?”

Nisha’s lips twitched. “I am, but I’m guessing you’re talking about real food and not what I’m thinking about.”

Kannon went up in flames.

Chuckling, Nisha walked over to Kannon and placed both his hands on Kannon’s cheeks. “Do you have any idea how much it turns me on when you blush?”

Kannon weakly smiled. “Good thing, considering you seem to make me do it quite often.”

“I intend to make you do it even more.” Nisha stole a quick kiss, grabbed Kannon by the hand, and led him from the bedroom. “Let’s eat.”

CHAPTER SIX

NISHA STRUGGLED to keep his aggression under wraps. The very act of leading his unclaimed mate away from a perfectly comfortable bed irked him. Every instinct he had demanded he toss Kannon on the bed and take what was his.

If his mate had been any other species besides human, that's exactly what Nisha would have done. Others like him knew what to expect. But these humans... Nisha sighed silently. Kannon being human changed everything. He let his instincts get the best of him once, and look what happened.

"So, sandwiches?" Nisha stopped once he pulled Kannon to the kitchen.

"Coming up." Kannon fixed the sandwiches. "Here you go. Dig in."

They settled on the couch in the living area with the food and drinks. Kannon left his plate on the coffee table and opened the sliding doors that overlooked the ocean.

He picked up his plate and sat back down next to Nisha. "Beautiful view, isn't it?"

"It is. I don't think I could stand to live anywhere else."

Kannon bit into his sandwich and swallowed. "I never asked, but do you live here on the island?"

"I do, actually, but I live on the other side."

“It must be nice living near your sister. Brett and I aren’t related, but I do wish we could see each other more.”

“I can imagine. He said you two are close.” Nisha ate some of his sandwich. Kannon would be seeing a lot more of Brett, but Nisha couldn’t very well tell him that. “I’m close to Brooke, without being too close to her, you know what I mean?”

“I do, even though I don’t have siblings.”

“Some would say you’re lucky.”

“Yeah, and those ‘some’ don’t necessarily know what they’re talking about. I’m basically alone now. My dad’s gone, I have no siblings, and my mother left a long time ago.”

Conversation died as they focused on eating. The fact that Kannon didn’t have any immediate family was a blessing as far as Nisha was concerned. Merfolk weren’t immortal, but they did live longer than humans. He was already seventy. Once mated, their mate’s life expectancy extended too, if they were human. This would happen to Kannon once Nisha finished the mating.

After lunch, Nisha changed into his swimsuit and met Kannon outside by the pool. Fortunately one side of it was shaded. Kannon had pulled a couple of loungers over to the shade. Smart of him, considering he was a tad bit pink even with the sunscreen Nisha had put on him earlier.

A small table sat between the lounge chairs with two beers sitting on it. Kannon had draped long beach towels over their seats. Nisha stood in the doorway, watching Kannon. His swim trunks were a deep blue with a light blue edging.

They went well with his skin tone. He’d also twisted his long auburn hair up on his

head. Those laughing blue eyes intrigued him. Kannon was about six foot even. For a thirty-something-year-old man, Kannon had a nice, sleek build.

Kannon slipped into the water, his arms resting along the sides of the pool. He moaned slightly as the cool water lapped at his skin. “That feels good.”

The pool wasn’t very deep—maybe four feet at the most. Nisha walked down the pool steps—he much preferred the ocean to chemically treated water—and slowly moved toward where Kannon stood, hands trailing in the water. His sense of hearing picked up the sudden spike in Kannon’s breathing.

“Feels good, huh?” Nisha continued across the pool until he was standing in front of Kannon. “Bet I can make you feel better.”

Kannon licked his lips. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Only inches separated Nisha from Kannon.

Nisha ran his hands across Kannon’s shoulders then down over his arms until he reached his hands. He threaded his fingers through Kannon’s then tightened his grip, trapping his hands there. Drops of water trailed down, following the path of Nisha’s caress, tickling the sensitized skin. Kannon shivered slightly.

Nisha closed the remaining distance between them, waiting to see if Kannon would do or say anything to stop him. Eyes heavy and panting slightly, Kannon stood there waiting. Nisha brushed his lips across Kannon’s, a featherlight touch that promised what was to come. He nipped and licked Kannon’s lips. Kannon moaned softly and angled his head, trying to get more.

Nisha tightened his hands and leaned his head back slightly so he could see Kannon’s eyes. “Behave.”

Kannon bit his lower lip. “I... I don’t know what you—”

“Take what I give you only when I give it to you.”

“But—”

Nisha lowered his mouth over Kannon’s, ending any protest his mate might have. There would be answers and more questions soon enough. He also noticed Kannon wasn’t struggling to get out of his hold. Excellent. Kannon didn’t fight his control over the kiss.

Grinding his hard cock against Kannon’s, Nisha fought to keep his need in check. When Kannon whimpered, Nisha ended the kiss. He let go of Kannon and quickly turned the other man around so he faced the edge of the pool.

He grabbed Kannon’s hands and gently pulled them behind his back. Kannon immediately grabbed one of his wrists with the other hand. Nisha grinned slightly as he released his hold on Kannon’s hands. It seemed like Kannon knew exactly what to do.

Had he fantasized about this? Nisha put his hand between Kannon’s shoulder blades, and with a gentle push, encouraged Kannon to bend over. Nisha was grateful they were in the shade. At least the concrete Kannon’s chest rested on wouldn’t be hot.

“Okay?”

“I... yeah, I’m okay.”

“Good. Is the concrete too hot?”

“No, no it’s fine.”

“Excellent. Leave your hands where they are. Understand?”

“Y-yes.”

All Nisha could do was stare. He’d waited for this for so long, and now he didn’t know where to begin, so he smoothed his hands across Kannon shoulders once again and Kannon trembled. It wasn’t from fear, he knew that.

Kannon reeked of desire. He trailed his fingers down Kannon’s back and over his clasped hands. Kannon’s breathing sped up when Nisha let his hands rest on the waistband of Kannon’s swimsuit letting the anticipation build.

Slipping his finger underneath the band, he slowly moved it around to the front of Kannon’s swimsuit. Kannon’s stomach muscles bunched and jumped under his finger. He held Kannon steady with his other hand.

“Please,” Kannon whispered.

“Please, what?”

“Please, touch me.”

Nisha leaned against Kannon, his chest to Kannon’s back. The warmth of Kannon’s skin, and the strong scent of aroused male, mixed with the tropical breeze and the harsh scent of chlorine. He kissed the skin between Kannon’s shoulder blades, and a hint of salt exploded on his tongue.

“Oh, God.”

He knew Kannon had to feel his cock pressing against him. All that was between them was a couple layers of clothing. Pressing against Kannon’s ass, he dipped his

hand below the waistband of Kannon's swimsuit and found a hard cock reaching up eagerly.

"Oh, oh..."

Nisha wrapped his hand around Kannon's cock and pumped slowly. Flicking his thumb back and forth across the head, he thrust his hips against Kannon. There was so much more than just handling his mate he wanted to do... like tasting him. He let go of Kannon's cock and removed his hands from his swimsuit.

"What—? Is something wrong?"

"Not at all." He grasped Kannon's waistband and ducked under the water. Still holding Kannon's trunks, he abruptly pulled them straight down.

"Holy crap!" Kannon yelled, hands going to his waistband.

Nisha could hear Kannon's yell underwater. He almost swallowed half of the pool before he remembered what form he was in. Kannon had forgotten and tried to twist away, but that only helped Nisha get the swim trunks off.

He was tempted to swat Kannon for moving out of position, but didn't. He had what he wanted. Popping up out of the water, he held the trunks securely held in his hand.

"All you have to do is ask." Kannon laughed, now facing Nisha. "I-I would have happily given them to you."

"This was much more fun."

Nisha tossed the trunks out of the pool. Kannon's surprised blushes were sweet and endearing, but they were certainly not going to stop him. He grabbed Kannon by the

waist and lifted him out of the water.

“Hey!” Kannon sputtered.

“I wanted you to sit on the side.”

“So I see.” Kannon chuckled as he let his legs dangle in the water.

“Good, that’s perfect. Now, lift your legs out of the water and lie back.”

Kannon gulped. “Um...”

There was little doubt in Nisha’s mind Kannon knew exactly what he wanted. He’d have the ideal view of Kannon’s hole from that position. “I promise you’ll like what I have planned.” Nisha kissed Kannon’s knee while he waited. “Do this for me.”

Kannon hesitated then finally lay back and lifted his legs out of the water. Resting his feet on the concrete, he spread his legs.

“Beautiful.” Nisha ran his hands up and down Kannon’s hairy legs, his eyes on the tight little hole that awaited his attention. “Relax for me. I won’t hurt you.”

Nisha pulled Kannon’s cheeks apart, and he lowered his head. He blew gently, watching as that lovely hole of Kannon’s twitched in pleasure. Unable to help himself, Nisha placed a kiss there. He nibbled at Kannon’s hole, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin. Spreading Kannon’s ass more, he massaged the tight opening, loosening it.

“Fuck. That feels so good.” Kannon’s legs trembled.

Nisha looked up from what he was doing. His smile was sharp at seeing Kannon’s

clenched fists and hard cock resting on his stomach. “Mmm, what’s this?”

Nisha stopped playing with Kannon’s hole and reached for the hard dick lying against his stomach. Trails of precome decorated his belly.

“I’m going to taste you,” Nisha mumbled as he rested his other hand on Kannon’s hip.

“I... I...”

Nisha lowered his head to Kannon’s dick and ran his tongue through the precome that had collected on Kannon’s stomach. He smirked when he heard Kannon’s breathless giggle. Slipping the tip of Kannon’s cock into his mouth, he sucked on the swollen head while nibbling around the shaft.

“More. Please, Nisha. Suck me.”

Nisha waited until Kannon’s begging reached a desperate level. He licked Kannon’s thick shaft, working his way back to the head of his cock... and then he swallowed, which dragged more desperate pleas from Kannon. Bobbing his head up and down, he hollowed his cheeks as he came back up on Kannon’s cock until only the head was left in his mouth. His tongue the tiny slit in the top of Kannon’s shaft.

“Mmm.” Nisha hummed as Kannon’s precome leaked into his mouth.

“Nisha, Nisha, I’m going to come.” Kannon’s breathy whisper sent chills down Nisha’s back.

Nisha lifted his head and let Kannon’s cock pop out of his mouth. “Ask first.”

“W-what?”

“You heard me. Ask for permission.” Nisha waited to see how Kannon would react. Either his mate would either punch him in the mouth and stalk off, or do as he was told. He sincerely hoped Kannon would do the latter.

“I... can I come? Please?”

Nisha wanted to shout with joy. “Soon.”

“Oh God, oh God.”

He lowered his head back to Kannon’s cock, sucked it back in, and started moving his head up and down Kannon’s shaft, going faster. Slipping a finger into his mouth, he wetted it then placed his damp finger at Kannon’s entrance, teasing that tightly puckered hole.

“Ah... ah... yes.” Kannon’s body stiffened. “Nisha, I’m going to... Nisha! I’m going to come. Please ?” Kannon writhed.

Nisha stopped sucking and lifted his head. “Yes. Come...”

Kannon yelled, and his body jerked as he came. Nisha quickly lowered his head and swallowed every drop, but finally stopped when Kannon whimpered that he was too sensitive.

Bracing himself on the side of the pool, he jumped up next to Kannon and sat. “You okay?”

“Okay?” Kannon snorted. “Okay doesn’t begin to describe it. I don’t think there are words for what I am right now.” Kannon glanced down at the bulge in Nisha’s swimsuit. “You want a little help with that?”

“I’m fine. Besides, this was for you.”

“Oh, but... are you sure?”

“Positive.” He’d love nothing more than to have Kannon’s hot mouth wrapped around his cock, but he wasn’t sure he could control himself. He was denying every instinct he had as it was. The urge to bite Kannon as he fucked him was almost overwhelming.

“Why don’t we—” Kannon’s cell blared from inside the bungalow. “That’s Brett’s ring tone. I guess I better go see what he wants.”

Kannon hopped up from the side of the pool, grabbed his shorts off a nearby bush—and smirked at Nisha about that—then hurried inside.

CHAPTER SEVEN

KANNON'S Cell stopped ringing, so he called Brett back. "Hey, sorry I missed your call. I was in the pool."

"No problem. Remember earlier when I said something about getting together tonight? Can we do it tomorrow night? I've got a guest insisting on taking Brooke and me to dinner. If he wasn't such an important person I'd say no, but... well, I can't afford to piss him off."

"No problem."

"Good. I'll call you tomorrow evening with the details," Brett said. "Thanks, man."

Kannon rejoined Nisha by the pool. "Seems like tonight's off. Something came up with Brett. Is tomorrow okay with you?"

"It's fine."

"Um, well, there go our plans for the evening." Kannon scratched his head.

"Why don't we shower and get dressed? The sun will set soon, but until then I could show you around the jungle."

"Ah... the jungle. I... huh. I'm not really sure about that. There are all sorts of things in there that can kill you."

“I grew up on the island. Trust me, I know the jungle. I’m not going to take you too far into it, just enough to show you different types of plants and animals. Nothing too scary, I promise.”

“Well, um, okay, I guess. It could be interesting.”

Once dressed, they headed to the very outskirts of the jungle. They didn’t go too far into the jungle, much to Kannon’s relief. He was immediately overcome by the screeching of tropical birds.

They sounded so much louder now than what they did from the bungalow. The chatter of monkeys high in the trees echoed around him. Odd noises like odd croaks and peeps came from every direction. Nisha pointed out the Seychelles black parrot, which was the national bird.

“Come here and look at this.”

Kannon joined Nisha by a tree with long, wide fan-shaped leaves.

“It’s called coco de mer, and it’s a species of palm. They only grow on certain Seychelles islands, and it’s dioecious. That means it has separate male and female parts. It has several nicknames, but the most popular one is ‘love nut’ because of its suggestive shape.”

Kannon looked at the bilobed fruit and choked with laughter. “I can see that.”

“The the coco de mer is also the world’s largest seed.”

“It’s twice as large as my head, so yeah, I can see that too.”

When the sky began to darken, they returned to Kannon’s bungalow.

Kannon pushed his hair off his neck. “Jeez, I’m hot. How the devil is it you’re not even sweaty? That’s just wrong. I feel like I could melt.”

“Really? Melt, huh? Well, we certainly can’t have that.” Nisha picked Kannon up and headed for the pool, an evil grin on his face.

“What...? Oh hey! No! Nisha!” Kannon kicked, laughing madly. “I’m not that hot!”

“Sure you are.”

Nisha tossed Kannon into the pool, clothes and all.

Kannon surfaced, spluttering. “You... you...That was—”

Nisha jumped in after him.

“Holy crap!” Kannon spluttered again as a wave hit him.

Before long there was a pile clothes by the pool, and Kannon found himself on his knees on the pool steps sucking Nisha off.

Afterward Kannon fixed them something to eat. They watched a little TV, and when Kannon yawned several times in a row, Nisha suggested they go to bed. Kannon was surprised Nisha didn’t try to fuck him through the mattress.

Instead all Nisha did was wrap his arm around him and pull him close. He didn’t have time to fret, though, because he was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

THEY SPENT Thursday wandering around the resort and doing some of the activities they missed the day before.

Later that evening Brett called. “Brooke and I are going down to the private beach that connects to the resort. There’s a couple of open fire pits down there. We’re going to cook out tonight—nothing fancy, just hot dogs. She wants to make s’mores too. Does that sound good to you?”

Kannon looked out the sliding doors at Nisha, who was sitting by the pool. Nisha stared back at him. “Sure. That sounds like fun.”

Nisha strolled over to the sliding glass doors and leaned against them, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Okay, meet me on the beach right outside of the resort about nine o’clock tonight,” Brett said. “I’m going to call Nisha and ask him too.”

“It just so happens he’s standing right here. You want to talk to him?”

“Oh really ? Yeah, put him on the line, please.”

“Sure thing. Hold on.” Kannon held the phone out to Nisha. “Brett wants to talk to you for a second.”

Nisha crossed the living area and took the phone from Kannon. “Thanks.”

Kannon grabbed another beer and slipped outside so Nisha and Brett could talk privately.

Nisha joined Kannon outside. He returned Kannon’s cell phone and held a fresh beer. “Here you go.” Nisha sat down on the lounge and crossed his ankles as he took a sip of his beer. “Brett said to tell you they’re also going to get in the water.”

Kannon grimaced. “If by water he means the pool at the resort then that’s cool. If not,

then we have a problem. No way am I getting in the ocean, and especially not at night.” The thought made him shiver. Of course, that day fifteen years ago had been bright and sunny.

“I know you’re afraid of it, but they plan to go swimming.”

Kannon shook his head. “Then I’ll just sit by the fire.”

“But we walked in the waves just today.”

Nisha just didn’t get it. “Yeah, and it didn’t come past my ankles. I’m not getting in the ocean, Nisha.”

“Okay, okay. You and I can sit by the fire and eat all the chocolate while they’re swimming. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds devious.” He was relieved Nisha let it drop. “I love it.”

AN HOUR later he found himself on the beach, admiring an ocean-side stone fire pit. White Adirondack chairs set around the fire. On a small white table next to one of the chairs sat graham crackers, marshmallows, and chocolate. A cooler sat on the sand with a picnic basket alongside it. Close by, strategically placed tiki torches flickered as they casted shadows.

The ocean presented a perfect backdrop to an enchanting and romantic set-up. Brooke sat in one of the chairs, dressed in cutoff blue jean shorts and her bikini bathing suit top. Brett wore swim trunks. He and Nisha wore the same swim trunks they’d had on earlier.

“Hey, you guys, glad to see you could make it.” Brett used a long stick to stir up the coals. “Anybody hungry?”

Brooke opened the cooler sitting by her feet. “We have beer, wine coolers, plain water, and sodas if you’re thirsty.”

Nisha sat down next to Brooke and peered into the cooler. “Think I’ll take a water.” Brooke handed Nisha his drink. “Thanks. And yeah, I’m hungry.”

“Me too,” Kannon said. “Do you have Coke?”

“Yup,” said Brooke.

“I’ll take one of those, then.” Kannon took the drink from Brooke. “Mmm, good and cold. Thanks.”

“Now that everyone has a drink, let’s get on with hot dog roasting.” Brett put the long stick down by his chair. From one of the empty chairs around the fire pit, he picked up a hot dog roasting fork. “Here you go.” He handed one to Nisha with a flourish.

“How much you had to drink?” Nisha laughed. “And thanks.”

“You’re welcome. And nothing. Well, nothing alcoholic.” Brett handed the other roasting fork to Kannon.

“Thanks,” Kannon said.

“I got the hot dogs,” Brooke said, waving the package. “Buns are in the picnic basket along with paper plates and chips. Let me get those out too.”

Kannon took the package and got a hot dog out for him and Nisha. After they were skewered onto the roasting forks, they each claimed an empty chair next to one other.

“I forgot to bring the mustard.” Frowning, Brooke poked around in the picnic basket.

“It’s not a big deal,” said Kannon. “I like mine plain, anyway. Besides, I’m here for the chocolate, you know?”

“You want chocolate on your hot dog?” Nisha joked.

“Oh ha-ha. Everyone wants to be a comedian. We got the stuff to make s’mores , man,” Kannon declared dramatically, waving his hands at the goodies next to Brooke. “The rest of this stuff is just frills.”

“Now we know what Kannon’s priorities are.”

Kannon nodded. “Yep. It’s all about the chocolate.”

Nisha snorted but didn’t say anything. Once everybody had what they needed, conversation stopped. The fire crackled, and the smell of burning wood drifted around them. Kannon slowly relaxed. The night was cloudless and stars filled the sky—an endless network of twinkling lights.

A river of white glowed on the surface of the water from the moonlight. At night the water was opaque, a deep inky blackness full of mysteries. The waves flowed to the beach, a gentle caress that lapped at the shore. A light breeze ruffled Kannon’s hair, and peace stole over him. Never had he felt so relaxed, or so comfortable. The feeling of belonging surprised him.

“Think you might need to flip your wiener to the other side,” Nisha said. “Don’t want to burn it.”

Brett snickered from the other side of the fire as Kannon turned his hot dog. Kannon cut his eyes at Nisha. “Sexual innuendo much?”

“That was nothing. Seriously. You have no idea,” said Brooke. “Of course, I used to

think Nisha was the worst, but then I met Brett. I quickly found out Nisha wasn't the worst. Brett was."

"Hey! I represent that remark." Brett grinned at the group.

Kannon flipped his hot dog a couple more times then held his hand out to Brooke. "Think I'm done here. Hit me with the bun please."

"Here you go."

"Thanks." Balancing the paper plate on his knees, he wrapped the bun around the hog dog and used that to pull it off the stick so he didn't singe his fingers.

"All we got is just plain old potato chips. That okay?" Brooke asked.

"Absolutely. I'm starving," Kannon said.

"Make sure you leave some room for s'mores," Nisha said.

"Trust me, I'll have more than enough room." Kannon bit into his hot dog and groaned. Nothing beat a hot dog cooked over an open flame. Nothing.

After they finished, Brooke handed out all the things they needed to make s'mores. Laughter echoed around the fire as they joked. It didn't take long until Nisha became the center of attention. He kept burning his marshmallow until it was a charred mess, then cussing when it fell off into the fire. That, of course, sent Brett into a gale of laughter.

"Why does it keep falling in the fire?" Nisha glared at the sizzling mess burning in the open fire.

Kannon finally took pity on him. “Of course it’s going to fall into the fire. You charbroiled the thing. Let me show you how it’s done.” Kannon held his hand out and wiggled his fingers. “Just give it to me, would you? And here, hold my stick.”

“I’ll be glad to hold your stick any time you want.” Nisha took Kannon’s stick, leering. He immediately started nibbling on the roasted marshmallow Kannon had already cooked.

Brett moaned. “Really, Nisha?”

“I’m not even going to comment on that one.” Swapping roasting sticks, Kannon roasted the marshmallow to a perfect golden brown. “Ta-da. One perfectly cooked marshmallow.”

“You can’t just stop there,” Nisha complained. “You have to finish it out.”

“All you have to do is slap the marshmallow on top of the chocolate... that just so happens to be sitting on the graham cracker. It’s not rocket science,” Kannon said.

“Please?” Nisha wheedled.

Laughing hysterically, Brett managed to wheeze the word, “Sucker.”

“Better hush before I throw one of these charbroiled marshmallows of Nisha’s at you,” Kannon threatened, pointing a sticky finger at Brett.

“Anything but that.” Brett chuckled.

Nisha grabbed Kannon’s marshmallow-coated sticky fingers. “Just what do you have here?”

Kannon looked down at his fingers. "A mess."

"Here, let me help you with that." Nisha dragged Kannon's fingers to his mouth. One by one he sucked sticky marshmallow from Kannon's fingers.

Kannon fought to keep his eyes from crossing. "Oh, my."

Brett grabbed Brooke by the hand. "That's our cue to hit the water. Come on, Brooke."

Giggling, Brooke let Brett drag her off. "Don't do anything we wouldn't do!" she yelled over her shoulder at them.

Kannon's gaze never left Nisha's mouth, but he did grin at Brooke's words. "Right."

Nisha let go of Kannon's fingers, but held his hand still. He tugged gently on Kannon's arm. "Come here."

Kannon got up and moved onto Nisha's lap. In the distance he heard a splash as Brooke and Brett made it to the water. "It's just us now."

"I didn't think they'd ever leave." Nisha slipped his other hand around the back of Kannon's neck and urged him closer. "I have a sudden, pressing need to see if you taste like s'mores."

"Well, I think you should find out, don't you?" Not waiting, Kannon pressed his lips to Nisha's.

Nisha had his hands down Kannon's shorts when a sharp yell caught his attention. He glanced up and looked around, trying to pinpoint where the sound came from.

“Nisha, did you hear that?”

“I—”

The yell came again. The full moon provided plenty of light, and out in the water Kannon could see something thrashing. “What the...? Is that—” Dread filled him. That sounded like Brett. “Nisha...?”

“Shit!”

The fear in Nisha’s voice left him cold. Something was going on out there in the water, and Brett and Brooke were in the middle of it. He scrambled off Nisha’s lap.

“Stay here!”

Standing, he watched Nisha sprint toward the water. Stay here? But, but... His knuckles turned white from clutching the back of the Adirondack chair. Part of him demanded he follow Nisha into the water. The other part of him was cemented firmly on land.

As he stood there arguing with his body about what to do, a shrill trilling sound came from the water. The sound scraped across his nerves, and every hair on his body stood up. What is that? Never in his life had he heard such a noise. It vaguely reminded him of nails on a chalkboard.

He shivered in the warm tropical night air. More sounds—more frightening sounds—came from the water. He couldn’t see very well, even with the moonlight shining down. All he could hear was splashing, odd noises, grunting... then a feminine scream of anger and fear.

His stomach roiled. The only reason Brooke would scream that way was if Brett was

in trouble. Every thought about safety flew from his head. That was his best friend out there, and damned if he was going to stand there on the beach like some helpless maiden.

He raced toward the water, determined to help, even as his mind recoiled in fear. He hit the water running and dove in. Surfacing, he swam hard, thankful he worked out in his pool at home every day, and made a beeline toward the thrashing.

Even with his heart pounding in his head, and the roar of the ocean in his ears, he could hear screams... and what sounded like growls. He couldn't think of any possible explanation of why whatever was out there in the water would growl . He drew closer and dove under the water.

All the thrashing made it hard to see, but it looked like someone was trapped in a net. Bubbles from the struggles enveloped whatever it was. Then he caught a flash of a long tail. Oh God, oh God, not again .

For a split second, he debated surfacing and heading back toward the shore. Not that would do any good. He knew Fate just dropkicked his ass right there in the ocean. He prayed it was a dolphin and not what he thought—of course, it could also be a shark.

At this point he didn't know which would be worse. He surfaced, dragged in a couple lungfuls of air, and went back down. What greeted him was straight out of a nightmare. It was Brett, tangled in the net, fighting to get free.

That was scary. But what terrified him was the person next to the net. Brooke no longer had legs. What he saw was a long, iridescent bluish green tail that shimmered in place of legs. Shut the front door. She tore relentlessly at the net, and her desperation was obvious. Kannon shoved his fear side and swam closer.

Brett would drown if they didn't get him free.

As he drew near, Brooke suddenly turned to face him, her teeth bared. Well, that's not normal. Right, like a tail is . Blue hair floated around her head. The shocked, surprised look on her face was almost worth his fear.

Brooke blinked at him, and her look changed to sadness, but that was gone immediately and replaced by fear. That terrified Kannon even more. Kannon pointed at Brett, and then pointed up, signaling they needed to get Brett to the surface.

Brooke shook her head and pointed at him, then back the way he came. Kannon gaped at her. Was she trying to get him to leave? Surely she understood Brett was not like her and couldn't breathe underwater.

Kannon pointed to the surface again, motioning frantically they needed to get Brett to the surface. Again she shook her head no and pointed at him, her motions more frantic than his, if possible. What was she trying to tell him? Why wasn't she trying to help?

And by all that was holy, where was Nisha? Forget this! He'd get Brett to the surface on his own. He grabbed the net and agonizing pain tore through his hands. It felt like his skin had been scraped raw, and then acid poured all over the wounds.

He let go of the net and looked down at his hands. He couldn't see anything, but they burned. If the net felt like that and he barely touched it, what was it doing to Brett? He took a closer look at Brett. He could see blisters on him. Jesus, they're everywhere the thing touched him .

Now he understood why Brooke was desperately trying to get him out of the net, but Brett drowning might be a bigger problem than the blisters. Except... he took a closer look at Brett. What was that on his neck?

Kannon narrowed his eyes in an effort to sharpen his gaze. What was that? It almost,

almost looked like Brett had... gills. But that couldn't be, could it? That was impossible. And his soon-to-be wife is half fish, so hey, why not gills?

He turned to Brooke, wishing desperately he could communicate with her, but then Brooke opened her mouth... and the sound that came out was completely inhuman. He slammed his hands over his ears and glared at her. Suddenly Kannon found himself jerked around.

He came face-to-face with another merman, but this one had long, dull red hair. Its face was eerily human—except for the sharp teeth bared at him and seafoam green eyes narrowed in malice. Holy moly, seriously? How many of them are down here?

Brooke barreled into the other merman, but with a sweep of his arm he sent her tumbling away, head over tail. Then the redheaded merman reached out and grabbed hold of Kannon's forearms. He jerked him closer,, but they were practically and his nails sank into Kannon's skin. Ow!

Trails of blood from his arms danced in the water. He struggled to get free, but they were practically hugging. And he was running out of air. The creature grinned at him with a malevolent smirk as it pulled Kannon farther down—down into the murky depths of the ocean. Fucker is trying to drown me!

His temper ignited as his lungs burned. Panic rode him hard. The need to breathe was overwhelming, but he wasn't going to die without a fight. From somewhere behind him, Kannon heard a trill of notes sung through the water.

The creature fighting with Kannon froze then snarled. Kannon turned to look. Through the water something was coming fast, heading toward them at an amazing speed. Stunned, Kannon watched as two more of the mermen came out of nowhere.

One of the new mermen crashed into them. The redheaded merman let go and turned

toward the new one. Kannon immediately started swimming toward the surface. He glanced down briefly as he swam and saw the two mermen fighting viciously.

It was then he noticed the other merman had blue hair. As Kannon watched, his savior made a fist, and three long spines erupted from his knuckles, but Kannon didn't wait to see what the other merman planned to do with them. He faced the surface. The sound of a sharp scream echoed through the water behind Kannon as he struggled upward.

He flinched when he felt hands grasp his waist. He turned his head and saw the other merman who came to his rescue next to him. The one pushing him toward the surface also had blue hair. Anger flooded his system. Not only did the merman who propelled him toward the surface have long blue hair, he had blue eyes too.

It was Nisha.

But this wasn't the Nisha who spent the day at his bungalow and fed s'mores to him. It's him. The one who bit me. Dear God, Nisha is the merman from fifteen years ago. But at the moment, Kannon had more pressing issues. He turned his attention to the surface.

Fading light filtered through the turbulent water. So close... but I'm not going to make it. Just as Kannon gave up the fight to breathe, Nisha shoved him upward hard. His head broke the surface, and he gulped precious air, his lungs starving for oxygen. He coughed horribly, still struggling, as Nisha surfaced next to him.

They stared at each other then Nisha disappeared below the surface. Seriously? A moment later Brooke surfaced, holding Brett close to her. Somehow she'd removed the net from Brett, who was cussing a blue streak.

Obviously his best friend was going to be okay, and he was glad, even as it horrified

him that apparently Brett wasn't freaked out about Brooke being a mermaid. But then, why should he be? His best friend was sporting gills on each side of his neck.

A million questions crowded his mind, but those would have to wait. He had one thing and one thing only on his mind. Time to get the hell out of Dodge. Adrenaline spiked as he took off toward the shore. Land meant safety. His head spun at what he'd seen, but he kept going.

Just as he was closing in on the shore, something latched onto his ankle. Not again!

CHAPTER EIGHT

NISHA WATCHED as the redheaded merman swam away. The wound his friend inflicted wasn't much—just bad enough to make a point that this was Nisha's territory. The only males he allowed here were friends.

The temptation to go after him was great, but now wasn't the time. Besides, he had more pressing matters, namely the human swimming hell-for-leather toward the shore. With a flip of his tail, he took off after Kannon. Kannon was still a good, strong swimmer.

His mate was still over his head when Nisha grabbed his ankle. The suddenness of the action pulled Kannon under. Kannon twisted around. Nisha threw up his hands, hoping to show he meant no harm.

Pulling him under had been an accident. He hadn't meant to do that. Sometimes he forgot the humans weren't as strong as his kind in the water. Kannon surfaced, and Nisha followed him up. As they bobbed in the water, the other merman and Brooke slowly swam toward them. Brett had his arms around both their shoulders.

The glare Kannon flashed at Nisha should've left him writhing on the ocean floor. Finally Nisha sighed, tired of the stare-off. "Kannon, I need you to remain calm. I'm not going to hurt you. Surely you know—"

"Holy shizzballs, you can speak like... like... like that?" Kannon blurted.

Bewildered, Nisha could only gape at Kannon. "Of course I can speak. Why wouldn't

I be able to speak? You speak.”

“Ah... ah...ah...” Kannon’s eyes widened as he treaded water.

“Should I assume just because you’re human you can’t swim?” Nisha hiked a perfectly shaped blue eyebrow at Kannon, who just happened to be treading water.

Kannon blinked at Nisha. “I-ah... yeah, okay. Um, you’re part fish. So no, I wasn’t expecting you to speak in perfectly clear English like that. Whatever was I thinking?”

A strangled cough came from behind Kannon, and he swung around to face the other merman who was helping Brooke and Brett to the shore. Nisha also looked at his friend. Marcus had the same long blue hair and pointed ears as himself, but his eyes were a pale, pale blue. He had a scar that ran through his right eyebrow.

“Yes, I can speak also. I know my ABCs and 123s, and—”

“Marcus, behave,” Nisha warned.

Kannon swung back toward him.

“Just pointing out I can speak. Oh. Forgot to mention I know my colors too.” Marcus flashed a toothy grin.

Kannon jerked his head back toward the other merman. “Um...”

Nisha rolled his eyes.

“And there goes the eye roll,” Brooke added.

Nisha huffed. “Both of you just stop. Marcus, Kannon’s freaked out enough without

you acting stranger than normal. Don't scare him."

"A little late for that," Kannon muttered then glanced at Brett. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Got some gnarly blisters, but basically, yeah," Brett affirmed.

"Good. Good, I'm really glad to hear that. Seeing you stuck down there like that scared me silly. I was worried you might drown." Kannon eyed Brett's neck. "Guess I shouldn't have been, though. Cool breathing apparatus you got there. Care to explain the new look?"

"Well... dammit," Brett huffed. "You weren't supposed to find out this way, but it's too late to worry about that now."

"I'll say," Kannon retorted.

"Brooke and I mated about a year ago. It's a long story, and I really don't want to go into it here, in the middle of the ocean—"

"Just so you know, I'm not exactly having a blast out here either."

"—I can breathe underwater now thanks to being Brooke's mate."

"I see," Kannon said. "Well no, actually I don't, but that's a discussion for later. So you knew she was a mermaid?"

"Yes," Brett said. "Actually I found out not long after we met."

"Uh-huh. Did you know Nisha was a merman too?"

“Yes, yes I did,” Brett plunged ahead. “But—”

“Did you know he was the one who attacked me fifteen years ago?” Kannon demanded.

Brett looked at Nisha then Kannon. “Well—”

“Now wait a minute.” Nisha shot a quick look at Kannon. “I wouldn’t exactly call what I did—”

“Attack?” Stunned, Marcus glanced at Nisha. “You attacked—”

“—I do now, but I didn’t then,” Brett hastened to add. “Brooke told me when she revealed she was a mermaid.”

“I see.” Kannon launched himself across the water at Brett. “You son of a bitch! You knew, you knew , and you never told me? After all these years?”

There was a mad scramble as Kannon tackled Brett.

“I couldn’t tell you,” Brett yelled as Kannon grabbed him by the shoulders. Both of them went under the waves. Brooke screeched, Marcus laughed, and Nisha swore loudly as all of them dove down and tried to separate Kannon and Brett.

After several minutes Kannon, being the only one who couldn’t breathe underwater, had to surface.

“Why? Why didn’t you tell me?” Kannon demanded.

“He couldn’t,” Brooke answered. “You... you had no ties to us, so it was forbidden.”

Nisha immediately wrapped his arms around Kannon. He was glad to see Kannon didn't struggle, even though he shot a truly horrendous death glare over his shoulder at Nisha.

"Are you sure you want to do this now? In the water?" Nisha asked as he let go of Kannon. "Besides, while I understand your anger, Brooke needs to treat Brett's blisters."

"Fine. We'll talk about this once we're out of the water. It's not like this is the most comfortable place for me." Kannon threw another glare over his shoulder at Nisha. "Thanks to you."

It was all Nisha could do not to cringe. "I am sorry for that, Kannon. I promise I will explain what happened that day, and why I did what I did just as soon as we get out of the water."

"Yeah, can't wait to hear this." Kannon set off toward the shore.

Brett looked at Nisha. "He's mad."

"You think?" Brooke snapped. "I don't think I could have devised a worse scenario for him to find out."

Marcus snorted. "We might want to talk about this later. Nisha, your human is leaving us behind."

Nisha sighed silently as the four of them trailed slowly behind Kannon. Unfortunately Kannon hadn't given them an opportunity to explain they couldn't just walk out of the water like he could.

The public beach was much too visible. Brooke and Marcus took Brett to a nearby

cove that had a cave which was only assessable by water. Nisha went as far as he could toward the shore, and then stopped. Once Kannon was on the sandy beach, he turned and glanced back out at the ocean.

Nisha called from the water. "I'll meet you back at your bungalow."

"You're not going to... Oh, I... I didn't stop to think about... Know what? Why don't you just not? I've had about all I can handle tonight."

"We need to talk, Kannon. This can't wait. Give me twenty minutes, and I'll meet you at your bungalow."

Kannon threw his hands in the air. "Why even bother asking if you're going to do it anyway? Fine. Guess I don't have much of a choice. Not that I've had much so far. I'll see you there."

NISHA CUT through the dark water, swimming swiftly toward the cove. He needed to transform and get to Kannon's bungalow as fast as possible. Kannon's last words scared him. Kannon made it very clear he didn't wish to speak to him, but at this point that wasn't an option.

He understood Kannon felt he was pushing, but the last thing Kannon needed was time to think. He spotted the entrance to the underwater cave and darted to it. The cave wasn't all that large, not like the one closer to his above water home, and it had a small opening at the top that let a little light inside.

There was a beach and room for a small boat. He surfaced and quickly made his way to the shallows. He hauled his body out of the water and beached himself. Now all he had to do was wait.

He truly hated this part, but he fanned his tail with his hands to hurry along the

process. Like that's going to do any good. The color of his tail lightened, signifying his skin was drying out. More time passed, and he struggled with his impatience.

Bracing his elbows against the sand, he leaned back and prepared himself for the tearing to start. Come on, come on, come on. The bottom of his tail tingled then ripped . Fuck! The pain made him queasy, but he held on. Luckily the process never lasted long.

The flipper part of his tail split, and the tear continued up his body. Minutes crept by as the two parts separated and slowly morphed into human legs. His fins devolved into feet, and finally the transformation ended.

He was up and heading toward some rocks on the small beach that hid several waterproof bags. One contained clothes. He fished out a pair of shorts and sandals. Once dressed, he used the passage which led upward to a hidden opening in a cave... on land.

It was one of the reasons he and the ones allowed in his territory used this cave. The passage gave them more options, and reduced the risk of discovery when they transformed. He hurried to Kannon's bungalow. The moon had now dipped behind clouds, and darkness shrouded the landscape.

As he drew closer, he heard the sounds of a scuffle and harsh, panting grunts. Oh no. No, no, no! The sound of a fist hitting skin reached his ears, and he picked up his pace. He darted around the side of the bungalow. Through the glass he saw Kannon fighting with the redheaded merman.

Horried, he hurried up the steps and exploded into the living area. "Cree! Let him go, now!"

"I don't think so." Cree dodged Kannon's fist and grabbed his arm. He swung

Kannon around and pulled him close, locking them together in a parody of an embrace. “You refused me the right to mate with your sister. Gave her to a damn human, of all things. A human .”

“I didn’t give Brooke to anyone.” Nisha froze. Last thing he wanted was for Cree to continue to hurt Kannon. “Brett was who she wanted, not you.”

“So what? Humans are worthless, weak. She could have mated me and kept him on the side. I’d have been fine with that as long I could play with him too.”

“He’s straight, you overgrown blowfish,” Kannon snarled, twisting in Cree’s arms.

“Like that matters,” Cree hissed as he stilled Kannon with a sharp twist of his arm. Cree glared at Nisha. “Why you even gave her a choice is beyond me. She’s a female.”

“That right there is why I refused you permission to mate her,” Nisha growled. “She deserves better. Even if she hadn’t found Brett, I still would’ve refused you permission.”

“You mean... you mean to tell me that—”

“Even sea slugs are too good for you. That’s what I mean.”

Cree screeched. “A sea slug? How dare you! Too good for me, huh? Well then.” Cree looked at Kannon, smirked, and then licked his cheek. “Mmm. He tastes good.”

Nisha snarled and stepped closer. “Let. Him. Go.”

“Now, now.” Cree flashed his sharp teeth at Nisha. “Wouldn’t take much to rip his throat out. He’s a pretty little thing too, isn’t he? Imagine my shock when I heard that

not only had you marked a human as yours, you hadn't finished the ritual. Of course I had to investigate."

"He has nothing to do with this."

"Nothing to do with this? Are you suffering from dolphin pox? He has everything to do with this. You denied me the right to have your sister, so I think I'll deny you the right to this human."

Spinning, the redheaded merman tossed Kannon up against the nearest wall and pinned him there with his body. Kannon yelled as he crashed into the wall. Cree buried his hand in Kannon's hair and jerked his head to the side as he bared his teeth. He leaned closer to Kannon's neck and Kannon struggled furiously, but it did no good.

"No!" Nisha barreled across the room and flung his body at the two against the wall.

A red haze obscured his vision and blood pounded in his veins. Anger flooded his body. The need to rip—to decimate anyone or anything that threatened what was his—consumed him. All he could hear was a roaring in his ears as he grabbed hold of Cree. Nothing made sense, nothing but the sheer driving need to save his mate.

With a mighty heave, he threw the other merman across the room. "You dare to touch what's mine? I will kill you for that alone!"

Cree's body slammed into another wall in the bungalow then dropped to the floor. There was an indentation from where he hit. Snarling, Nisha stomped across the floor, hoisted Cree by his long red hair, and wrapped it around his fist.

He used that to drag Cree out of Kannon's bungalow. Cree immediately clawed at Nisha's hands, yelling painfully and kicking his legs. The sound was sharp and

screeching, but Nisha couldn't understand him for the pounding in his head.

All he could hear was kill, kill, kill . But he couldn't do that on the land. At least, not the way he wanted. He needed to be in his merman form to be able to use the defensive spikes that came from his clenched fist.

“Nisha!”

Somewhere in the middle of his rage a voice called to him.

“ Nisha ! Stop!”

Hissing, he stopped pulling Cree behind him and turned back to the voice calling to him. There in the doorway of the bungalow, backlit by the lights in the living area, stood Kannon.

“Please.”

Nisha looked down at Cree and then back up at Kannon.

Kannon held out his hand. “ Please ?”

It was a no-brainer. He let go of Cree's hair and the vague sound of Cree's head hitting the ground broke through his rage. His mate needed him and nothing else mattered. Emotions bubbling, he trekked back to Kannon. He clasped Kannon's hand and everything in his world righted and made sense once again.

“Are you okay?”

Nisha grunted.

Kannon glanced out to where Cree struggled upon to his knees. “Um, what about him?”

Nisha turned around and looked at Cree. Human words were beyond him now thanks to his anger. Sharp, shrill clicking noise came from his throat, and Kannon slapped his hands over his ears. Cree struggled to his feet and sprinted toward the water.

He hoped he hadn’t made a huge mistake letting Cree go and clutched Kannon closer. Now that the red haze of anger had cleared way, another need rose fiercely to take its place. Holding Kannon in his arms, he turned his mate around and quickly picked him up.

Kannon grabbed hold of Nisha’s neck. “W-what are you doing?”

He grunted again, wishing Kannon could understand his native language. A tumble of emotions rolled through him, forcing the more primitive side of his nature to take over. The predator in him chanted mine, mine, mine . The desire to claim ruled his mind.

He wouldn’t allow any more threats to Kannon. He’d waited fifteen years—he wasn’t waiting any longer. The fact he hadn’t properly claimed Kannon echoed through his head, a sickening taunt of what could have happened. He had to remedy that, and now.

“Um, Nisha? Where we going?”

He heard Kannon’s words, but they didn’t really make sense. His mind was a whirlwind of worries and alarm. All he knew was there was no fear in Kannon’s voice. Holding his mate he returned the way he’d come earlier, back toward the cave that led back down to the water.

“Nisha? Can you talk to me, please?”

Nisha buried his nose in Kannon’s hair and sniffed delicately. His nose bumped Kannon’s ear, and he vocalized softly. The trilling notes were sweet and soft, a deep hum that continued as Nisha walked.

“O-okay, that didn’t sound quite human. In fact, it kind of reminds me of a CD I have. It has all these neat sounds from dolphins and whales on it. I, ah, I’m going to assume for some reason you can’t speak to me right now. I’m not hurt, you know. He got in some good hits, but so did I. And I’m babbling.”

He whistled quietly. Still carrying his mate in his arms, he entered the cave and made his way down the passage to the beach.

“Oh boy. I hope you can see, because I sure can’t. It’s really dark in here, Nisha. Please don’t get us lost.”

He knew exactly where he was going. Nisha sniffed at Kannon’s hair again and clicked softly. Such a lovely color it was, and smelled so nice.

“I guess that was supposed to be some sort of reassurance, but it really isn’t. At all. Nope.” Kannon rested his head against Nisha’s shoulder. “I’m not sure what’s going on with you. I really, really wish you’d speak to me. This is a little unnerving.”

Nisha couldn’t tell him the fight and resulting fear of losing Kannon had prompted the more animalistic side of his nature to take over. It was why he was vocalizing instead of speaking. It was just easier than trying to force the sounds past his vocal cords that were words.

He might look human in this form, but he wasn’t. He didn’t think like a human, and he certainly didn’t act like a human. Human morals were not his. And this wasn’t his

preferred form. This form was nothing more than a guise he needed to be able to pass among the land walkers.

When he calmed down and got control of his body, he'd regain the ability to speak. Once he reached a sandy part of the beach, he set Kannon on his feet. He gently patted Kannon on the shoulder.

Hopefully his mate would understand he needed to stay still for a moment. Nisha hurried to one of the waterproof camping lanterns. Soon there was a blaze of light through the darkness of the cave.

"Thank goodness," Kannon said.

Nisha lifted the lantern and made his way around the cave, lighting the others. Now Kannon had the light he needed. He set the lantern down and walked to Kannon. He didn't see fear in Kannon's eyes, but he did see wariness and a healthy dose of curiosity, which pleased him.

It was time. Mind made up, he walked to the bag that held his clothes. He dug around until he found what he was looking for then returned to where Kannon stood. He held the lube in his hand, waiting to see what Kannon would say.

"Lube?"

Nisha nodded and held it out to Kannon.

Relief flooded his body when Kannon took it. He held out his other hand. His breath left him in a whoosh when Kannon entwined their fingers. Walking backward toward the water, he held onto Kannon. He saw Kannon gulp.

The water rose up to his knees, then onto his thighs, and then finally up to his hips.

There he stopped. He slowly reeled Kannon closer to him and pulled him into his arms. Nisha was relieved to see his mate wasn't fighting. He tenderly pressed a small kiss against Kannon's lips.

Kannon sighed after it ended and rested his head against Nisha's shoulder. Nisha clicked softly. He rubbed his hands up and down Kannon's back as they stood waist-deep in the water. He nudged Kannon's chin up and looked into his eyes.

Threading his fingers through Kannon's wet hair, he again kissed Kannon, but this time the kiss was much less sweet. Kannon opened his mouth under the gentle assault, and his tongue darted out to play with Nisha's. As the kiss intensified, Kannon moaned, pulled him closer.

Nisha let go of Kannon's hair. He brushed his lips over Kannon's while pushing Kannon's swim trunks down. Once he had them off, he threw them onto the beach. His soon followed. Their breath mingled as he ran a finger down Kannon's cock.

He swallowed Kannon's moan as he teased him. Nipping Kannon's lip, he wrapped his long fingers around Kannon's shaft and squeezed. Kannon lurched in surprise. Tracing the crown of that veined shaft, Nisha released Kannon's mouth, both desperate for air.

Not wanting to give Kannon time to think, he knelt in the water and engulfed Kannon's cock. Even underwater he heard the strangled gasp from Kannon. He knew Kannon teetered on the edge—he'd either give up control or panic at what was happening.

He closed his lips over the dome of Kannon's shaft and sucked on the crown, running his tongue over the head. His tongue teased the slit, and more precome leaked into his mouth when he went farther down Kannon's shaft.

Finally his lips pressed against Kannon's groin. Closing his eyes, he relaxed and lodged Kannon's cock in his throat, cutting off his air. He swallowed, and his mate shuddered as his throat muscles massaged Kannon's shaft. Backing off, he bobbed his head up and down Kannon's thick cock, determined to make his mate lose himself to the pleasure.

He released Kannon's cock and surfaced. The tube of lube floated close by. He clicked softly and Kannon looked at him. Desire, lust, and a bit of uncertainty flickered in Kannon's eyes... but no fear.

Then Kannon saw the lube floating close by and blushed. He grabbed it. "Yeah, it got away from me. I, ah, was a little distracted."

Nisha nodded.

"Um, why did you stop?"

Nisha grinned. His mate didn't want him to stop? Then he wouldn't. He stepped back. He kept moving away from Kannon, going deeper in the water. It slid past his stomach, up to his chest, and finally water touched his nose.

He took a deep breath. Here goes nothing.

CHAPTER NINE

ALL KANNON could see was Nisha's eyes. It was more than a little unnerving that all he could see peeking at him from above the water were those odd blue eyes. Then Nisha ducked under the water, and Kannon lost sight of him completely. Now he truly was unnerved.

Where Nisha once stood the water churned. It roiled and spun. Kannon took a step back. His nerves danced. His heart fluttered. Uneasily he glanced over his shoulder at the sandy beach. What the devil was Nisha doing out there?

Maybe it would be safer if he... a body exploded from the water—a long and lean body that glistened a silvery pale. Kannon caught a flash of blue as the creature tossed his head back in a spray of water.

A large splash in front of him sent out a torrent of small waves powerful enough to send him stumbling back. Once the water calmed, he found himself facing Nisha, but this wasn't the Nisha he knew. Memories flooded him as he stared.

Suddenly he was back, back to where he was fifteen years ago, staring at a face across from him that wasn't quite human. His heart pounded as he remembered looking upon those features years ago... and he was still fascinated with those pointy ears.

His fingers twitched to trace them even as he struggled to breathe. His chest was tight. The water around Nisha moved gently, and he wondered how it was doing that. When a large iridescent blue tail cut through the water, he knew.

“Holy cow.”

Nisha grinned at him.

His breathing did stutter when Nisha swam closer, but he stayed still. Curiosity drove him. He wanted to touch Nisha, to see if his merman would be warm to the touch or cool like a fish. When Nisha reached out and ran his hand up Kannon's arm, he breathed easier.

Nisha was warm to the touch. Thank God. While his skin was smooth, and looked silvery, it felt really no different from human skin. He looked down at Nisha's hand... Nisha's webbed hands. They were wonderfully creepy and awe-inspiring.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Nisha pulled him closer until Nisha's arms circled him. Kannon didn't fight. Even though his heart pounded in his chest, he wanted to know what Nisha was capable of. Common sense told him he should be scared out of his mind, but he and common sense never did get along all that well.

Instinct said Nisha wouldn't harm him, and he was going with that. Once Nisha had a good hold on him, he propelled them backward, and Kannon felt that massive tail brush against his legs. Nisha took them farther out into the water.

Kannon wasn't sure what Nisha had planned until he noticed his merman had angled them toward the side of the cave. As they drew closer, he noticed a shelf that projected slightly out of the water.

When they reached it Kannon quickly rested his arms on it so he didn't have to tread water or depend on Nisha to keep him afloat. Nisha ran his hands up and down Kannon's side, and the water churned around them as Nisha's tail moved.

Nisha reached around him and gently pried the lube out of his hand. Kannon was

surprised to see he still held it. When Nisha opened it and squirted some on his fingers, Kannon figured out right quick what was about to happen.

A hundred questions ran through his mind, then scattered to the winds. A thousand different scenarios played out in his mind, but he couldn't grasp one of them. One question forced its way to the front of his mind. Did he want to do this?

All thoughts ended as Nisha sank below the water's surface, and Kannon felt a slick finger caress his hole. Kannon jumped, clutched at the rock's edge, and then shuddered. His stomach fluttered as Nisha touched him.

A gentle nudge encouraged him to spread his legs, but he froze. Could he do this? Should he? Was it even possible for the two of them to do this? But the last thing Nisha would do was hurt him, so it must be possible for them to make love.

He spread his legs and waited to see what would happen. Nisha's slick finger worked its way into Kannon's depths, caressing the inner walls. Kannon clutched the ledge again. Nisha took his time, working his finger in and out, loosening Kannon.

His body writhed, and the need for more grew. Almost as if he understood, another of Nisha's fingers entered Kannon and stretched him more. When Nisha pegged his hot spot, fireworks exploded through his system, sending little bursts of pleasure through his body.

"Oh my God!" He jerked and let go of the ledge.

Immediately he sank under the water. Seconds later, his head broke the surface, and his fingers scrabbled at the ledge again. He spit water. Now he understood where "sinking like a rock" came from. He struggled to hold his legs open, and his desire faded.

Then Nisha's shoulders pushed between his legs, and he didn't have to strain so. Nisha's leverage also braced him, so he didn't have to worry about keeping his head above water. Nisha even patted his ass, as if to say he had everything under control.

He tried to glance down through the water, but all he could see was Nisha's blue hair floating aimlessly. Lucky bastard. Wish I was able to stay down there like that. Oddly enough the thoughts didn't send sheer terror through him. But he did tremble when he realized Nisha had spread him open. His gasp echoed through the cave as Nisha thrust another finger inside him.

"I'm ready," he gasped. "And I really, really hope you can hear me under there."

Nisha surfaced and pulled Kannon around to face him so they were chest to chest. He reached down, grabbed Kannon's legs, and draped them over his arms.

Shocked, Kannon grasped Nisha's shoulders. "W-wait just a minute! I can't... I can't float like this if... if I needed to."

"I'll take care of you, I promise. Trust me to hold you up." Nisha stole a quick kiss. "I'm going to fuck you like this... as if I was standing up with you in my arms. And yes, you'll have to just take it."

Kannon's back rested against the ledge. He shivered, and the water splashed gently against him. Feelings of helplessness washed through him. "Now you decide to talk?"

Nisha's grin was positively wicked. "I'm going to fuck you until you scream for me. It'll echo around us. We'll both get to hear your cries of pleasure."

"But... in this form?" Kannon waved mindlessly at Nisha. "Like that?"

“Oh yes.” Nisha tightened his hands on Kannon’s legs. “Most certainly.”

His arousal spiked. Spread open like this, he couldn’t do anything but take it, and that excited him more. Something hot and slick probed at his entrance, and he arched, unsure if he was trying to get away or get closer. The strange feeling unnerved him but also excited him. Nisha tightened his hold. The tip of Nisha’s cock, which felt rounded and narrow, slid into Kannon.

But as it went deeper, it flared out to open him up. He panted. The feeling was alien, different from a normal dick... but not bad or painful. He whimpered, and Nisha trilled in his ear. The sound soothed him. “Is that... is that your cock?”

“Yes.”

“Oh wow. Just”—he gulped—“wow.”

Nisha flexed his tail and thrust his hips. Kannon’s eyes widened as Nisha’s hardness stroked deeper inside him. The force of the thrust sent small waves out from them.

“Good?”

“Oh God, oh... yeah. I’m good. Harder.”

Grinning, Nisha did as he asked. Kannon held on as Nisha fucked him hard. There was no pain, only an overwhelming fullness. Then Nisha changed his angle, and Kannon gasped. Nisha nailed his hot spot. His shaft hardened, and tension rolled through his body. Tingles started at the base of his spine and rocked up his spine. Pleasure beat at him.

“Going to...” he gasped.

“No. Not yet.”

Eyes closed, Kannon threw his head back and fought the rising need. He wanted to do as Nisha said, but he didn't know if he could. His body burned with the need to come, but still... Nisha said no. He bit his lip in an effort to distract himself. A small bite of pain zinged through his lip. How hard had he bitten himself? Nisha growled suddenly, and Kannon blinked open his eyes.

“Come,” he demanded. “Come for me.”

Kannon came just as Nisha slammed his mouth down on Kannon's. The taste of copper flooded his mouth. What's that? Blood? Kannon's mind shut down as his body took over and followed Nisha's command.

Pleasure ripped through him. One more deep thrust, and Nisha held himself against Kannon as he came. He jerked his mouth off Kannon's and leaned forward until he could sink his sharp teeth into that same spot he bit fifteen years ago.

“Fuck!” Kannon's scream tore from his throat to bounce around the cave. Spots danced in front of his eyes, and everything went black.

WARM WATER cradled him.

“Kannon? Can you wake up?”

Kannon opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the ceiling of the cave. Wow, there were all these colors in the rocks. How cool. Really, folks should take a minute and float around staring up at ceilings more often.

Whoa. That was weird. Jeez, what was wrong with him? Speaking of which, his body was warm and lax as it rocked gently in the water, but he felt fuzzy. O-okay, what's

going on? He took a deep breath and looked around.

“Welcome back.”

Nisha held him in his arms. It didn't take him long to figure out Nisha was still in his merman form, since water brushed against him in small waves.

“Um, hey.” His last memory was... Jesus, had Nisha fucked him unconscious? He hadn't thought that was possible.

“How do you feel?”

“Well...” Now that he was a little more with it, he noticed his head ached, and his stomach was sending messages it wasn't exactly happy either.

He was slightly queasy, and a warm sensation spread from the bite on his shoulder, but it wasn't too bad. Just annoying. And it tingled. And well... now that he was paying attention, he noticed his body tingled. His legs, arms, back, neck—everything tingled, and that made him restless.

“Kannon?”

“I, ah... I'm not feeling too hot. What's going on with me?”

“I... I bit you fifteen years ago and started the process of changing you. From what we know, a merfolk bite must contain something—maybe bacteria—that's toxic to humans. Whatever it is, it changes the human enough to adapt to our world. In other words, a human will develop gills.”

“Gills. As in... gills.”

“Yes. The transformation comes from a bite, not from sex. So, when a merman or maid bites a human, the saliva enters the human’s blood stream and... changes take place.”

“I... I... seriously?”

“Yes, seriously. But one bite isn’t enough. It takes two. After the second bite, the process takes a few hours to integrate fully into human cells.”

“I hate biology, just so you know. Really sucked at it.”

“I’ll review as many times as you need. So while this was happening, you passed out. Once awake, you may have a headache and even be nauseated.”

“Lovely.”

“I know. It isn’t fun. Now, you won’t show any external signs of any changes, and you won’t until you make a conscious effort to... change. I can get into the water and not change into my merman form, just as you can get into water and not open your gills.”

“You bit me again, didn’t you? Right there at the end.”

“Of course. I also feel I should apologize for what happened earlier with Cree. He was the one who attacked you in the water and at the bungalow.”

“Wait, wait... what? Cree? You... you just jumped from basically describing how you abused my DNA to what happened with that other merman? Are you for real? Well, please, go ahead, then. Seems you got a program to follow.”

“Um, I sense you mean something by that, but I’m unsure as to what you mean.”

Kannon growled, and Nisha paused, a bemused look on his face. “Anyway, Cree has carried a grudge against me for a long time, but that gave him no right to not only attack Brett, but you too.”

“Well, we can agree on that.”

Nisha took a deep breath and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry you were subjected to that. I can promise you Cree will never bother you again. Not if he knows what’s good for him.”

Is he kidding me ? Kannon struggled until Nisha let him go. Amazed, he quickly made his way to the shallows where he could stand on his own two feet. He couldn’t believe what he heard.

“You... you... Let me get this straight. That’s what you apologize for? Cree attacking me? Of all the things—and there’s a laundry list of them, let me tell you— that’s what you focus on first? Seriously?”

He’d been pretty calm up until now, all things considered. But calm was quickly taking a backseat to anger.

“I... I’m confused.” Nisha scratched his head.

“I’ve spent the last fifteen years in that state, so please, join the crowd.”

“Should I not apologize for Cree attacking you because of something I did a long time ago? Or rather, I didn’t do. I refused to him the right to mate Brooke. Of course it didn’t much matter what I said. Brett was her mate, and she would’ve refused anyone else. Cree never understood that.”

Kannon threw his hands up in the air. “ Seriously ? No apology about when I was

eighteen? When you popped up out of nowhere, dragged me under the water, and fucking bit me? Got nothing to say about the fact that you're a merman? A creature who does not exist? Just going to ignore the fact that Brooke's a mermaid and mated to Brett, who's my best friend?"

"Well—"

"And oh my God!" Kannon thrust his hands into his hair and rubbed his temples. "I told Brett what happened to me. Never once did he act as though he knew what I was fucking talking about."

"I believe he explained why he couldn't—"

"It's been fifteen years, and in all this time he never once told me he knew about your existence. I am going to fucking kill him!"

"Um, he couldn't. He wanted to, but it's against our ways to share such with humans—"

"And you!" Kannon pointed a finger at Nisha.

Nisha flinched.

"What the hell, man? You bit me. You left a scar. Do you have any fucking idea how that messed with my mind? Everything I knew got tossed out the window after that day. I worried something freaky was going to happen to my body, thanks to you biting me. Shit! Do you have any idea what it's like to live with that kind of stress?"

"I—you're cussing. You don't normally cuss. "

"No?" Kannon paced back and forth in the shallows in front of Nisha. "You're right.

I don't normally cuss, but by God, this is what you've reduced me to. You don't have any idea what it's like to live with this kind of stress because you just bit me then fucking disappeared !”

“At the time I thought it best for you to stay with your—”

Kannon screeched.

Nisha flinched again.

“Aaaaand there we go. You. What you thought was best for me. Did I get a fucking say in that? Oh hell no!” Kannon yelled. “Then you turned around and bit me again. Do you know what consent is? Ever heard of this little thing called permission? Obviously not, since you just up and bit me again . Fucking hell!”

Kannon spun around and headed toward the beach. “Do whatever you have to do, but damn you, change. I'm not having this conversation hip deep in water.”

CHAPTER TEN

“WAIT!” NISHA panicked. With a flip of his tail, he darted after Kannon.

“What... dammit, Nisha!”

Nisha grabbed Kannon around the waist and quickly headed back to deeper water. Somehow he knew letting Kannon out of the water would be a mistake. Well, another mistake. He'd assumed Kannon would want an apology for what he'd done concerning Cree. It appeared he was mistaken about what he needed to apologize for.

“Just... just wait a minute.” Nisha grunted as Kannon kicked his tail. “Ow. That hurts, Kannon.”

“Really? Here's a thought... let go !”

This was going so horribly, horribly wrong. Now he had Kannon struggling in his arms. It appeared he was wrong about several things. Humans. Would he ever understand them? Obviously he should've apologized for starting the mating process with Kannon. Unfortunately that was not something he could bring himself to apologize for.

“Please, Kannon.” He gulped. Kannon was really mad. “ Please .”

So focused on Kannon fighting, they both almost went under the water when his mate suddenly stilled. Was Kannon okay? Had he somehow inadvertently hurt him?

“Kannon?” They were quite a distance from the beach, so he stopped swimming and treaded water with his tail to keep them afloat.

Kannon turned his head but didn’t make eye contact. “That’s the first time you’ve ever said please to me.”

Hearing the hopelessness and confusion in Kannon’s voice, Nisha turned Kannon to him. “I’m sorry for that. I am... I am sorry for so many things, my mate. The list is long and seems to be growing with every passing minute.”

Kannon stared at him then his lips twitched, and a small smile crossed his face. “But at least you’ve gotten started on it.”

His mate should only know happiness. He couldn’t change what he’d done fifteen years ago. That was in the past. He wasn’t sure he would’ve changed anything now either. With Cree showing up and threatening Kannon, he’d had to do something to protect his mate.

Claiming him would provide that protection. He was also willing to bet Kannon wouldn’t see it that way. If he was honest with himself, he had to admit he wanted this. Wanted to claim Kannon. He wanted his mate.

“Oh, Kannon. I’ve gone about this entirely wrong. Please understand, I regret scaring you to the point you wouldn’t go near the water for so long. I regret that your introduction to my people happened in such a frightful way. And I regret our mating hasn’t gone as smoothly as I could’ve wished.”

Kannon snorted.

“But as far as mating you? No. I don’t regret that at all. You mean more to me than the ocean itself. I... I need you.”

Kannon relaxed in his arms. “Dammit, how can I stay mad when you say stuff like that? From the moment I looked at you, there was this pull. No one has ever affected me like you have. Of course, I haven’t been seriously interested in anyone else since you bit me either.”

“We need to talk.”

“I agree. We need to talk, and talk calmly.” Kannon shoved his wet hair out of his face. “I know you’re probably more comfortable in the water, but I’m really not. At least, not yet. Can we do this on land?”

“I guess that’s only fair. Your unease of the water comes from me. But you’re right. I’m much more comfortable in the water than on land. I sincerely hope you can adjust.”

“Compromise. If this thing between us has a chance, we’re going to have to work on compromise. I also have a lot of questions I need answers to.”

“I will answer to the best of my ability.” Nisha released Kannon. “Why don’t you go ahead and wait for me on the beach? And, um, maybe it would be best for you to start heading on back. I can meet you at the bungalow.”

“I’m getting the distinct impression you’re trying to get rid of me.”

“That would be because I am.”

“Why?”

“Because honestly, my transformation might be a little... For an introduction to my kind, it might be a little extreme.”

“I’m here talking to you, so I’d say I’ve done been introduced to your kind. Now quit beating around the bush, and tell me what it is you’re trying to say.”

“I’m saying it can be rather... gruesome. There is no flash of light and suddenly I have legs. When I say transformation, I mean transformation. My tail splits and—I guess for lack of a better word—it devolves and forms human legs. It’s not pleasant. It’s not pretty. And yes, for a very brief time, it is painful. I don’t want to freak you out.”

“Okay, see? That’s what I’m talking about. Blunt, precise, and to the point. I don’t want to head back to the bungalow, especially after what happened, without you with me. So I’ll go to the beach, and I don’t know, turn my back and not watch. How’s that?”

“Good enough. Just remember you wanted to do this when you hear the transformation.” Nisha released Kannon and watched as his mate swam back toward the little beach.

When Nisha was satisfied Kannon was far enough away, he too swam to the beach and pulled himself out of the water. Looking up, he saw Kannon still facing him. Their eyes locked for a moment, and they stared at each other.

“One day I want the time to examine every square inch of that tail of yours.” With that, Kannon turned around and presented his back to Nisha.

Nisha flipped around so he was on his back. Resting on his elbows, he stared up at the cave, waiting. One day soon, he’d be more than happy to let Kannon explore. He eased back until he was flat on the sand. Breathing deeply, he prepared himself.

As the change started, he clamped his lips closed, refusing to let the pain out as it tore through him. He really wished Kannon would have gone ahead and not heard this.

Desperately he struggled to keep his cries inside. Centuries passed as the change ripped his body apart and remade it.

Once it was finished he lay in the sand, panting. He knew he needed to get up and go find Kannon, but he needed a minute. Just a minute to acclimate himself. Closing his eyes, he focused on the difference, now that he had legs instead of a tail.

He controlled his breathing and focused on centering himself. In... and out and... in and... out. As he settled into his human body, he felt a presence beside him. He opened his eyes to see Kannon sitting next to him on the beach.

“Are you okay?” Kannon reached out, but before he touched Nisha, he froze.

“I am, yes. I thought you were going to wait for me.”

Kannon sighed. “I was going to, but... That sound. That sound... my God, Nisha. I didn’t turn around, but as soon as I could I hurried down here to you. That was... something. I honestly felt kind of sick.”

Nisha set up and calmly wiggled his toes. “I did warn you.”

“Yes, you did. I’m glad now you didn’t let me watch it. That was seriously disturbing. We might get to that someday, but not right now.”

“Maybe.” Nisha stood then held his hand out to Kannon. Kannon clasped it and let Nisha pull him up.

“Um, what are you going to do about clothes?”

Nisha walked over to a waterproof bag, opened it up, and got a pair of shorts out. “I keep some things here for instances like this.” Nisha quickly dressed and returned to

Kannon.

He held out his hand. Never again would he force Kannon to do something he didn't want to do. When Kannon took his hand, relief swept through him. Maybe, just maybe, they could make this work. After extinguishing the lamps, they walked up the path until they got to the surface. The moon peeked out from behind the clouds. Once on land Nisha looked around, checking for threats.

Detecting none, they headed toward Kannon's bungalow, still holding hands. Nisha entered the bungalow and did a quick check for any dangers. Satisfied Cree hadn't come back, he moved aside and let Kannon enter.

"What a mess." Kannon removed a lamp from the floor and put it back on an end table. "Brett is going to freak."

"It's not as bad as it could have been." Nisha picked up several broken knickknacks and placed them on the coffee table.

"I guess." Kannon walked into the kitchen. He checked to see if there were any spare trash bags. He opened a cabinet under the sink and found a box of them. He returned to the living area. "At least no one was seriously hurt. I mean, Brett is going to be okay, right? He's getting married shortly."

"He will be. The blisters will be mostly gone by then."

"Good," Kannon said. "What the hell was that net thing on him?"

"It was a regular net coated with poisons that causes blisters when it comes in contact with skin. Brooke has a salve to treat them."

"Is that something you... your people... What do you call yourselves?"

“Merfolk. And yes, it’s something we make. The poison, in small doses, is used in several medicines. It can be very beneficial. It was never intended to be used as a weapon, but as you saw, it can be. Like any dangerous substance, it can be misused.”

“I see.”

Conversation died down as they cleaned up the place.

“Do you want something to drink?” Kannon asked once they were done.

“Just water. And thank you.”

After Kannon fixed a soda and Nisha’s water, they returned to the living area and sat on the couch. Kannon sat close to Nisha, his legs curled up underneath him and then studied his soda. “You know, it would’ve really been nice if you could’ve run this past me first. What if I didn’t feel what you felt? What if you had bit me, changed me, and there was no attraction between us?”

Was this what was bothering Kannon? “Do you remember the first time you saw me?”

Kannon snorted. “You bet your ass I do.”

“You were attracted to me even though you were scared. And yes, before you argue, you were. I could smell your arousal that day. But it’s more than that, Kannon. We believe we’re paired with a mate. Usually it is another mer, but this time it was human.”

“Lucky you.”

“Yes, I am very lucky.” He needed Kannon to see he meant what he said. “I know

that was sarcasm, but I am lucky. The moment I saw you in the water I knew you were my mate.”

“But—”

“No buts. There is no mistake. You can call it Fate or whatever you want. It doesn’t matter. You are mine, and I am yours.”

Kannon laid his head on Nisha’s shoulder. “But do you love me?”

“I’ve never experienced love, but I can tell you already what I feel for you is strong. Deep. And it grows with every passing second. What about you?”

“I’ve never been attracted to anyone as I am to you. And just like you, what I feel for you is also growing.”

Kannon lifted his head off Nisha’s shoulder and sat up. “So now what?”

“I would ask that you consider living on the island. I have to live near the water, Kannon.” Nisha reached out and threaded his hands through Kannon’s hair. The vibrant color fascinated him. So soft and silky.

Kannon sighed. “Of course, the one place I swore I’d never be.”

“I understand that, but I’m a creature of the deep blue sea. This area is my territory. I allow certain merfolk to reside here. They keep the area clear of crap humans throw in the ocean, and in turn they depend on me for protection. I... I don’t think I could survive away from here.”

“Hey, hey, hey.” Kannon put his hand on top of Nisha’s knee. “I never said I wouldn’t live here. I totally get what you’re saying. You have a life I can’t really

even begin to comprehend, and it's here. I was just saying I never figured I'd end up here. I can't imagine you in the big city."

Nisha shuddered. "Neither can I. Is it going to be hard for you to move here? I mean, in terms of furniture and stuff like that."

Kannon shrugged. "Oddly enough, I don't have much. I rented an apartment that came fully furnished. I just never... It didn't feel right putting down roots. At the time, I didn't understand it." Kannon turned to look at Nisha. "I guess I understand why now."

"Thank you. I know I've turned your life upside down, and I truly am very appreciative that you are willing to do what I need in order for us to live together."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KANNON TURNED pale. “About that... you do live in an actual house, right? Not a cave? I mean, I like electricity and indoor plumbing... and, and... Internet. And a bed. And a coffee maker.” Kannon scrubbed his hands over his face. “Oh man.”

“Yes, I have an aboveground dwelling and yes, it has electricity and indoor plumbing. There’s Internet, a coffee maker, and a large bed I can’t wait to introduce you to.” Nisha looked around. “Actually, it looks a lot like this bungalow. I don’t have a pool, though. My pool’s out there.” Nisha waved at the ocean right outside the bungalow.

“That’s where we’ll be living the majority of the time, right?”

“As I said, I am a creature of water. I also have a belowground dwelling, but don’t panic. You’ll like it. And remember, you can breathe underwater now. The world beneath the surface is so different. I can’t wait to show you.”

A thought overtook Kannon, and he grimaced. “Exploring other worlds will have to wait until tomorrow. I’m exhausted. I just want to go to bed.”

“Come on, then.” Nisha held his hand out to Kannon. “Let’s take a quick shower and get the ocean water off us, then we’ll go to bed.”

Kannon took Nisha’s hand and let him pull him off the couch. “Are you planning on staying the night?”

“You’re my mate. You’ll never sleep without me again.”

That right there should've been enough to make Kannon flee in the opposite direction, but it wasn't. Nisha was powerful, with a naturally dominant personality, but it didn't worry him. That was just who Nisha was.

While he did find it hot, he also knew he was able to stand up to Nisha if he needed to. While he didn't mind a little domination in the bedroom, he was certainly nobody's "little woman." Even though it was tight, they showered together.

They touched intimately, but nothing happened. Kannon was just too tired and emotionally drained. He stood blinking on the bathmat as Nisha quickly dried him. The next thing he knew, Nisha had bundled him into bed and wrapped herself around him.

THE SOUNDS of the jungle woke him the next morning. Thankfully Nisha had remembered to close the curtains so it wasn't too bright. He was on his back, with Nisha facing him. Seeing that Nisha still slept, he took the time to study the sculptured lines of Nisha's face.

His beautiful blue hair was a tousled mess around his face and over the pillow. Someone, probably him, had kicked the sheet partially off during the night. He admired Nisha's smooth chest and the sleek muscles. There wasn't a hair in sight. Nisha's breathing was deep and even, and Kannon sighed contentedly.

Nisha's eyes blinked open. Kannon stared into those unique blue eyes. While he might still have a multitude of questions, there was no doubt in his mind there was something deep and strong between them.

"Good morning."

"Good morning to you too," Nisha replied.

Kannon's stomach growled. "I'm starving. You hungry?"

"I could eat, yes." The rest of the sheet slid off him.

For a moment Kannon stared at the long, lean lines of the man in his bed, his mouth watering. Nisha's cock jumped and started to fill. Kannon gulped. Then his stomach growled, and Nisha sighed. "Up you go, mate. Let's get you fed."

Blushing fiercely he hopped out of bed... and then stumbled when Nisha swatted his ass. Stunned, he turned back to the bed, one hand on his ass and his cock hard as a brick. "What...?"

"Love that blush of yours. I may have to heat your ass up some more too, if it makes you blush like that."

Kannon gasped, his hand still on his ass. "You... you spanked me."

Nisha sniffed the air. "I did, and you liked it."

Kannon's mouth snapped shut, and he rubbed his ass. He had enjoyed it. His ass stung, but nothing serious. As the warmth faded he found himself wondering what another smack would feel like. Wasn't that a kick in the head? He hadn't known he wanted the first and now he was curious what another would feel like?

"I, um, yeah. Wow. I was going to... to... oh yeah, fix breakfast. Holy cow." Kannon grabbed a pair of shorts he'd thrown over a chair in the bedroom, tugged them on, and hurried out of the room.

Barefoot and shirtless, he strode to the kitchen, his mind swirling with all sorts of interesting thoughts. Never in a million years would he have thought a spanking would've turned him on. But it had. Whoo boy, had it ever. Maybe that was

something they needed to explore later. Right now he had enough new things in his life to worry about.

As he cooked, his mind turned over all that had happened over the past several days. Now he knew why he'd always felt like he was on hold—like he was waiting for something. The “something” must have been Nisha.

“Well, living with a merman will certainly liven things up.”

Seeing that everything was ready, he prepared their plates but paused midway. He might not truly be a merman, but he was certainly going to have gills, according to Nisha. Nisha had been in a lot of pain when he transformed. Would he feel the same sort of pain when his gills came out? He and pain didn't get along well.

At all.

He jumped when arms circled his waist and pulled him back against a firm chest. “I can hear you worrying all the way from the bedroom. What's wrong?”

“Sorry, sorry.”

“Kannon?”

Kannon relaxed in Nisha's arms. “It was nothing, really. I just happened to think about something. I'm sure I'm going to be thinking of several things I forgot to ask. By the way, breakfast is ready. Hope you like bacon, eggs, and biscuits.”

“I'm more than happy to eat anything my mate prepares for me. I am honored.” Nisha kissed the back of Kannon's neck and then stepped away. “It's natural for you to have questions. If there's something, ask me. Don't think it's too small or silly.”

They sat at the table. “You’re right. Okay, then. You said I’ll have gills, right?”

“Yes. Just like the ones you saw on Brett. And on me.”

“Does it hurt? When they—I’m not sure how you’d say this—but when they come out, does it hurt?”

“Absolutely not. It’s not like when my tail transforms into human legs. The gills are always there, whether you’re in the water or not—whether you’re using them are not.”

“Oh.” Kannon put a hand to his neck. Now that he was touching the skin there, he swore he could feel ridges. “Didn’t see that coming.”

“Skinfolds will hide them when not in use. When you’re underwater and need to breathe, you’ll have to concentrate in order to use them until it becomes second nature to you.”

“Oh wow, okay. I think I can handle that.” Maybe.

“Don’t worry about asking me questions. It’s the only way you’ll learn.” Nisha nodded to Kannon’s plate of food. “Please eat. You went to all this trouble; don’t let it go cold.”

“You’re right.” Kannon picked up his fork and dug in.

After they finished, Nisha helped Kannon clean the kitchen. Kannon stood by the counter, sipping his coffee. Suddenly he slapped a hand to his head. “Jesus, do you realize today’s Friday? I’d totally forgotten! Their wedding is tomorrow.”

“Yes, I just happened to think about that myself. I’m sure Brooke has most

everything ready to go by now, but maybe you should call and check in.”

“Maybe I should.” Kannon put his coffee on the counter and went back to the bedroom, searching for his cell phone. Moments later he returned, phone in hand. He unlocked it and dialed Brett’s number.

“Hey! Brett, how you doing man? You feel okay? Is everything okay?”

“Kannon? Damn, am I glad to hear from you. The last I saw you... yeah. You were rather pissed. I was just getting ready to call and... um... is everything okay with you ? I mean, I know Nisha would never hurt you, but he and Brooke tend to think differently than we do, know what I mean?”

“Understatement of the year, but yeah, everything’s perfectly fine. I’m fine. Nisha and I had a long talk last night and... Well, let’s just say I’m no longer the odd man out. We’ll talk more in person. Now, what about the wedding tomorrow evening? Can we help with anything?”

“Brooke has everything under control. Seriously, we’re not doing all that much. I’ve got my clothes, Brooke has her dress, the flowers and cake are finished, the trellis is ready... We got it all under control.”

“What about my shirt?”

“It came yesterday afternoon, and in all the excitement I forgot to mention it. You want to come to the resort and pick it up?”

“Yeah, Nisha and I will. I want to make sure you’re completely healed too.”

“Sounds good. And I am. Brooke had some stuff she used on me last night. Just check in with the front desk before coming up.”

They finished getting dressed and used the golf cart to return to the resort. They took the private elevator to the penthouse. The door of the elevator opened and Kannon goggled. Light-colored hardwoods spread out in front of them and drew his eye to an endless array of windows that overlooked the ocean.

As he looked around the living area, he noticed a 360o custom gas fireplace finished in mirror-polished stainless steel in the middle of the room. The L-shaped couch was white leather with a black base. A black leather tufted ottoman sat in the middle.

To the right of the living area was a large graphic rug done in blacks and whites, with a black table sitting on top of it. There were white chairs around it. Everywhere he looked there were splashes of red in the décor. It was all very modern, sleek, and cold. It actually reminded him a lot of his apartment back home. Ex-home. My home is here now.

“Hey!” Brett suddenly walked into the living area and ambled over to where Kannon stood. “I’m so glad to see you’re okay.” Brett pulled Kannon into a hug.

“Me?” Kannon hugged Brett, stepped back, and scanned Brett’s arms, looking for any blisters. Not seeing any, he breathed easier. “Thank goodness. I don’t see any blisters. I was really worried.”

“Naw, that stuff Brooke has worked miracles. I got a few still, but nothing you can see.” Brett motioned for them to follow him into the living area. “Are we good, man?”

“I understand why you didn’t tell me, but it’s going to take me some time, Brett. I’m... there’s a lot in my head, you know. And you hurt me even though I understand. So yes, we’re good... or we will be. That’s the best I can do.”

“I understand.”

“Good,” Kannon said. “Now, the wedding?”

“Right. So, the wedding. I swear, this just snuck up on us. Have a seat, guys.”

Kannon curled into Nisha on the couch.

“We’re going to do a quick run-through later this afternoon. Brooke’s maid of honor is also a mermaid and won’t show up until later this afternoon too. She doesn’t spend much time on land.”

“What’s her name?” Kannon asked, intrigued. He never stopped to think that Brooke’s maid of honor would be anything other than human. That was a habit he was going to have to break.

“Cora,” Brett said.

“She’s very tall, with hip-length dark blue hair,” Nisha said. “Very strong-willed and quite good at hand-to-hand combat. She and Brooke have been friends for a very long time.”

“Yeah, she and Brooke are pretty tight,” Brett said. “Cora can be pretty intimidating. She wasn’t overly impressed by me in the beginning. Nisha? Do you have your clothes?”

“Of course.”

“Good. Kannon?” Brett glanced at Kannon. “You got all your stuff too? Outside of the shirt, of course.”

“All I needed was a shirt. I ironed the white pants and hung them up as soon as I knew I needed them, so they’re ready to go. Since we’re not wearing shoes, I’m

pretty much ready. What time do you want us here tomorrow afternoon?"

"The ceremony starts at five o'clock," Brett said. "It's going to be quick and to the point since it's only going to be us. There'll be a small reception held by the staff for us in one of the smaller reception rooms, and I need you guys to be there. We'll do the cake and a champagne toast at that point."

"Oh, also bring a small duffel with your regular clothes so you have something to change into," Brett added. "After the reception and once any well-wishers leave, we'll head down to that cove they use to transform. The real celebration will take place below the water."

"Again, it won't be anything spectacular. Most of the people in my territory have already met Brett. I'll introduce you as my mate at that time too," said Nisha.

"Will there be a lot of your people there?" Kannon asked. His stomach rolled uneasily. Talk about jumping into the deep end.

"No," Nisha said. "I don't allow many people in my territory."

"Okay, guys, that's pretty much everything. Like I said, it's going to be really simplistic," Brett said. "Any questions?"

"None that I can think of. It sounds like you have it all under control," Kannon said. He wished he felt more in control. Not that things hadn't seemed real before, but now they really seemed real. He wasn't sure he was ready to be thrust into the middle of all this.

Brett checked his wristwatch. "I'm supposed to meet Brooke at Sandals in about twenty minutes for a late lunch. Would you like to join us?"

“Um, I’m not really sure...? Nisha?”

“Actually, I was thinking about taking Kannon for a little swim.” Nisha clasped Kannon’s hand. “It’s time you see my world.”

“But...” Was he ready for this? “I thought you planned to introduce me after the wedding?”

“I do. I thought you might like your first time to be a little more private. It would just be you and me,” said Nisha.

“In the ocean?”

“Yes, mate. In the ocean. It’s time to replace those scary memories with something much more appropriate. Will you come with me?”

Kannon took a deep breath and slowly released it. He squeezed Nisha’s hand as he stared into his eyes. Time to face his fears. “I can go for a swim, yeah.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

SHOCK HELD Nisha immobile, but not for long. Did he hear Kannon right? He sprang to his feet, dragging Kannon up with him. “We’ll catch you later, Brett,” Nisha said. “Give Brooke our love, wherever she’s gotten off to. See you later.”

Behind him he heard Brett chuckling, but he didn’t dare slow down or loosen his grip on his mate. Finally, finally , he could show Kannon all the wonders of his world.

“What’s the rush?” Kannon gasped as Nisha dragged him into the elevator.

Nisha just grunted. When the doors opened, he pulled Kannon from the elevator. Curious eyes followed them as he hurried his mate from the resort and onto the sandy beaches that spread out in front of them.

“Dude, slow down. Loosen up on the grip a little bit too, will you?”

The amusement in Kannon’s voice finally penetrated the fog of excitement around Nisha. Guess he did look pretty ridiculous dragging Kannon behind him. He glanced at Kannon.

“Sorry.” Nisha ran a hand through his hair, slightly bemused. “I guess I was a little excited.”

“A little?” Kannon sorted.

Their joined hands swayed gently as they walked, and Nisha forced his body to relax.

“It’s just... I can’t wait to show you everything. I want to see how you react. I remember how you were before I ruined—”

“Hey, hey. None of that. Let’s not start digging up the past and all that happened in it.”

“I’m not, I’m really not. But you had such a childlike joy. Everything you saw beneath the surface fascinated you but because of me that changed.”

Kannon stopped which also halted Nisha. “Okay, see that’s what I’m talking about. So let’s settle this once and for all. Do you regret starting the mating process fifteen years ago?”

“No.” Was Kannon kidding? Mating him was the best thing he’d ever done. But... “What I regret is...”

“Is what?”

“How it was done.” Nisha glanced out over the ocean and signed. “I regret I scared you. I truly regret fear drove you from the water. I took your enjoyment of the ocean from you.”

“Okay, that’s a good point. But that’s over and done with. It wasn’t the water that scared me—it was what was in the water. Meaning you... and just hold up.” Kannon stopped Nisha before he spoke. “Fear can distort memories, which is what happened with me. You’re not nearly as scary as I remember.” Kannon winked.

“Um...” Nisha quirked an eyebrow at Kannon. “Thanks?”

Kannon laughed. “You’re welcome.”

They fell silent as they made their way to the cove Nisha used before. Was Kannon nervous? Unbelievably, Nisha was. What if Kannon freaked out on him? What then? They fell silent as they descended into the cavern.

He released Kannon's hand, lit one of the torches so Kannon could see, and walked over to the dry bags hidden behind an outcrop of rocks. He opened one and fished out a couple of beach blankets then returned to where he left Kannon standing. He spread the blanket out on the sand.

"I'm going to leave my clothes here. This way they won't be covered in sand when we return." Nisha took his shirt off.

"Oh. Um, why are you...?"

"I have a tail, remember? It doesn't work well with shorts."

"Ahhh, gotcha." Kannon shuffled his feet. "Do I need to strip too? I see why you do, but I'd be more comfortable in my trunks. Is that okay?"

Nisha paused in undressing, his hands on his waistband. "You do whatever makes you feel best. I hate the feeling of clothes, but then, I don't normally wear them."

"Okay, good. These aren't my swim trunks, but going naked..." Kannon shrugged as he dragged his shirt over his head. "Maybe I'll go skinny-dipping later after I'm used to this whole deal."

"I sincerely hope so." Nisha eyed Kannon's chest.

"Jeez, stop that or that towel is going to be put to other uses." Kannon adjusted his cock.

As tempting as that was, he really wanted to introduce Kannon to his world. Laying his mate out on the towel could wait until later. After he stripped, Nisha took Kannon by the hand and walked toward the water. Already he could hear Kannon's breathing increase. Once the water was around their waists, he took Kannon's other hand and looked his mate straight the eye.

"Now, I want you to think about breathing. Breathe in. Feel your diaphragm contract? Try to feel it as it moves downward. In, and out. In, and out. Good. Close your eyes."

Kannon closed his eyes.

"Think about your neck. Think about all the nerves and muscles in there. How smooth the skin is. But wait. What's that? Maybe it wasn't as smooth as you first thought. Feel something there? Something that has never been there before? Yes?"

Kannon nodded.

"Focus on that. Does it tingle?"

Again Kannon nodded.

"That's excellent. That's exactly what we want. Keep your eyes close and keep concentrating."

Kannon's breathing smoothed out into a steady in and out rhythm.

Nisha lowered his voice. "You're doing so well. Concentrate. Keep breathing for me... lose yourself in the rhythm. Good, good. Keep breathing, and look deep inside yourself. Focus on the tingling in your neck."

Kannon frowned then his face smoothed out.

“Feel it?”

Kannon nodded.

“Good. Concentrate on that feeling. We’re going to open your gills now. I want you to pretend like you’re trying to open a window. A window that’s been painted over. It’s stuck. Force the window open. Now .”

Kannon’s breathing accelerated, and his face screwed up into a grimace as his body tensed. His eyebrows lowered, and his lips tightened. The cords in his neck stood out and then Kannon suddenly grunted his eyes flew open just as the gills appeared on his neck.

“Holy crap!” Kannon reached for his neck, but Nisha caught his hands.

“Easy. Be very gentle. They’re going to be sensitive especially since this is their first time opening.”

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh. I can feel them!” Kannon hopped from one foot to the other in the water. Small waves drifted out. “Seriously, like really feel them. They kind of tickled when they opened and, and... holy moly! I have gills.”

“Yes you do, mate.” Nisha pressed a swift kiss to Kannon’s lips even as he smiled at the excitement in Kannon’s voice. “Now listen to me.”

Kannon stopped jumping around and stared at Nisha. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Of course not. I’m just going to give you a quick crash course on gills. As you know, fish—just like humans—breathe oxygen, but their gills pull oxygen out of the water. Merfolk do the same. Now, so can you.”

“How exactly do they work? I mean, I’m not sure I can wrap my head around this.”

“In the most simplistic terms, water is forced across the gills and dissolved oxygen is taken in by tiny blood vessels and veins in the gills. Seawater carries away the carbon dioxide.”

“You know, I never noticed it until now, but you would’ve made a good teacher,” Kannon said. “You like to lecture.”

“I... oh, bite me.”

“No, I’m serious. You’re really good at lecturing.”

“Wait until we get home,” Nisha growled. “I’m going to show you all about ‘lecturing’ ... possibly with the flat of my hand.”

“Ohhhh, can’t wait.”

Nisha shook his head. “You’re distracting me. As I was saying, essentially the main thing to remember is not to hold your breath once under the water. Let your body do what it needs to do. Don’t fight it or panic. Remember, you won’t drown.”

Kannon bit his lip then nodded. “Right. Don’t panic. Bet that’s easier said than done. Man, this is all kinds of scary, but I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

“Don’t be nervous. I’ll be right there with you.” Nisha let go of Kannon’s hands and step back. “Give me just a second. I’m going to change to my natural form.”

Nisha stepped backward in the water, and clearing his mind, began the process that would transform him back to his preferred form. Luckily it took less time than bringing forth his human legs. Oddly enough, going from legs to tail didn’t hurt. It

stung, yes. But it wasn't anywhere as bad as bringing forth his legs.

Maybe it was the fact that everything, for lack of better description, melted together and reformed—there was no tearing. Whatever the reason was, he was grateful it took less time. As his tail formed he stretched, shaking out its length and flexing his caudal fin.

He surfaced and looked at Kannon. "Ready?"

Kannon took one last deep breath. "Ready."

He wasn't ready, Nisha could plainly see that, but he wasn't going to delay this any longer. The thumping of Kannon's heart was all Nisha could hear. He grasped Kannon's hand and pulled him farther into the water until they could no longer touch bottom.

The best way to do this would be to grab Kannon and pull him under, and just force him to do what needed to be done... but he couldn't. He absolutely refused to terrify Kannon again. Still holding hands, and a quick wink to boost Kannon's courage, Nisha stopped propelling his tail.

Slowly they sank under the water. He let go of Kannon's hands, and with a featherlight touch, eased his fingers across Kannon's gills. Even underwater, he could see Kannon's eyes widening. The first flickers of fear raced across his face.

Breathing underwater was such an unnatural act for his mate. Kannon would have a hard time denying his human urges even though he was no longer fully human. But just because his brain knew it didn't mean his body did... and that was what Kannon was fighting now.

Nisha's sensitive hearing picked up the steadily increasing pounding of Kannon's

heart. Kannon's eyes bulged. Instinct kicked in, and Kannon thrashed desperately as he tried to surface. Nisha knew Kannon wouldn't drown. Problem was Kannon didn't know that.

He was unable to believe such a feat quite yet. It broke his heart to see the fear in Kannon's eyes. Unable to think of anything else, Nisha grabbed Kannon and kissed him. He kissed him, pouring every bit of love and promise he had into the kiss.

He trilled softly as he touched Kannon's gills once more. Please, love. Trust me. You can do this. Just... breathe. The kiss spiraled out of control as Nisha trapped Kannon's face with his hands. Kannon's hair spread out as they sank father down. He's holding his breath. Exactly what I told him not to do.

Even though Nisha knew it was instinct, Kannon simply could not do this. Nisha thrust his tongue into Kannon's mouth and then drew back, inviting Kannon's to follow—to come and explore his mouth.

He trilled with joy when the first tentative brush up Kannon's tongue. I'm sorry, love. Nisha bit him with his sharp little teeth. Kannon jerked in his arms, his body trembling. It had to sting, Nisha knew, but he needed it to.

He needed something to knock Kannon out of his flight or fight mindset. He hoped the kiss and the bite would. Then Nisha saw it... Kannon's chest expanded and contracted. Yes! His mate just took his first breath underwater.

Kannon jerked his head back, ran his hands across his lips, then glared at Nisha. Nisha grabbed Kannon by the waist to stop their descent, his tail slowly moving back and forth. They hung suspended in the water, Kannon still glaring at him.

Letting the joy he felt spill across his face, he waited. Then he saw it. The aggravation on Kannon's face quickly disappeared as excitement replaced it. Finally.

The look of shock on Kannon's face was priceless.

Nisha held Kannon as he watched Kannon's gills working perfectly. His mate was breathing underwater. Now for some fun. Still holding hands, Nisha used his powerful tail to send them toward the underwater opening of the cave.

When they reached it he slowed and looked at Kannon. Hopefully his mate would understand he was taking them out of the cave and into the deep blue sea. Once they got back on land he'd have to explain to Kannon they had a way to converse—mates were able to communicate telepathically while in mer form—but it would take some time to develop.

While that was a private form of communication, merfolk had developed a range and a variety of noises to commune verbally. As with whales, they used four main types of sounds: trills, clicks, whistles, and pulsed calls. Clicks were used for identification.

When sound waves bounced off an object, it returned to a mer. A pleasant return click help differentiate between friend and predators. Aquatic life, for the most part, fell in the friendly category. Their whistles and pulsed calls were used during social activities.

Humans heard pulsed calls as squeaks, screams, and squawks. When a mer trilled, it was to offer comfort. Merfolk also use their tails and fins to make loud slapping noises on the surface of the water. This was a nonverbal communicate that could be heard for below the surface miles away.

It was used as a warning sign of aggression. But for right now they were reduced to playing charades. He pointed out the cave opening, and Kannon nodded. Excellent. He couldn't wait to see Kannon's reaction once they left the cave.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HOLY COW.

As they left the underwater cave, Kannon struggled to keep up with Nisha. It wasn't that his mate was purposely leaving him... it was more that Kannon was enthralled by everything around him and kept getting distracted.

Oh, how he wished he could communicate with Nisha right now. Questions flooded his mind. The joy of what was in front of him was almost enough to sidetrack him from the fluttering he felt at his neck. He had gills. Gills.

Maybe if he repeated that a thousand more times, it would finally sink in. He could feel their movement as water flowed across them. It was indescribable. Awe-inspiring. And freaky as hell. He glanced over at Nisha and watched as his mate's tail slowly moved up and down as he swam.

He remembered wanting to examine it inch by inch the first opportunity he had. As soon as the exploration was over, he certainly intended to do just that. It quickly became obvious he needed his diving flippers. He just simply wasn't fast enough to keep up with Nisha and that fabulous tail of his.

They swam toward a huge reef of coral in dynamic reds and yellows. It'd been many years since he'd been scuba diving, and he'd forgotten how rich with life the ocean was beneath the surface. He did remember enough to know that nothing had ever been as clear and vibrant as what he saw now.

Had mating with Nisha improved his eyesight? It must have. As he swam around and through the reefs, Kannon noticed the rocks on the floor of the ocean, and the remains of other animals. Unfortunately, there was also human trash scattered there, such as tires and soda cans. As he drifted closer to the reefs, he turned his head this way and that, trying to see everything, and his bubbles distracted him... reminding him once again he was breathing underwater.

He glanced up toward the surface, and all he could see were beams of light that tried to penetrate the water. A shrimp flung itself off a rock and made a mad dash to swim away, claiming his attention.

Fascinated, he watched its progress. Butterfly fish, angel fish, soldier fish, and squirrel fish—just to name a few—darted up to check him out. Giant grouper, reef sharks, and ribbon-tailed stingrays drifted by.

Amazed, he could only watch. He heard a click and he glanced to his right, to where Nisha rested on an outcrop of rocks. His blue hair floated around his head, and his tail swished back and forth gently in the water. His beauty took Kannon's breath.

He not only fit in the gorgeous underwater landscape, he belonged there. Now he understood why Nisha's hair was that stunning blue. His pale skin blended with the ocean floor. Everything down here was bluish green, with pops of vibrant color. Nisha's skin and hair coloring fit.

Now he saw why Nisha preferred to live here rather than on land. Know what? Screw waiting to explore that tail. I'm going to do it now. He swam toward Nisha. Unmoving, Nisha hiked an eyebrow at Kannon. Kannon knelt by Nisha, his eyes on the bottom part of Nisha's tail.

From the waist down, Nisha was... well, part fish. He glanced up. Nisha's human form ended around his belly button. From there down, his merman form took over.

He reached out and gently touched Nisha's hip, or where Nisha's hip should have been.

The scales were silky and smooth, which surprised Kannon. It reminded him of ocean water under his fingertips—glass smooth and calm. The scales shimmered and sparkled like polished sea glass in the clear water. Intrigued, he bent closer.

The fragile scales were molded together, as small as his fingernail. He trailed his hand down Nisha's tail until he reached the caudal fin, which was forked. He stroked the fin and felt it twitch under his hand. Nisha trilled, and Kannon glanced up at him.

Or he started to, but something caught his attention. Kannon stroking Nisha's tail must have aroused him, because his cock was slowly protruding. Kannon gulped. He hadn't really thought about when Nisha made love to him before, even though he'd been in his merman form.

The mechanics quickly stopped being important once they started making love. But now he wanted to know. Nisha thrust his lower body at him, which apparently meant he had permission to proceed.

So proceed he did. Nisha's cock was inside a pouch in Nisha's body, and it now protruded through a slit in the skin just about exactly where his human penis would have been. Fascinating. He remembered how it felt entering him. Now he saw why.

The tip of Nisha's cock was rounded and narrow, but it flared out as it grew. No wonder it felt like it was opening him when they fucked. It had been. Tentatively he reached out and stroked it. For some reason, he expected it to feel cool, although he couldn't say why. But it wasn't.

It was warm and firm—just like the rest of Nisha—and an iridescent blue, just like his tail. Isn't that just all kinds of neat? He stroked Nisha's cock, and the shudder that

ripped through Nisha surprised Kannon. So did the hand that wrapped around his. Now he shuddered, his cock going hard too.

Nisha grinned, exposing sharp teeth, as they stroked him off together. Nisha arched, his body bowing as he came. His tail jerked and thrashed. Kannon watched as water washed Nisha's come away.

Nisha leaned forward and trailed his webbed fingers over Kannon's face then kissed him. The kiss was sweet and quick, and Kannon glanced down to watch as Nisha's cock disappeared back into the slit. Fascinating.

Nisha tapped him on the shoulder and motioned for him to follow. Time passed as they swam, played with a school of dolphins, and explored. Growing tired, Kannon tapped Nisha on the arm and pointed back in the general direction from which they came.

Nisha nodded his head, and together they swam back. Kannon was surprised to see exactly how far out they'd gone. Eventually they made it back to the underwater cave and swam into it. They surfaced in the cove.

Immediately Nisha took him by the shoulders and turned Kannon to face him. Since they couldn't touch bottom, Nisha supported Kannon, using his tail to keep them above water.

"Okay, we're going to do the same thing as we did before," Nisha said. "I want you to concentrate. Think about the gill flaps closing. Visualize them flush with your skin so they can't be seen. When you feel the tingle, you'll know it's happening."

After several minutes, and some fierce concentration on Kannon's part, the gill flaps finally closed. Kannon pushed his hair out of the face. "That's the coolest thing ever. I got to ask you, though, when the gill flaps are open and I'm using them underwater,

can I speak?"

"You could, but your vocal cords don't really work underwater. You could make noise, and possibly sound out a word or two, but you're not going to talk like we're talking now. You can't make the click and pulsed calls, like I can."

"That's too bad. I'd like to be able to communicate while we're underwater."

"Well, in regards to that, we'll be able to, eventually. It just takes a little while for the mating bond between us to strengthen. But eventually you and I will be able to speak telepathically. All mates can."

"Just wow. This gets better and better. You'll be in my head? And you can hear me?" Kannon suddenly frowned. "Does that mean you can read my mind?"

"No, I can't read your mind any more than you will be able to read mine. But you will be able to hear me when I speak to you."

"So eventually we can talk."

"Yes, eventually."

"Awesome. There were so many things I wanted to ask you while we were down there, but I couldn't. It really bugged me."

"You took to it exceptionally well. I was very impressed with how calm you were after you managed to get the gills open. I can tell you now Brett wasn't nearly as easy to deal with. And no, I'm not going to tell you what happened. Sufficient to say Brooke had her hands full teaching him."

"Oh yeah, you can bet your tail fin I'm asking him about that."

Nisha laughed. “Up to you. I need to transform. Why don’t you go on up to the shore, use one of the beach towels to dry off, and get dressed? I’ll join you shortly.”

“Sounds good to me.” Kannon walked to the beach.

As he waded out of the water, he felt a moment of disorientation, almost as if his body was readjusting. That had never happened before, so he assumed it was connected to using his gills for the first time.

By the time the water was around his ankles, he felt normal once more. Well, as normal as a person who was capable of breathing underwater could feel. From his place on the beach, he heard Nisha moan quietly.

As cool as having a tail would be, he was very grateful he didn’t have to go through the pain of transforming which Nisha did. Opening his gills might have tickled some, but it was certainly nothing compared to what Nisha was going through.

The soft pad of feet on sand drew his attention, and he turned around. Nisha had legs now, and was using one of the beach towels to dry off. Once dry, he found a pair of shorts and redressed.

“Ready to go?”

Kannon twisted his hair, trying to get as much water out as he could. “Yep. Let’s go.”

They returned to Kannon’s bungalow. While Nisha showered, Kannon checked his clothes to make sure he had everything he needed.

Nisha walked into the bedroom, with a towel around his waist. Kannon glanced at Nisha. “Just had a thought—where are your clothes for the wedding?”

“I left them in the spare bedroom at the penthouse. Brett offered me a room at the resort, but I really didn’t want to take up a paying room when I didn’t need one. I slept in their spare bedroom when I wasn’t in the ocean.”

“So I guess we need to make a quick trip up there and get them?”

“No, I’ll just call Brett and have one of his employees run my clothes to your bungalow. I better do that now while it’s on my mind. Can I borrow your cell phone?”

“Sure.” Kannon opened his cell and called Brett.

He handed it to Nisha. While Nisha talked to Brett, Kannon wandered into the kitchen to hunt up something to eat. He was starving. He thought about asking Nisha if he wanted to return to the resort and get some food, but after all he’d experienced that afternoon, he really wanted to be alone with him.

It was all so new. So instead, he scrounged around until he found a pan of frozen lasagna. He popped it in the microwave to partially defrost, and then placed the pan in the oven to finish cooking.

While they waited for the lasagna, he found some chips and cheese dip. They could nibble on that while they waited for the food to cook.

Nisha walked into the kitchen and placed the cell on the counter. “Brett’s sending somebody over with my clothes. He’ll be here shortly.” Nisha grabbed a chip and bit into it. “Hungry, are we?”

“Starving. Like seriously. I’m going to munch on this until the food’s ready. Want some?”

“Of the chips and dip?”

Kannon chuckled. “For now.” He looked over at the clock on the microwave. It was late afternoon. “We spent a lot more time in the water than I thought.”

“We did. Swimming burns a lot of calories too. On top of that, your body has changed and adapted. You’re going to need more calories than you used to consume. You have a higher metabolism now.”

“Cool. Want something to drink?”

“Water would be good.”

“Sure thing. It’s odd, I want water too. Never been much for just plain water, though.”

“You will be now. Water’s the best thing for you. It’ll help keep you hydrated. You’ll want to make sure to drink several glasses a day.”

“Which is good for me, anyway.” Kannon removed two bottles of water from the refrigerator and gave one to Nisha. “So, I can eat all I want and not worry about it?”

“Within reason. I will tell you there’s no such thing as a fat mermaid or merman.”

“Speaking of merfolk—and I’m not exactly sure what the right word is so I’m just going to go for it—are merfolk the only nonhumans around? Are there other beings? Would ‘beings’ be the right word? Would paranormals be more correct? Shifters maybe?”

“Honestly, I have no idea what else exists out there. It stands to reason that if we exist, there are other beings who aren’t fully human too. But have I met any? No.”

“Interesting. And kind of scary if you think about it.”

“Humans tend to be a little arrogant in the belief they’re the only sentient being on this planet. But that works out well for us, so I can’t really complain.”

“It sure does.”

“I’m not sure shifter’s the correct word for us either. From what Brooke has told me about the books she’s read with shifters in them, shifters are beings who can turn into animals. We don’t turn into an animal. We have two forms: one with legs and one with a tail. I guess, though, we do ‘shift’ from one form to the other.”

“Huh. Is there any type of written history, or anything about where you guys came from?”

“No, not really.” Nisha sipped his water. “The best we have are stories passed down from generation to generation. Those stories say we were once fully human millions of years ago, but slowly moved to the ocean to hunt and live. As time passed, we evolved to fit our new habitat.”

“It’s funny you should mention that. I remember seeing a documentary on TV a couple years ago that had something to do with that.”

“Yeah, I think Brooke saw the one you’re referring to. It freaked her out just exactly how true to form it turned out being.”

“I bet.” Kannon checked the lasagna then closed the oven door. “I’m going to go take a quick shower. This has about twenty more minutes to cook, and then it should be ready.”

“I’ll keep an eye on it while you go get cleaned up.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back shortly.”

Kannon walked back to the bedroom, stripped, and took a shower. When he returned, Nisha’s clothes had arrived, and Nisha was taking the lasagna out of the oven. After they ate and cleaned up the kitchen, they spent some time lounging around outside and talking.

Brett called, and they returned to the resort to do a quick run-through of the wedding. Nisha introduced Cora to Kannon. Cora was very nice, even though she didn’t have much to say. He was a stranger, and it was very obvious that even though he was Nisha’s mate, she wasn’t comfortable with him yet.

Kannon didn’t take it personally. Privately he wondered if many of Nisha’s friends would treat him that way when they met, but it wasn’t something he was overly worried about. If he was honest with himself, he was just a little leery of them also, so he could understand how they felt.

After they rehearsed the wedding a couple of times, Kannon and Nisha returned to Kannon’s bungalow. Kannon fixed them something to eat, and they sat on the deck, enjoying the pleasant tropical night. Hours later, they decided to call it an early night and went to bed.

THE NEXT morning they spent lazing around the bungalow. After breakfast, Kannon called Brett to make sure there weren’t any last-minute emergencies. Brett reassured them both everything was under control. Since they weren’t needed, they spent the time together, just talking and making plans. Kannon had a list of things to do after the wedding regarding his move to the island. By midafternoon, they returned to the resort, where Brett met them.

“So, you about ready?” Kannon asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Nervous?” Kannon elbowed Brett.

“No, actually, I’m really not. Excited, yes. But nervous? No way. She’s it for me.”

“Oh hey, just had a thought. What are you going to do about pictures? You are taking pictures, right?”

“The resort keeps a photographer on staff,” Brett said. “He’s going to take the pictures.”

“Okay, cool,” Kannon said. “It would be a shame to do this and not have pictures, you know?”

“Oh yeah. It’s the second-best day of my life.”

Kannon looked closely at Brett. His best friend wasn’t lying. Kannon couldn’t detect any nerves whatsoever. Brett looked relaxed in his wedding finery. His black hair gleamed in the sun. Brett wore khaki pants that fit his toned body nicely, and a white dress shirt that was untucked.

The pants were rolled up just like his and Nisha’s. Since they were still inside, each of them wore sandals. Kannon looked up as Cora joined them. Her knee-length turquoise dress had spaghetti straps, and flowed around her legs as she walked.

She’d piled her dark blue hair up on top of her head, with wisps around her face. Her pale skin looked wonderful in the color Brooke had chosen. She wore no jewelry, but she didn’t need it. She was tall, with a killer shape, and if Kannon was even remotely attracted to the female form, hers probably would’ve knocked his socks off.

He quickly glanced at Nisha and swallowed. While Cora, as beautiful as she was, didn't do a thing for him, the man standing next to her certainly did. The feelings building for Nisha were strong, and somewhat frightening in their intensity.

Nisha looked up and caught Kannon staring at him. A small smile crossed his face. Kannon knew then what he felt for Nisha might scare him... that this new world he'd stumbled into might be frightening... and that he wouldn't trade it for anything.

"Hey, everyone. Brooke asked me to bring this to you, Kannon." In her hand, she held a white rose boutonniere.

Kannon saw that it matched the one Brett was wearing. "Oh, thank you. It's lovely."

Nisha held out his hand. "Thank you, Cora. If you don't mind, I'll pin it on Kannon."

"Of course." She handed the boutonniere to Nisha.

Nisha slid his hand inside of Kannon's shirt. Kannon swallowed roughly as he felt Nisha's fingers slide across his chest. His cock perked up. Aw jeez, what timing. At this rate, he'd need to duck in the nearest bathroom and thump his cock to get it to go down. The sexy smirk on Nisha's face wasn't helping matters.

Kannon stared at Nisha while Nisha carefully pinned the boutonniere to his shirt. Nisha let his fingers linger a moment on Kannon's skin before he slowly pulled them out. Kannon groaned. Oh yeah, a trip to the restroom was looking like a necessity.

"You enjoyed that way too much," Kannon whispered.

Nisha looked up and winked at Kannon. "You bet."

Kannon licked his lips.

“Jesus, I’d tell you two to get a room, but you probably would. And since I need Kannon, dial it back, Nisha, please, otherwise your mate won’t be able to walk.”

“Dude.” Kannon glared at Brett. “TMI.”

“Just saying.” Brett snickered then blew out a breath. “Okay, guys. Is everyone ready?”

“Huh. That’s the first inkling of nerves I’ve picked up from you.” Kannon pounded Brett on the back.

“Bite me.” Brett laughed as he pulled away from Kannon.

The man who was performing the ceremony walked up to the group. Brett introduced him as Tane, who also happened to be an islander. He briefly shook hands with everybody then bowed slightly to Nisha.

That answered whether or not Tane knew who and what they were, especially Nisha. Tane’s action reminded him of the guy on the beach who did the demonstration with the coconuts. Both islanders were very respectful, and acted somewhat intimidated around Nisha, it seemed.

Brett quickly led them to the beach. Not far from the water’s edge was a white trellis, covered with several kinds of snow-white flowers, with vibrant greenery mixed in. At the corners of the trellis, flowers trailed down the latticework toward the ground.

As they drew closer, Kannon saw the flowers were white orchids, white roses, and calla lilies, among several other kinds he had no clue what their names were. Sheer turquoise and teal organza draped the trellis. It spilled onto the sand and blew gently in the breeze. An aisle runner in white, with teal colored rose petals on it, led to the trellis.

“This is simply beautiful,” Kannon said breathily.

They took their places, and all heads turned back toward the resort. There was no music except for the sounds of the ocean waves hitting the beach, and the tropical birds singing from the nearby jungle. It struck Kannon how exactly right this was for this wedding.

Then Brooke appeared, and Kannon caught his breath. She left the resort and began to walk toward them. Her dress had a sweetheart neckline and a fitted bodice. The rest of the dress was loose, and ended right above her knee, even though the back of the dress was longer.

As she came closer, he saw that it was very simplistic. No lace, no beading... just pure silk that draped across her body perfectly. What surprised him, though, was the color. He’d assumed her wedding dress would be white. In actuality, it was the palest of blues.

He glanced down at his boutonniere. Now he understood why the light, light blue ribbon was interlaced with the turquoise and teal. With Brooke’s blue eyes and blue hair, the light blue of the dress was perfect.

She, like Cora, wore no jewelry. She also didn’t wear a veil. The look totally fit her and who she was. Brooke stepped up on the aisle runner and walked down it until she came face to face with Brett.

Kannon sighed happily as Tane began the wedding ceremony. Tane’s softly spoken words washed across Kannon’s consciousness. All he could see was the love on both Brooke and Brett’s face.

Finally Tane concluded the ceremony by saying Brett could kiss his bride. Kannon discreetly wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. He was so, so happy for his best

friend. The wedding had been beautiful, right out of a storybook.

Funny, he never thought about weddings. Why would he? It hadn't been that long since the right to marry had been denied him. Plus he'd never truly been interested in anybody since that day fifteen years ago. But if he was going to have a wedding, he suddenly decided the beach was where he'd have to have it.

Cheers and cries of congratulations floated around him, but he just couldn't seem to shake himself out of his musings. And he really needed to—today was not about him.

“Kannon?”

Kannon, lost in his thoughts, jumped. Nisha stood in front of him. Kannon looked quickly around, only then noticing that Brett, Brooke, and Cora had stepped off to the side.

“Oh, sorry about that.” Kannon flushed. “I, ah, wasn't paying attention. Alrighty, are we ready to go?”

“No.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE BEMUSEMENT on Kannon's face touched Nisha's heart. Through the wedding he kept an eye on his mate, and he'd seen the dreamy look on Kannon's face. After Brett had kissed Brooke, it was obvious Kannon was still lost in his own little world.

An idea came to Nisha, but he had to act swiftly. He caught Brett's eye and nodded his head at Kannon after the wedding was over. Confusion flashed across Brett's face. Brooke leaned closer to Brett and whispered in his ear.

Brett's mouth fell open, and then he suddenly grinned. Nisha quickly turned to Tane and spoke quietly. The islander nodded his head too, a pleased smile on his face.

He heard Kannon asking if they were ready to go, and he faced his mate. "No."

Puzzled, Kannon looked between him and Tane. Nisha stepped closer to Kannon, grasped his hand, and slowly walked him under the trellis so they stood in front of Tane.

"Nisha? What... what are you doing?"

"He understands who and what we are. Hundreds of years ago the islanders worshiped us as sea gods. We aren't, of course, but they still treat us with respect. I... Will you commit to me in the ways of the humans? Tane has agreed. Please?"

Stunned, Kannon clutched Nisha's hand. Kannon swallowed several times in a row

before he managed to speak. “Are... are you serious? Oh God, are you sure ?”

“As sure as the sun will rise tomorrow. Yes, I want to do this. Do you?”

“I... I... Do I ever! I was just thinking this was... It’s perfect, you know?”

“I do know.” Nisha cupped Kannon’s face. “I could also see the yearning on your face.”

“But, but this is Brooke and Brett’s day. We couldn’t just—”

Nisha shook his head. “They don’t mind.”

“But—”

“Dude, stuff’s all here! Go for it,” Brett yelled. “Marry him, and put all of us out of our misery.”

“Please,” Cora added. “You have no idea how disagreeable he’s been for the last fifteen years.”

“Seriously, you really don’t. He’s been unbearable,” said Brooke.

“I have not been that bad.” Nisha turned a stern eye at everybody. The group promptly busted out laughing, even though nobody retracted their statement.

Nisha flushed as he turned back to face Kannon. “Okay, maybe I have been. So maybe you should do as they say, and put me out of my misery.”

“Good grief. If that isn’t the most romantic proposition I’ve ever had.”

Nisha lifted their joined hands and kissed Kannon’s knuckles. “Do you remember

earlier when Brett said Brooke was it for him? Well, we've mated. You're moving here to be with me. Soon you will meet the mer in my territory. We'll build our life together. Kannon, you're my everything. Will you marry me?"

Kannon gulped then sniffled. Why not? He had committed to Nisha. He planned to move here. He'd embraced this life. He wasn't sure what he felt for Nisha was love, but it was certainly close. There were still some things he wanted resolved, like seeing where they'd live and such... but really.

Why not do this? He wanted to. He wanted this. All of this. The sun, sand, merfolk, sea life... and his mate. His beautiful mate. Yes, he was willing to give it all up and live beneath the surface if he had to with Nisha.

"Yes. Yes, I will."