



Riding the Tide (The Deep Blue Sea #2)

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Caught between two worlds—what's a merman to do?

Marcus Krill, a creature of the sea, is a perfectly content bachelor. Mating someone? No thank you. Living anywhere but in the ocean? Ha! Not happening. Spending more than the barest necessity of time on land? Nope. Not this merman. And humans? They're perfectly fine as a diversion, but that's all. They might be interesting, but complications follow them like a hungry shark during a feeding frenzy. So what if he's a little lonely? A little tired of one-night stands? That doesn't mean he's ready to mate. Not him.

Blair Estes, a creature of land, is perfectly happy with his nomadic lifestyle. No strings keep him tied to any one place long. Adventure is his lover and adrenaline his master. He loves to travel, and the things he'd seen—things that defy description. Now his wandering has brought him to the Seychelle islands and a mysterious merman who's going to take him on the journey of a lifetime.

Once again merfolk and human culture collide in an explosion of passion and... fear.

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CHAPTER ONE

“I’M NEVER getting mated.” Marcus leaned back in the patio chair, shaking his head. Across from him was his friend, Brett, and Brett’s mate, Brooke.

“Uh-huh. You say that now.” Brett glanced back toward the bungalow where Kannon and Nisha stood whispering intensely.

“Nope. I’m going to be a bachelor until the end of my days.” He winced in sympathy as he watched Nisha’s mate, Kannon, drill his finger into Nisha’s shoulder.

The two were trying to keep their voices down, but it was a lost cause. Kannon was furious, if the tongue-lashing Nisha was getting was any indication. He wondered what Nisha did this time. He’d feel sorry for him if it wasn’t so damn funny.

A year had passed since Nisha claimed Kannon—and what an entertaining time it’d been. Marcus snorted in amusement when Nisha threw his hands up in frustration over whatever Kannon said to him. Leave it to them to get into a fight on their one-year anniversary. Kannon and Nisha loved fiercely, but they also disagreed just as fiercely.

“Swear to God, do we need to have yet another conversation on the concept of consent?” Kannon yelled.

“At the time I only thought—”

“Thought? What were you thinking with—no, no, let me guess. You were thinking

with your dick. Yet again,” Kannon interrupted, glaring at Nisha.

“That was not what I was going to say.”

“But it fits, doesn’t it?” Kannon crossed his arms over his chest.

“I am sorry!” Nisha growled. “I told you we don’t think like humans. You keep trying to apply human values to my kind, and it doesn’t work. I understand I was wrong now , but then was another matter.”

Poor Nisha. This was an argument he wasn’t going to win. They were sitting around the pool Kannon added to his and Nisha’s aboveground dwelling—which, admittedly, Marcus didn’t understand since the ocean was right there , but whatever. It was more proof humans were odd... even those humans mers had converted, as Nisha did with Kannon.

Anyway, they were having a late dinner by the pool and enjoying the warm tropical evening when something was said about the powder their kind made from certain fish toxins. It was used for many things, including pain relief. It also was used to induce a dream-like state where the one who inhaled the powder was able to feel, but unable to move.

One thing led to another and then— bam pow . Fireworks. Kannon figured out Nisha had used the powder on him after he had arrived and was significantly unhappy with the knowledge, if the glaring and raised voices were any indication.

Brett sighed, taking a sip of his water. “I did warn Nisha. Granted, it was after the fact, but still. Even went on to tell him how badly I reacted when Brooke did the same thing to me.”

Brooke patted Brett’s hand. “Nisha should’ve told him before now.”

Marcus picked up one of the chilled shrimp appetizers and bit into it. Personally he thought they were better uncooked, but that was just him. “Why? He didn’t harm him.”

Brett sighed even louder. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and typed something into it. A few seconds later he turned the screen around so Marcus could see it.

“Oh, funny,” Marcus snapped as he stared at the definition of “consent” on the cell phone’s screen.

“Here’s a thought. Try reading the damn definition.” Brett glanced back over his shoulder at Nisha and Kannon.

Marcus shrugged as he watched Nisha grabbed Kannon and try to kiss him senseless. Well, that was one way of ending an argument.

“You know, maybe if you guys would, a bunch of shit could be avoided later,” Brett said.

“Hmm? Would what?” Marcus asked, distracted by Kannon and Nisha. Kannon struggled for a minute then gave in, but Marcus wasn’t fooled. He’d gotten to know Kannon well enough to know Kannon didn’t give up easily when he wanted something—which was probably an apology and an acknowledgment that Nisha was wrong.

“Good grief, what’s up with you lately?” Brett asked. “I said if you guys tried reading the definition of consent then a bunch of shit could be avoided later.”

“Oh.” Marcus nodded. “I suppose so, but I’m not planning on mating a human—or anyone else—so it’s irrelevant.”

“Famous last words.” Brooke snickered.

Marcus picked up his drink and stared into it. He didn’t have anything against humans—he certainly fucked his fair share of them—but they were more trouble than they were worth.

“Wasn’t it you who told me you knew your ABCs and 123s?” Kannon asked as he and Nisha returned to the table. “Reading the definition should be no problem, then.”

Marcus chuckled softly. Kannon was such a multitasker. He could fight with Nisha and listen to the conversation going on around him. “I’m surprised you remember that. You were, ah... I believe the words Nisha used were ‘freaked out.’”

“I’d just found out there were such things as mermaids and mermen, along with my best friend being mated to one.” Kannon sat back down, along with Nisha. “ Along with the fact that said best friend sported a cool set of gills and could breathe underwater. Along with being attacked by a merman. Along with finding out Brett knew Nisha bit me all those years ago and hadn’t told—”

“You had to get him going, didn’t you?” Brett joked.

“If I remember correctly, it was you he tried to drown, not me.” Marcus grinned at Brett, flashing his teeth. He knew perfectly well even in this form his canines were a bit longer than normal human teeth.

Kannon snorted. “Kind of hard to do when I was the only one who couldn’t breathe underwater at the time.”

“Sure didn’t stop you from trying,” Brett huffed, as if he was the most put upon person in the world. “And I was injured, no less, by that stupid, poisonous net Cree threw over me.”

Kannon picked up a shrimp, dipped it in sauce, and waved it at Brett. “Just found out there was such a thing as mermen and you’d held out on me, so yeah, you’re lucky all I tried to do was drown you.”

“Speaking of Cree, has anybody seen him lately?” Brooke asked.

“These are much better raw, mate,” Nisha said to Kannon as he picked up a shrimp, wrinkled his nose, and bit into it. “In regards to Cree, no. I haven’t seen him in my territory, and I better not. I’m still not sure banishing him was the right decision.”

Marcus had helped repel the attack on Brett but missed out on Cree’s later attack on Kannon. He’d been helping Brooke get Brett home.

Marcus picked up another shrimp and stared at it, bemused. “Why did you cut the head off of it? That’s the best part.”

Kannon made gagging noises.

Marcus rolled his eyes at Kannon. “I swear, you’re such a human.”

“Not entirely. Not anymore. And stop picking on these excellent shrimp appetizers,” Kannon said.

“Right.” Marcus pushed the tray of shrimp closer to Nisha. “Here, Nisha, have some of this excellent shrimp.”

“Behave,” Nisha warned.

“I have been. It’s not my fault your mate has no idea how to properly prepare seafood.” Marcus shook his head sadly. “Anyway, back to Cree. I’m surprised you let him live.”

Nisha looked at Kannon, a small smile on his face. “There were other things on my mind.”

Marcus thought about sighing dramatically at the sappy look on Nisha’s face to see if he could get a few laughs or maybe a glare from Nisha but decided not to. He and Nisha were friends, and he was thankful he was allowed in the territory Nisha claimed.

He was all for poking fun at Nisha, but the truth was a little tentacle of jealousy wound through him. The two of them had gotten off to a rocky start but were making it work. They truly loved each other. He could see it in the way Nisha looked at his mate, listened to him, and touched him.

Then Marcus reminded himself the last thing he wanted was a mate, and if there was a little fluttery feeling around his heart, he ignored it. It was probably nothing more than the cooked shrimp Kannon insisted on serving them. Seriously, what kind of monster cooked shrimp?

“Oh good, that’s the buzzer for the oven.” Kannon stood. “Give me a few minutes and dinner will be ready.”

Nisha stood, too. “Do you need some help?”

“Always.” Kannon picked up his drink, and he and Nisha walked into their bungalow.

“What are we having again?” Whatever it was, Marcus was sure it’d be cooked to within an inch of its life.

“Pineapple teriyaki chicken, crab cakes, flounder, shrimp scampi, and a couple of side dishes. I think he also baked some potatoes and made a salad,” Brooke said.

“Chicken? With pineapples? Is that a normal combination?” Marcus asked. That seemed odd, but what did he know?

“It’s good, trust me. He was going to cook steaks but decided to mainly go with seafood for those of the merfolk persuasion.” Brett snagged another shrimp and dipped it into sauce before popping it into his mouth. “He wasn’t sure how you guys felt about eating cow.”

Marcus blinked. The seafood was for them? Even though he fixed it for human tastes, Kannon still went to the effort. Now he felt like an ass. “Good grief, does this mean I’m going to have to apologize?”

Brett finished off the shrimp, a slow grin crossing his face. “Oh yeah.”

Now that was an evil grin if he’d ever seen one. Marcus was jealous.

Kannon came to the sliding glass doors of the bungalow. “Okay! Dinner’s ready. You guys come on in, fix a plate, and take it back outside. It’s too nice of an evening to eat inside.”

Marcus sighed silently. Of course they were sitting outside eating by the stinky pool. As much as he hated the indoors, he’d rather be in there than out here with the stench of chlorine surrounding him.

DINNER WAS nice, and once it was over Marcus volunteered to help Kannon clean up. Nisha turned on music to play by the pool, where Brett and Brooke were playing. After Marcus and Kannon finished cleaning the kitchen, they returned outside, too.

Nisha joined them by the pool, and Marcus barely sat before Nisha picked Kannon up and threw him in. Marcus laughed as Kannon surfaced, spluttering. Nisha dove in, and soon there was entirely too much splashing going on. Marcus watched as the two

couples started a rousing game of Chicken. At least, that's what Kannon called it.

Marcus never heard of it. Brooke sat on Brett's shoulders and Kannon sat on Nisha's. Soon Kannon and Brooke were trying to push each other off their mate's shoulders. Why they were playing in pool water when the ocean was the backyard was beyond Marcus. The chlorine stunk.

He shuddered. Sitting by the pool was nearly more than he could stand. Then, of course, was the fact he was the fifth wheel in the group. Yes, he knew some human sayings. He was sixty years old, after all.

The sun dipped below the horizon. The urge to return to the ocean was growing by the second. He didn't mind visiting land, but unlike Nisha and Brooke, there was no one pulling him to it. This was another reason why he didn't want a human mate—he loved the ocean too much to live anywhere else, even for a short time.

Finally, the couples in the water calmed down, and seeing his chance, Marcus quickly bade them goodbye. Everyone climbed out of the water to see him off and, of course, Brooke insisted on hugging him. He swore she did it so he'd reek of chlorine, too. Maybe she and Nisha were used to the scent, but he wasn't.

He left the bungalow and walked across the sand. The island they lived on was riddled with a cave system, which was a good thing considering they used them to transform. Plus, Kannon and Nisha lived in a very remote area. The other side of the island, where Brett's resort—Blue Waters Resort—was located was quite populated.

Nisha told him once he purposely moved to the other side of the island so there'd be room between him and Brooke. Nisha loved his sister, but he also believed being too close could be problematic.

The residents in his territory often stashed waterproof bags in the underwater caves

where they transformed. The bags held clothing such as shorts, shirts, and flip-flops which could be used when they needed to walk on land in human form. There they could transform.

He'd only dressed in shorts. Clothing restricted his movements, and he didn't like wearing them any more than necessary. When he had arrived, Kannon briefly joked about no shoes, no shirt, no service. After a brief explanation, he finally understood what Kannon meant. What could he say? Shirts were uncomfortable the way they fit, and shoes... Well, most of the time he didn't even have feet.

He strolled along the water's edge, the gentle waves splashing around his ankles. The beaches here were left in their natural state, unlike on the other side of the island where the resorts were located. He wandered along as dusk gave way to night.

This was his favorite time. He did enjoy the sun beating down upon his head, but nighttime... There was something about the ocean during the night. It was never tame, but at night it was more... dangerous. Wild. Invigorating.

As he walked along the water's edge, the predators of the night called from the jungle. They fascinated him even as they scared him. Land animals were so different from what he was used to in the deep, blue sea. Sharks were nothing to mess with thanks to their merciless drive for food and endless curiosity.

Merfolk respected the creatures, but it didn't mean the two predators didn't clash, too. Nisha wore a necklace full of shark teeth as proof of his unwillingness to back down. Fortunately, his kind came equipped with built-in protection.

Sharks weren't the only dangers lurking under the waves—eels and sea snakes were just a few, along with other mers. Then there were the humans. Frankly, he thought they were the most dangerous of the predators. They were certainly the most destructive.

A sharp whistle from the water caught his attention, and he stopped. Farther out was a pod of dolphins signaling to him. It never ceased to amaze him how they recognized merfolk in human form. He glanced around to make sure there were no prying eyes. Nothing on land caught his attention, and all he could see in the water was a small dinner cruise ship, but it was quite a distance away.

Some resorts offered a dinner cruise package—a few hours on the water which included a nice dinner, a band for entertainment, and drinks. But this one was far enough away he wasn't concerned about it. He slipped off his shorts, dropped them on the sand, and ran toward the water.

He waded in, the water grabbing at his legs almost as if welcoming him home. As the waves hit him he dove into the water. He cleared his mind and let the transformation to his preferred form begin. The water cradled him as the seconds ticked by. His body tingled, especially his lower extremities.

A sharp, sudden pain washed over him as his tail formed. The gills opened, and he stretched, shaking out his tail and flexing his caudal fin. The dolphins called to him once more, and he swam towards them.

None of them knew why it was easier to go from legs to tail. Not only did it take less time, it didn't hurt. Well, not like forming legs did. It stung some, but it was nothing compared to how bad it was bringing forth his legs. Maybe it was the fact that everything melted together and reformed—there was no tearing. He didn't know and didn't care.

Gray shadows cut through the water as the dolphins called out, greeting him like an old friend, their calls and clicks beckoning him to come further out. He cut through the water with a mighty thrust of his tail, heading toward them. Even though there was no sunlight, he could see perfectly in the dark waters. Joy spread through Marcus as he joined the pod of about fifteen dolphins.

They swam together, their tails flipping smartly as they played. Bodies turned in a rolling, graceful dance. Marcus hung suspended in the water, watching the dolphins interact. They moved toward him, their tails moving up and down.

They twisted and turned, darting back and forth in the water, rushing at him and then away. He laughed softly and called to them, his sounds similar but not exactly like theirs. Moving together slowly they circled around him turning cartwheels. He ran his hands over the smooth bodies as they bumped against him.

Time lost all meaning as he swam with the dolphins until the low drone of a motor caught his and the dolphins' attention. Eagerly they swam toward the slow-moving ship, but Marcus hesitated. There were humans on the ship. The dolphins might enjoy interacting with them, but he couldn't.

Still, if he didn't surface he should be okay. Once he was deep enough he couldn't be seen, he peered up. The dolphins showed off for the humans who leaned over the railings, pointing and laughing. Marcus chuckled as he listened to the dolphins.

The little imps were hoping the humans would throw food to them. Even over the noise of the ship's motor and the excited clicks of the dolphins, he could hear the human voices, but he couldn't distinguish their words.

Losing interest, he swam from the ship. Once he was far enough, he surfaced and flipped his long hair out of the way. A warm tropical breeze swirled around him then moved on. There was nothing he enjoyed more than the moonlight on the water. It was a beautiful sight, and one he treasured.

Then the wind shifted, and a scent—the most tantalizing fragrance he'd ever smelled—slammed into him. Heady and tropical, the smell reminded him of Wright's Gardenia, one of the Seychelles's loveliest trees. Its white flowers were speckled with deep red splotches and its scent was strong... something he shouldn't smell this far

out in the ocean.

Shit.

CHAPTER TWO

BLAIR LEANED against the railing of a small two-deck boat staring out at the dark waters. The LGBT dinner cruise was packed. Lord knows, he was propositioned more in the past two hours than any one person had the right to be. Regrettably, not one of the men who approached him did a thing for him.

That seemed to be par for the course lately. For crying out loud, he was in his late twenties and his sex drive was in the toilet. Maybe he was in a funk or something. Actually, there was no maybe about it. He hadn't had sex—outside of his hand—in months.

He sipped his drink and stared out across the ocean as the boat crawled along. At age twenty-two he inherited three million upon his grandmother's death. God, he still missed her. He loved her more than anything, and even to this day he still ached when he thought of her.

She raised him from age five on after his parents died in a head-on collision. They were having a "date night," so he'd been left with his grandmother. Otherwise he'd have died, too. He was thankful for the money he'd inherited even if it came with responsibilities.

Well, maybe responsibilities weren't the right word. It came with a price tag. More times than he cared to count, the men he dated ended up proving they were more interested in his bank account than him. He'd learned to keep his financials quiet.

He'd spent the next two years establishing an online business, which he sold when he

turned twenty-four. Having a case of what his grandmother called itchy feet, he decided to travel. Since he'd sold his business, he spent six months backpacking across Europe.

After that, he'd ended up in Africa. He'd stayed with different tribes, and he learned right quick sex without commitment was a no-no. That was enough to put the kibosh on his sexual appetites. Then there was the other thing that happened.

He shoved those thoughts out of his head—he simply wasn't going to relive that. Not again. Already he'd spent too much time reliving that nightmare. Shaking the dirt of the Dark Continent off his boots never felt so good.

It was a nice moonlit night. So pretty. So serene. A perfect night for lovers. Shit, there he went again. He seriously needed to get laid.

A loud clicking noise from below him caught his attention, and he looked down at the water. "Well, hello." A dolphin bobbed in the water. It made an odd clicking sound and then disappeared. "Aw, don't leave." He leaned against the railing. Hopefully his new friend would come back.

The dolphin popped up again, and this time there were a couple of friends with him.

"I see you have a couple of buddies with you."

The dolphin made a half-patch squealing noise, his head nodding in a "yes" motion.

"What are you guys up to on a nice night like this? Looking for a bunch of female dolphins?" Blair swore some of the sounds they made were negative. "No? So, if you're not looking for females, what are you guys up to? Nothing good, I'd bet."

More squeals and clicks greeted him. The noise they made was entertaining, and he

enjoyed watching them play in the water. Who knew their antics could be so relaxing?

He leaned out farther. "You know, maybe I phrased my question all wrong. Maybe I should ask if you are looking for other male dolphins."

One dolphin waved his tail in the air. Blair snorted, delighted at the dolphin's antics. There was no way the dolphin could have understood him, no possible way, but it was still funny.

"Sounds like a yes to me. We seem to be in the same boat." Blair snickered. "So to speak." Then he sighed. "I hope you guys are having better luck than me."

How strange. It looked as if they were smiling at him.

"Well, if you're smiling, I'll take that as a yes, too. Any advice on attracting someone of the male persuasion? Because I got to tell you guys, nobody's rang my bell lately. I'm beginning to think my bell is broken."

Apparently, they found that highly entertaining, if the whistles and screeches were any indication.

"Now y'all wouldn't laugh at a fellow male, would you? Even if I have two legs and you guys have tails. We're still all males, right?"

The one that waved his tail at him earlier bobbed in the water nodding at him. Damn, he almost wished he was in the water with them. They were truly fascinating creatures. While researching vacation destinations, he noticed dolphins seem to be very popular with tourists.

The resort he was staying at offered a chance to swim with the animals. He'd

discounted it, but maybe he needed to rethink that. The lights from the ship and the bright moonlight enabled him to see the animals pretty well. Yes, he definitely needed to rethink swimming with them. Maybe do some snorkeling, too. He loved the water and couldn't think of anything more fun.

One of the dolphins launched itself out of the water.

“Whoa now!” He jerked back from the railing.

The dolphin dropped back down into the water, and his cohorts whistled and splashed. Blair, heart thumping madly, pursed his lips. Were they congratulating him on scaring the human? Having a dolphin jump that far out of the water startled him.

Good Lord, what kind of chaos would've ensued if it had managed to end up on the deck? He peered back over the railing to see the dolphin laughing up at him. It was as if the damn thing was trying to dare him into the water, but that couldn't be right. It was just an animal.

He ignored that for a moment, a very brief moment, they'd made eye contact. He could've sworn it... He shook his head at the crazy turn his thoughts took. Instead he looked at the drink he held in his hand.

Hmm. Maybe it was a little stronger than he was normally used to? He shrugged. That made just as much sense as him thinking the dolphin threw down a dare. The dolphins swam away from the boat but didn't go far. Instead they frolicked in the water.

Odd. It was almost as if they were pacing the boat. They would swim away, play around, then dart back to where he stood. Was this normal dolphin behavior? He didn't know. He didn't really know that much about them except for they were smart.

They swam back at him, whistling. He swore they were trying to get his attention. They would shake their head, almost as if they were gesturing for him to come on in. Yeah, definitely strange.

But he'd seen things far stranger. He'd traveled, and some of the places he ended up were most definitely off the beaten path. Many things he'd seen couldn't be explained. Many scared the crap out of him, too. He came back to the States knowing there were beings who were more than human.

He kept those beliefs to himself; otherwise people looked at him as if he was nuts. Of course, being eccentric kind of went with having money—it was almost a requirement. His gaze traveled over the water looking for the dolphins.

He was so glad he came outside. It would've been a shame to miss this and... he frowned at the water, then squinted, trying to see better. Beyond the dolphins there was... what was that? His hand tightened on the glass he held. Shit, did someone spike his drink?

But no, that couldn't be. He didn't feel odd or sick. He felt totally fine—normal, which wasn't saying much, but still. So why was he certain there was somebody out there, bobbing in the water?

He hurried up to the very top level of the boat. Up here he could see better. He stared at the spot where he swore he saw... yup. His rational mind told him he was an idiot, but it was kind of hard to ignore what he saw with his eyes. There was somebody out there. In fact, he was so sure of it, he'd bet half his rather fat stock portfolio.

Yes, he was that sure.

What was somebody doing this far out? Could it be a surfer sitting on his board? No, they didn't seem to be sitting that high out of the water, but it was kind of hard to tell.

But a surfer didn't make sense either. There were no waves right now. So were they in trouble?

He strained his eyes trying to get a better look at whoever was floating around out there. He didn't think they were in trouble—there was no thrashing or flailing. Most people didn't drown quietly, right? Plus, whoever it was wasn't yelling for help. No, they just bobbed in the damn water, not doing anything.

Suddenly the hair on his neck stood up.

He shivered in the tropical night breeze as the eerie feeling of being watched nailed him straight between the shoulder blades. Why hadn't he noticed how desolated and dark it was here? Go in. Get inside. Now! In! In! In! The primitive side of his brain urged him to get his ass back inside—to get away from the railing. There were people inside. He'd be safe.

And he was hard as a brick, too.

His heart stuttered then commenced pounding. Now, why did he think that? He tried to swallow, but suddenly his mouth was drier than the desert—which was hysterical, considering he was surrounded by nothing but water.

“What the fuck?” Blair whispered.

Then just like that, the figure was gone. Vanished.

Blair actually gasped out loud. A sudden cold sensation overcame him, and he shivered in the warm air. He clutched the railing, his knuckles turning white. Okay, okay, shit. Maybe he was wrong and the person had been in trouble.

Dear God, had he watched someone drown? But no, everything inside him said that

wasn't correct. He didn't know what the hell he saw, but it wasn't a drowning. He stood staring out at the water from the railing, searching the waves desperately.

"There's nothing out there. Maybe it was a trick of the moonlight." Blair nodded, as if that settled the whole matter. "Moonlight. Nothing but the moonlight. Certainly no person."

The band picked then to start playing. Blair flinched then glanced back over his shoulder. The boat lurched, he stumbled, and then dropped his drink into the water.

"Oh, come on." Didn't that just figure? He wished he never stepped foot on this boat. Now that his breathing calmed somewhat, he began to question his foolish reaction.

Of course there was nothing out there. He'd freaked himself out for nothing. Jeez. Maybe the first thing he needed to do when he got home was visit the eye doctor, because obviously he was seeing things.

As he turned away from the railing, he saw something out of the corner of his eye. His heart rate spiked as he spun back. One of the dolphins whistled. Out there in the distance something answered, a sharp trilling sound. Only the answering trill didn't sound like the dolphin.

And then even the dolphins disappeared.

As he glared out over the moonlit ocean, he swore he saw a huge tail slap the surface of the water... right where he thought he saw somebody. Exactly where he thought he saw that person. Unnerved, he turned away from the railing. Enough was enough. Time to take his ass back inside... just as soon as he got around the couple standing near him. What now?

"Where the hell did you disappear to, Gerry?"

Blair faltered. A guy and his date were squared off. Oh man, he so did not need to witness something like this. Maybe he could slip past them.

“I went to the bathroom. That’s all I did!”

“For forty-five minutes? Come on, do you think I’m a fucking fool?”

Nope. This he did not need. Seriously. From the way their speech was slurred and they both staggered, they were drunk. On top of that, it appeared their argument was about to go nuclear.

“Fuck you, Nat. I wasn’t gone that long.”

“According to my cell phone, you were.”

Gerry backed away from the big hulking dude he was speaking with. Blair desperately tried to get out of his way, but Gerry’s ankle must have turned or he tripped over air, because the next thing Blair knew the other guy managed to stumble right into him.

Shit. The guy reeked. The alcohol coursing through his system was probably messing with his balance, too. Blair grabbed ahold of him—it was either that or let the guy knock him over, although he seriously considered stepping out of the way.

“Is that him? Is that the dude you were fucking? Is it, Gerry?”

“Whaaat? Who, me? No. No way.” Blair frantically tried to stabilize the other man so he could get his hands off him as quickly as possible. “Look, man, I never laid eyes on him in my life. I’ve been out here the whole time.”

“Bullshit!”

The guy draped himself over Blair. “Hey there, hot stuff,” Gerry slurred, his hands wandering everywhere. “You see that big goof over there? We think he been doing naughty things. I mean, he thinks we been doing naughty things. Wanna? With me?”

“Look, I really don’t want to get in the middle of—hey!” Blair jumped. Shit on a stick, Gerry grabbed a handful of his ass. Was he trying to get him killed? Or was Gerry trying to get his billfold? Was this a setup?

He got his answer when the boyfriend bellowed. Blair cringed. He almost hoped Gerry was trying to pick his pocket since Nat, Gerry’s boyfriend, was five inches taller and probably had a good thirty pounds on Blair. This was not going to end well.

“Fucking whore!” Nat yelled taking a step toward them.

“Whore? Whore ? Maybe if you didn’t take so many steroids all the time I wouldn’t be left hanging.” Gerry snuggled closer. “I bet he knows how to treat his guy.” He batted his eyes. “Don’t you, sexy?”

“Oh shit.” Blair flinched.

The crazy asshole insulted his monstrosity of a boyfriend’s sexual prowess. Yup, things just went nuclear. Nat bellowed again and raced toward them as Gerry squeaked and unstuck himself from Blair.

He was so dead.

CHAPTER T

Mate! Mate! Mate!

Marcus hadn't believed, even though Nisha tried to tell him. He simply hadn't understood the overpowering need, the drive to possess the one who was his mate. The human leaning against the rail on the small boat was his. It no longer mattered that he didn't want to be mated. It no longer mattered the person who was his mate was human and not a mer.

Nothing mattered except him . He froze, unable to do anything more but tread water. The pod of dolphins left him, making a beeline straight toward the ship. Did they know his mate was on there? Had he somehow communicated that to the pod? He could talk to them, but it wasn't done with human words.

He wanted... He wanted... He wanted the human in the water with him. He wanted to bite him, hold him, fuck him until he screamed in pleasure. Nothing was going to stand in his way. The human was his, and he would do anything to have him. Anything. He'd tear anyone and anything to pieces that got in his way and...

Whoa.

Possessive much? This wasn't him. He was known for being coolheaded and—oh, fuck, had the human somehow spotted him? Panicking, he ducked under the water. What am I doing? He was Marcus Krill, one of the strongest warriors in Nisha's territory. He didn't hide.

He popped back up. Surely he was far enough away his mate couldn't tell much about him. Then he glanced at the sky and took note of the moonlight. There were lights on the boat, too. Shit. He slapped the water with his tail.

One of the dolphins whistled at him, and the sharp, annoyed sound stopped the out-of-control spiral he was fast losing himself to. He shoved his long hair back and whistled back at the dolphin.

Holy shit, no wonder Nisha bit Kannon the first time he saw him. He never understood why Nisha did that—even privately wondered how Nisha could lose control in such a way. Now he knew. He needed to talk to Nisha.

Actually, maybe Kannon was the one he needed to speak with. Huh. Actually, maybe he needed his head examined. His aggravation brought the dolphins back to him. With clarity of mind came the question of what he was going to do now.

Fortunately, with his superb eyesight, he could see the other man perfectly. What a gorgeous human he was. He was tall and lean with sun-kissed skin and shoulder-length bleached blond hair. His mate's face was strong and masculine with a stubborn jawline and no facial hair. He couldn't see his eyes, but that was of no concern.

Somehow, someday he would see them soon enough. The first thing he needed to do was follow the ship back to where it was docked. Maybe he could get an idea of what resort the stranger was staying at. Then he would... He didn't know what he would do. Something.

“Oh shit!”

His mate's yell snapped his attention back to the boat. There were voices raised in anger, and they were close to his mate. Too close. Worry gripped him. He eased closer to the ship with the dolphins following alongside him. As he got closer to the

boat, a scream cut through the air, and a body sailed over the side.

Mate!

He didn't consider the repercussions. He dove under, and with a powerful thrust of his tail, aimed for where his mate hung suspended in the water. One dolphin gently poked the human, but nothing happened.

Above him on the boat, Marcus heard screams and shouts. There were the sounds of running feet and someone blew a whistle. A lot. The sound made his head ache, but he had more important things to worry about.

Marcus wrapped his arms around his mate and turned, swiftly swimming away from the ship. Seconds later he broke the surface still holding his mate securely. The dolphins surfaced with him. In their stress their concerned clicks sounded more like a squeaky door opening. Marcus pressed two fingers to the human's throat, feeling for his pulse.

Relief made him giddy when he found it. Then he pressed his ear to his mate's mouth and almost cried when he felt a puff of air. He was breathing. From the ship, a spotlight flashed over the ocean by men frantically searching the area around the boat.

Marcus didn't know what to do. The human was obviously unconscious, but he didn't know if that was because he hit his head on the way down or because something happened before he fell off the boat. Maybe the shock of falling overboard made him pass out.

Agonized, he stared at the boat. Humans could probably help his mate better than he could, but... but... he couldn't leave his mate floating in the water. A dolphin nudged him gently, almost as if pushing him away from the boat. No, he wouldn't leave his

mate in the hands of those humans. It was because of them his pretty little human was in this situation.

He'd get Kannon, and even Brett, to help him. Between the two of them surely they had enough connections in the human world to help his mate, if he needed help. Decision made, he swam toward a cave to transform.

Now that he decided on a course of action, he needed to transform before his mate woke up. That was something the poor guy didn't need to hear or see as soon as he opened his eyes. Then Marcus needed to get dressed. Stashed in the cave was an assortment of clothes kept in waterproof bags.

He was going to have to explain... and he had no idea where to even begin with that. Shit. What had he gotten himself into? Maybe this wasn't the best idea after all. He entered the cave and swam as far as he could. He pulled his mate up on the sand. There were only small waves lapping at the beach, so he wasn't worried about the human drowning.

Then he dragged himself completely out of the water and plopped down. He stared up at the top of the cave where several holes let moonlight in. Even though he dreaded the transformation, for once he wished it would hurry up and start. Almost as if his very thought started the process, the color of his tail lightened, signifying the skin drying out.

He tried to calm his breathing, but his breath froze in his lungs when he heard the human a few feet from him moan. No! Not yet! He fanned his tail with his hands even though he knew the action was ridiculous and wouldn't help. Come on, come on, come on. He shot another quick glimpse at the human. Dammit, were his eyes fluttering?

The bottom of his tail tingled. He clenched his teeth as the pain from his tail ripping

stormed through him, making him queasy. The flipper part of his tail split, and the tear continued up his body. It made him green about the gills every damn time, and his stomach threatened to revolt. The two parts separated and slowly morphed into human legs.

The fins devolved into feet, and finally the transformation ended. The process never lasted long, thank fuck, but it still hurt like a bitch. Still, he closed his eyes, taking a few seconds to reorient himself.

“W-what in the ever-loving hell are you?”

Marcus’ stomach dropped. Please, no. Tell me this isn’t happening. Opening his eyes, he looked at the man sitting half in, half out of the water. “I... fuck.”

“Well... okay. Good to know, but that doesn’t really answer my question, but... Hey! You speak English! Excellent.”

He was tempted to say he knew his ABCs and 123s, too, but he managed to keep his smart mouth shut for once.

“You’re a merman, aren’t you? Holy shit on a stick, you’re a merman. I mean, you got to be. You have a tail... Okay, I mean you had a tail. And I saw a... a... You had gills, even though I can’t see them now. If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck—huh. Sorry, guess I should’ve said merman. And I’m pretty sure I saw fins at your wrists, too. Wow, okay I think I hit the babble part of our evening.”

Marcus blinked. That was a whole lot of nothing he said just then. Babble described that perfectly. But babble was the least of his worries. He was screwed. So, so, screwed. They weren’t supposed to tell humans what they were. Okay, technically he hadn’t told the human... he had just showed him.

Ha! Little late to worry about that now. Not only did the human see him in his merman form, he watched him transform. He winced. And that wasn't something he'd wish on his worst enemy.

“Do you have a name?”

Did he have a name? If this didn't beat fuck all, and it certainly wasn't how he envisioned this playing out. Not that he spent a whole lot of time envisioning much of anything concerning a mate. Especially since he'd been determined to stay single. Boy, that certainly changed.

“Um, are you okay?”

Now the human—the human who fell off a fucking boat—was asking if he was okay.

“Yes, I'm okay. Just a little overwhelmed.”

“You? You're overwhelmed? Dude, how do you think I feel?”

This was simply beyond anything. Why wasn't his human completely freaking out, and he was just sick of calling him “the human.” “Okay, just hold on a second. Let me get dressed—”

“You have clothes here?”

“Um, yes. Clothes don't magically appear when we transform. But there are clothes here in the cave. Let me go get dressed then we'll talk.” The conversation was surreal. Hell, the whole damn thing was surreal.

“You're not like going to... like run off and leave me stranded here, are you? It's kind of dark and, I... I don't exactly know where I am. I mean, I was on the boat then... and... wow, suddenly I'm here, and then there's you, and... yeah.”

Marcus heard the nerves bleed through in his mate's voice, and it made him ache. Here was the reaction he first expected. Of course his mate was scared, and he hated that. "By the way, my name is Marcus."

"Oh, oh that's a really, um... never mind. My name is Blair."

"Nice to meet you, Blair. I promise I won't leave you stranded. Hold on a second while I dress and get you a light. I'll take care of everything, don't worry."

"Okay. Okay it's just... yeah. Suddenly this got very real."

"Believe me, I understand." His mate thought things suddenly seemed real? He stood and made his way to one of the bags which contained clothes. After he dressed in shorts, he lit some of the camping lanterns left stashed in various caves.

"Thank you. That helps a lot. I mean, the light really helps."

Yep, surreal. Marcus grabbed a few extra towels and one of the lanterns then walked back to where his mate sat.

Marcus stopped just shy of Blair. "Why don't you come out of the water? I have a couple of towels if you want to dry off. I could probably find you some shorts, too, if you want to change."

"Oh!" Blair stood up. "I, ah, didn't realize I was still sitting in the water. Heh. Thank you, that would be great. I'm soaked." Blair slowly made his way to where Marcus stood.

Of course Blair was soaked. He fell off a boat. Maybe he should check Blair's head and see if there were any lumps because this whole damn deal was beyond weird.

Blair unbuttoned his shirt, slipped it off, and wrung the water out of it.

Marcus cursed his wayward cock. Now was not the time. He held out a couple of the towels. "Here, give me that. I'll place it across one of the boulders in the cave. Maybe it'll dry out some. What size shorts do you wear?"

Blair told him, and Marcus handed him a few more towels so he could finish drying off. He left the lantern sitting on the sand next to Blair so he could see. Marcus purposely turned his back to give Blair some privacy.

Marcus spread the shirt out on a rock then walked over to a waterproof bag that was his. He searched through his clothes for a pair of shorts which might fit Blair. Good thing they were a similar size. Once he found what he needed, he returned down the beach. Desperately he tried to ignore that his mate wore nothing but a towel wrapped around his lean hips.

The closer he got, the more he noticed the tension surrounding Blair. Not surprising, considering he was in an isolated place with something that wasn't quite human, half-dressed, and no idea where he was. He'd be nervous, too.

Hell, he was, but for a different reason. "Here you go."

"Thank you."

Marcus turned around to give Blair privacy again. He searched desperately for something to talk about and remembered Blair's odd sentence from earlier. "What were you going to say a minute ago when I told you my name?"

"Oh, um, I was thinking Marcus is really a, um, human-type name. Is that... Is that okay to say? And I'm dressed, you can turn around now."

Marcus turned and took the shorts. “It is a very human sounding name, so of course I’m not going to get offended.”

Blair ran a hand through his hair then picked up one of the folded towels and used it to wring out the excess water. “I wasn’t sure.” Blair’s hesitant laugh echoed around them. Marcus nodded. “Let me put this with your shirt. Hopefully they’ll dry a bit.”

“Okay.”

Marcus hurried over to where he left Blair’s shirt and spread his shorts out, too.

“This is so weird,” Blair called out.

Marcus walked back to where Blair stood. “I have to agree, but please believe me when I say I have no intentions of hurting you.”

No, what he wanted to do didn’t fall in the category of hurting. He took a deep breath to steady himself. Blair was fucking built—all long lines and lean muscles. That bleach blond hair fell around his face in waves, and Marcus wanted to run his hands through it. It was so different from his. And those eyes. They were brown—the color of his favorite food.

He loved chocolate.

“Good to know.” Blair dropped the towel next to the other ones. “Seriously, that’s really good to know. Me and my heart—that’s pounding a million miles a second—thank you for saying that.”

Marcus snorted. Oh good, another smart ass. Someone he could totally relate to. “Tell me, why are you so calm? Why are you not screaming and hollering and trying to run off or beat the hell out of me?”

Blair blew out a breath. “Okay, I’m not going a lie. I am somewhat freaked out. But here’s the thing. I’ve done some traveling. Spent quite a bit of time in Africa with some of the local tribes. Let’s just say I saw and felt things that... defied description.”

“Ahhhh. I see.” How extraordinary. “Would you mind telling me?”

“Sure. Could we maybe sit down? My legs still feel like limp noodles.”

Marcus wanted to slap himself silly. Blair fell off of a boat. How could he have forgotten that? “Fuck, I’m such an ass. Are you okay? Are you hurt? I can’t imagine how scared you must have been. Did you hit anything on the way down? Do you need a doctor?”

“Whoa, whoa!” Blair laughed slightly. “I’m okay. I didn’t hit my head or anything. Actually, some asshole ran into me because he thought I’d been with his guy. I’m not sure if he was trying to push me overboard or not, but that’s what happened. I think it stunned me.”

“I heard screams after you fell. They were looking for you.” Marcus grabbed one of the towels, shook the sand out of it, and spread it on the beach. He arranged it so the moonlight would shine on them. He also brought the lantern closer.

Blair frowned. “Yeah, bet they were.”

What did that mean? Wouldn’t he expect the other humans to look after him? And why did Blair suddenly look sad and annoyed. There was a story there, he just knew it.

“Please, sit down.”

Blair sat. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” Marcus sat once Blair did. He meant what he said. Caring for his mate was his pleasure.

“Anyway, I hit the water in an awkward position. I wasn’t exactly unconscious when you grabbed me. I was sort of... out of it. I mean, it wasn’t that far of a fall, but I was fuzzy.”

“But it was still a fall.”

“Yeah, it sure was.” Blair sighed. “I don’t need a doctor.”

“I’m glad.”

“Me, too.”

Marcus resisted the urge to play with the corner of the towel they sat on. “Would you like me to take you back topside? I can take you anywhere you want to go. I know this island quite well.”

“Thank you for saying that, especially since, like I said, I have no clue where I am. I’m definitely at a disadvantage here.”

Marcus cringed. “I’m no threat to you, honest. I know that might seem hard to believe.”

Blair tilted his head. “Actually, it really isn’t. I mean, you didn’t have to save my ass.”

Yes, actually, he did. Blair had no clue he was Marcus’ mate, and he wasn’t about to launch into that discussion. “I’m not really sure you needed saving.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Like I said, it’s all a little fuzzy. Would you think me completely strange if I wanted to sit here and maybe talk to you for a little while?”

Think him strange? Marcus was thrilled. He still had trouble believing Blair wasn’t screaming in terror and trying to get away from them, but he certainly wasn’t going to look a gift squid in the beak. “I would like that very much. If you sure you’re comfortable.”

“I’m comfortable. If you were going to hurt me, you would’ve already done it. Besides, I’ve learned to trust my instincts.”

“I’m glad.” Marcus knew better than to snort. Snorting would be bad. Bad. It’d offend Blair, but seriously, instincts? Blair couldn’t be more than mid-twenties. Maybe late twenties. Compared to him, Blair was nothing but a baby. What instincts could he possibly have developed in such a short time?

“You were going to tell me about your travels in Africa?” Marcus prompted. He really wanted to hear about Blair’s time spent there. The continent wasn’t that far from them.

“Okay well, there was this tribe I was staying with and...”

Marcus listened closely as Blair talked. He described how he saw things in the tropical rainforests and animals that were entirely too intelligent for mere animals—animals that were larger than normal with eyes that glowed yellow or red.

He saw shadows which didn’t act as shadows and primitive medicines able to cure things which even modern medicine couldn’t touch. Then Blair started talking about a jaguar who stalked him one night while he was returning to the village.

He had seen the animal several times, then the animal would disappear and a native

would be standing not far from the last place Blair saw the jaguar. Which he admitted he could've discounted if he hadn't run across the same native a week later in the process of shifting back into a human.

He got away from the tribe and returned to civilization as quickly as he could after seeing that. Admittedly, he was afraid the tribe would force him to stay. The shifter he saw was someone who wanted him, but Blair hadn't been interested. Blair added there'd also been things he saw in the ocean that were unusual.

After listening to that, Marcus knew he shouldn't have scoffed at Blair's remark about his instincts. Indeed, it sounded as if Blair had some well-developed ones.

Blair stopped. "Of course, I didn't see anything in the ocean as interesting as you."

Marcus chuckled. "I imagine not. But I do find what you're saying fascinating. I've often wondered if we were the only nonhumans around. From what you're saying, we aren't."

"Oh, you're not. I know there are men who can shift into jaguars. Based on that, it stands to reason there are others around who can do the same."

"Absolutely fascinating."

Blair snickered. "I agree, you totally are."

"Oddly enough, I felt the same way about you," Marcus said.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I DON’T know why. You’re the merman.” Blair knew he was blushing. Hopefully Marcus couldn’t see it, but he had a feeling he could. He was sitting here talking to merman. A merman. He still couldn’t wrap his head around it.

Maybe he should’ve been terrified—okay, he was a little afraid—but not of Marcus. He hadn’t been anything but nice and quite helpful. There was something about him, something that spoke to him, reassured him.

Blair felt not only comfortable, but safe. Which was hysterical. But then again, maybe not. That jaguar shifter certainly never inspired such feelings. There was a sense of primitiveness about the man which had unsettled Blair and sent the hair on the back of his neck bristling.

He didn’t get that from Marcus. Oh, there was little doubt Marcus was a predator. There was a wildness to him, a sense of otherworldliness, but he didn’t feel threatened by Marcus, whereas he had by the jaguar shifter. No, what Marcus made him feel was something totally different. Stiff, hard, or aching would be good descriptions, but not afraid.

“And you’re the human. I still think you’re fascinating.”

Him—fascinating. Ha. That was hysterical, considering Marcus had a tail a few moments ago. That was fascinating. And oh dear God, was Marcus flirting with him? Blair thought he was, but did mermen flirt differently than humans? He couldn’t believe he thought that either.

Speaking of mermen, Marcus' long hair was fabulous. It was azure blue with dark blue highlights. Apparently, no matter what form he was in, it stayed the same color. His eyes were a pale, pale blue, and he had a scar running through his right eyebrow, which was blue, too. Wonder where he got the scar?

Was all the hair on his body blue? A closer look revealed no hair on Marcus' arms or legs. Interesting. Marcus had a swimmer's build—not surprising, considering—and was ripped. Blair licked his lips. He could spend hours tracing Marcus' abs with his tongue.

“Do you spend a lot of time around humans?” Blair asked, trying to get his mind off of the sexy, tight body next to him and the possibility of blue hair... everywhere.

“It depends on what you mean by that. There are a few I'm acquainted with who are mated to other mers. I spend time with them. They split their lives between the ocean and the land, but I tend to stay more in the water. It's where I'm the most comfortable.”

“Oh wow, that's...” Blair shook his head trying to imagine a life underwater. “You refer to yourself as mers?”

“Merfolk. Or mer for short.” Marcus shrugged. “As you can plainly see, I'm male. The females of our species are mermaids. More often than not, we mate each other, but sometimes we do mate with humans.”

“You guys can do that? You can be with humans?” Excitement shot through Blair. He wanted to know everything. He had so many questions, especially concerning humans.

“Yes, but I'm not going to go into exactly how. That's not information you need.”

Blair sighed. Ah well, he should've seen that coming. Marcus didn't know him, and he was human, to boot. Of course he'd be leery of giving away too much information on their species. He held onto the fact Marcus said they could be with humans.

Blair still had a hard time believing Marcus sat there so calmly talking to him. "I guess I can understand that."

Now that he thought about it, he was surprised Marcus was willing to talk with him at all. He mentioned they weren't supposed to tell humans about their existence. Which begged the question of why Marcus was talking to him.

"I will say we can mate humans. And by mating I mean something similar to a human marriage. Kind of."

"But, how does that work? I mean, I'm assuming you guys can breathe underwater, right? And you can obviously breathe air." Blair waved his hand at Nisha. "You said a minute ago that some of you split your time between the land and water, so...?"

"Yes. We can breathe underwater. As far as our human mates, I'm not really comfortable going into that."

"Of course. Sorry. I'm not trying to meddle, seriously. Okay, I am, but I won't push you on things you don't want to talk about. Huh. You probably shouldn't even be talking to me, right? Not really sure why you are."

"Once I fished you out of the water it became a moot point."

"Yeah, I can see that." Blair scratched his head. Ugh. He loved the ocean, but now it felt as if he was covered in a fine layer of salt. He really needed to shower. "Thanks for that, by the way. Fishing me out of water, I mean." Good Lord, could he sound like more of an idiot?

Marcus patted Blair's hand. "It was my pleasure."

Tingles shot up his arm from their contact. "Sure was a pleasure. I mean it was my pleasure, too. No, I didn't mean that, what I actually mean was I'm glad." Obviously he could sound like more of an idiot.

Feeling a flush climb up his face, he focused on Marcus' hand. Such lovely, slim long fingers that could probably reach interesting places... He shifted on the towel they sat on. That train of thought certainly wasn't helping matters below the belt.

It looked like a normal hand but not that long ago there'd been a fin on Marcus' wrist. Blair glanced up at Marcus. Those unique light blue eyes of Marcus' intrigued him. He truly was a beautiful man with an androgynous, fey face even in this form.

His glimpse of Marcus in his merman form was brief, but he had noticed the long, pointed ears and the gills at his neck. He didn't have a "type." He liked all kinds of guys—short, tall, gym bunnies, not-so-athletic, leather daddies, bears, twinkles, jocks, geeks. He didn't care about race either.

What was important to him was the guy's personality. If he was loyal. Honest. Trustworthy. If he wasn't a gold digger. Now suddenly he was attracted to a long and lean man, who wasn't even a man, with long blue hair and light blue eyes. And when the mood struck... he had a really awesome tail. Blair wanted more than a quick glimpse of it. He was dying to explore the thing.

In fact, he wanted to get to know Marcus— all of Marcus. He gulped. He wanted Marcus. Desire curled in his belly. Jesus, he had a bad case of lust... but even that didn't feel right. Lust didn't exactly describe what was coursing through him. He wasn't sure what he felt, only that there was no way he was letting this fascinating man out of his life.

“So...?”

Marcus raised an eyebrow. “So...?”

Marcus was going to make him say it, was he? Oh, what the hell. No pain, no gain. Wasn't that the saying?

“So what are we doing here?” Blair asked.

“What do you want to be doing here?”

Blair thought about smacking Marcus on the shoulder but decided not to. He wasn't sure how Marcus would react to that. “Are you like some sort of merman lawyer? What's up with answering a question with a question?”

“Merman lawyer?” Marcus snorted. “No, I'm not a lawyer. Don't humans compare them to sharks? I'm no shark.”

Blair eyed Marcus' form. “No, you most certainly are not a shark.”

“No, I'm not, but I am a warrior.”

Blair waited, but Marcus didn't speak again. “Oh come on! You can't throw something out there like that and then leave me hanging.” Blair huffed. “Don't think I didn't notice what you did there, too. You still haven't answered my question.”

“I'll make you a deal.” Marcus shoved his hair back over his shoulder. “I'll answer your questions if...”

Blair waited and then groaned when it became obvious Marcus wasn't going to continue. “You're a tease, are you?”

“You have no idea.”

Oh yeah, he did, too. His cock twitched. Just how much of a tease was Marcus? Blair had a flash of himself under Marcus, groaning and writhing.

“Blair?”

“Huh?” Blair blinked. Great, now he had that image seared in his mind. “Oh. Sorry, I was... never mind. Okay, if what?”

“If you promise me a date.”

“Date?” Excitement pricked Blair’s skin. “You mean like getting together and going out and doing something? That kind of date?”

“That’s my understanding of the word date, yes.”

Oh man, was there a smartass lurking underneath that calm exterior? It was rare he found someone with the same cutting humor he had. “You do stuff like that?”

“I’ve spent time among humans. Just because I prefer to live in the ocean doesn’t mean I don’t know how to interact with your kind. I’d like to take you on a date. Take you out to eat, maybe go to the movies. Or we could hang out on the beach. Something.”

“Wow. I would love to.” Would he ever.

“Excellent.”

“Exc— oomph !” Blair suddenly found himself with a merman wrapped around him.

Oh yes, Marcus spent time around humans if his ability to kiss was any indication. And whoo wee, could he kiss. Marcus buried his hand in Blair's hair. He didn't yank, but Blair shivered anyway. Blair's eyes closed as he sank into the kiss.

Marcus rested his other hand on Blair's hip. Having Marcus' hands on him was like lighting a firecracker. He lit up. The threat—that lovely possibility—of what Marcus could do with his hand buried in his hair was there.

Blair looped his arms around Marcus' waist as Marcus' mouth slanted over his. His lips were soft and full... and warm. Blair had no idea why he thought Marcus' skin would be cooler than his, but he had. No, Marcus was as hot as he was. Marcus moved against him, a silent demand. Blair opened and Marcus slipped his tongue inside, dueling with his.

His body tingled, and his toes curled. Marcus broke the kiss and leaned back. Seconds passed as they stared at each other. Blair licked his lips, enjoying Marcus' taste. He wanted more. Moaning softly, he focused on Marcus' mouth. Marcus tightened his fingers in Blair's hair, pulling his head back slightly.

Oh yes! Blair whimpered. Marcus nipped his throat, his breath hot and moist against Blair's skin. God, he was hard. He'd been kissing guys since he was old enough to understand how good it could be, but nothing had ever felt like this.

Marcus kissed his way down Blair's throat and focused on the skin at the base where his neck and shoulder met. He groaned happily when Marcus closed his mouth over that patch of skin and sucked hard.

He squirmed on the towel, unable to sit still. It was only a hickey, for God's sakes. Certainly not the first one he ever had, but it was damn sure the first one to make him lose his mind. He tightened his arms around Marcus, trying to pull him closer.

He broke the kiss, suddenly he was flat on his back with Marcus above him, looking down. He lifted his hands and cupped Marcus' face. All that blue hair fell over Marcus' shoulders, and he wanted nothing more than to wrap it around him.

The intensity in those pale blue eyes pinned him to the sand better than brute strength. Marcus removed his hand from behind Blair's head and stared down at him. Blair stretched out on the sand letting Marcus drink him in.

A small smile tipped Marcus' lips up into a barely discernable curve of pleasure, and he leaned down, brushing his lips over Blair's. Blair sank his hands into Marcus' hair and pulled him down. He moved restlessly, silently begging. As Marcus kissed him again, he ran one of his hands down Blair's stomach.

Blair's breath caught as Marcus' hand slipped into his trunks and wrapped around his cock. "Oh yes. Oh, oh please."

Blair strained into Marcus' touch, and his breath spiked. Marcus certainly wasn't wasting time. He set a fast pace, jacking Blair off as they kissed. Everything ceased to matter to Blair except for Marcus' lips on his and Marcus' hand wrapped around his cock.

With his orgasm threatening, he pulled back desperately from Marcus. "Going... going..."

Marcus shoved Blair's swim trunks down the rest of the way. Blair kicked them off, and his legs trembled then tightened. Any second now.

"Come for me."

Blair arched as his body obeyed Marcus' demand. He groaned, his hips thrusting as he came. Everything whited out.

“Beautiful,” Marcus whispered.

Blair heard him, but the voice was far, far away and he gasped for breath. Good God, had he stopped breathing while he came? No wonder it felt like his head was going to explode. He floated happily.

Had he ever felt like this? Had it ever felt this good? He didn't think so. He heard of mind-blowing orgasms, but he thought it was only a saying. Nothing more than words. Boy was he wrong on that account. It took a couple minutes, but finally his brain fired up again.

He lay limply on the sand, blinking lazily up at Marcus. “Ho-ly shit.”

Marcus' indulgent smile warmed Blair. I could really get used to this. Just curl up and go to sleep right here.

Then it struck him what he hadn't done. “Oh man, did you... Want me to... Will you let me...?”

Marcus smoothed a strand of hair off Blair's face. “I came when you did. Watching you got to me.”

Blair's eyes widened. “You mean you came because I did?”

“Yes.” Then Marcus hesitated. “Well, I might have been stroking myself off, too.”

Blair snickered. “Next time you have to let me get that.”

“That's a promise I'm going to hold you to.”

Blair sincerely hoped Marcus would as they cleaned up.

“I guess we better get you topside. I’m sure they’re in a panic on the boat since they can’t find you.”

Blair groaned, beating his head against the sand. “Shit. Shit. Shit. I completely forgot about that.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Blair peered up at Marcus. “You should.” But that didn’t excuse the fact he’d forgotten there were probably people ready to tear this island apart looking for him. “Dammit. I need to get back before some stupid shit gets started.”

Marcus stood and helped Blair up. “Do you have a way to call someone? And you might want to change back into your clothes.”

Blair walked over to where his clothes were laid out on the rock and picked them up. He wore a pair of khaki shorts and a nice shirt on the cruise. They were both still wet, but no longer dripping. Good. There was nothing grosser than drippy, soggy clothes. He stuck his hand in the pocket his cell phone in and wasn’t surprised to find it missing.

“I’ve lost my cell phone, and yuck, I’m not looking forward to putting these things back on, but I guess I’d better. I’m sure it would raise all sorts of questions if I showed up in a pair of swim trunks.”

Marcus nodded. “Most likely.”

Blair hesitated when it became pretty obvious Marcus wasn’t going to turn around. Blair shrugged. He wasn’t overly modest, and Marcus jacked him off a couple minutes ago, so why not? Blair struggled into his wet clothes, and yup, what a gross feeling that was.

“I guess I’m ready.” He started up the beach holding the pair of trunks he’d borrowed then stopped. “Here.”

Marcus returned the item to the waterproof bag then hurried back to Blair where he nonchalantly took Blair’s hand. Together they started up the beach toward the back of the cave.

“By the way, what about this date you mentioned?” Blair asked. “I lost my phone, and you obviously don’t have one. How are we going to do this?”

“I assume you’re staying at a resort.”

“Yes.”

“Which one?”

“Um, the name is Blue Waters Resort, I think. I checked in yesterday.” Marcus’ laughter surprised Blair. He had no idea why Marcus would find that so funny. “Okay, what?”

“I know that resort. I won’t have any trouble finding you, trust me. What room are you in?”

Blair told him. Later, he promised himself, he’d find out what Marcus found so funny about that.

Marcus escorted him to the path that took them out of the cave. “Stay here please. I’m going to shut the lanterns off, and it’s going to get dark in here. I can see better than you, so hang tight.”

“No problem.”

Blair watched as Marcus extinguished the lanterns one after the other. He was right. As the lights went out, the cave grew darker. Soon only moonlight lit the cave, but he waited patiently.

“Okay. That’s the end of that. I’m coming toward you now.”

Blair was glad Marcus spoke to him once the lights went out. Maybe because they were close to the water and moonlight caressed the beach there, but he didn’t remember it being this dark. A moment later he felt Marcus next to him.

“Okay, let’s go.” Marcus took Blair’s hand again.

Blair followed Marcus up the winding path. Once they were out of the cave, he glanced around. They weren’t far from the ocean, but the exit was clearly in the jungle. He still had no clue where he was.

“We’re not far from the resort, but it is a little bit of a walk. I’m only going to go halfway with you, is that okay?” Marcus asked.

“Oh. I assumed... That’s fine. Once I get my bearings, I’ll be okay. You don’t have to come, if you don’t want to.”

Marcus laid his hand on Blair’s arm. “It’s not that I don’t want to come with you, but keep in mind I’m not human. I’m not exactly sure what’s going to happen when you return, but if the authorities get involved and start asking for ID... Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“Oh. Yes. I see. I hadn’t thought about that. And yes, the authorities are probably going to be involved. Will I see you tomorrow?”

“Yes. How about we get together late afternoon? Say maybe six o’clock?”

“Okay. Should I meet you somewhere?”

“There’s a restaurant attached to the resort called Sandals. I’ll meet you out front. How does that sound?”

“Sounds great. Thank you. Oh, I don’t think I mentioned my last name. It’s Estes.”

“Krill is my last name.”

Blair didn’t say anything about the fact Marcus still held his hand as they walked. As they drew closer to the more occupied part of the island, Marcus stopped. With a quick kiss, Marcus told Blair good-bye.

Blair watched Marcus return to the jungle. With a sigh, he turned and headed toward the resort and the insanity that was going to ensue as soon as he was recognized.

CHAPTER FIVE

MARCUS WATCHED Blair from the cover of the jungle until he was out of sight. That certainly went better than he expected. He well remembered the pitfalls Nisha experienced when he told Kannon. Kannon had been furious, but then, Nisha did things he shouldn't have. At least Marcus hadn't started the mating ritual within moments of meeting Blair like Nisha did with Kannon.

And speaking of Nisha, he was in desperate need of his friend's help. He debated returning to Nisha's aboveground dwelling, but decided against it. He didn't like being on land. Besides, tomorrow was soon enough. He gulped as a tremor raced through his body. Shit. It appeared a mate was in the cards after all.

He made his way back to the cove, stripped, and returned to the ocean.

THE NEXT morning, he stood on Nisha's doorstep banging on the door.

"Hold on!"

Marcus smiled at the grumpiness in Nisha's voice, but he made sure to wipe the smile off his face when Nisha jerked the door open. "Good morning."

"Good morning? What's good about it? You have any idea what time it is?" Nisha leaned against the doorframe dressed in low-slung boxers, glaring at Marcus.

"You haven't had your morning cup of coffee yet, have you?" Marcus guessed.

“No, but I’m in the process of rectifying that right now,” Kannon called from farther inside the bungalow. “Nisha, let him in, and for God’s sake, quit glaring at him. It’s too early in the damn morning for that.”

“And an impressive glare it is, too.” Marcus smirked.

“I had plans for this morning, just wanted you to know,” Nisha griped, still not moving out of the doorway. “You’re cock blocking me.”

“Look at you picking up human slang!” Marcus wiped an imaginary tear from his eye. “I’m so proud.”

Nisha growled at Marcus.

“Okay, I understand the impressive glare now, but seriously, how often do I show up on your doorstep unannounced?”

“Which is the only reason why I’m not kicking your ass back to the ocean.” Nisha moved out of the doorway. “Come in.”

“Why, thank you. I think I will.”

Nisha scrubbed his hands over his face. “Too early. Entirely too early in the morning to be dealing with you without coffee. Come on.”

Marcus followed Nisha to the kitchen, enjoying the breeze from the open windows. “Good morning, Kannon. Sorry to drop by on you unannounced.”

“No problem. It’s not as if you drop by just to talk.” Kannon waved a hand at the kitchen table. “Have a seat. Have you had breakfast?”

“I’ve already eaten, but thank you. I wouldn’t mind a cup of coffee, though.”

Kannon was dressed in boxers like Nisha.

“Cream? Sugar?” Kannon asked.

“Yes, please.”

“Stuff is over there by the coffee maker. Help yourself.” Kannon handed him a cup of coffee.

A few seconds later Marcus finished doctoring his coffee and sat at the table. Nisha and Kannon joined him.

“Okay, what’s up?” Nisha asked. “Did something happen last night in my territory—”

“Yes and no, but nothing bad,” Marcus answered.

Nisha claimed the entire island as his. Which wasn’t unusual, but it was a vast area. Because it was so big, Nisha allowed other merfolk in his territory on the condition they swear loyalty to him. In return for allowing those mers to stay there, he offered his protection to them. They, in turn, either helped guard it or performed other services. Marcus was one of the ones who was a guard—or a warrior.

“That’s about as clear as cephalopod ink,” Nisha said.

Kannon snorted.

“Yes, well, it’s been that kind of day.” Marcus launched into his story, quickly explaining how he decided to swim with the pod of dolphins, then seeing the dinner

cruise, and how a human fell overboard. “I decided to help.”

Nisha squinted at him. “Wait. You... what? You helped that human?”

“Well, yes.”

Nisha blinked at him. “And you were in your human form, correct?”

Marcus toyed with the coffee cup. “Um, no.”

Nisha carefully set his coffee back on the table. “Excuse me?”

Oh, he hated that arrogant, know-it-all tone of Nisha’s. “I was swimming with the dolphins. Of course I wasn’t in my human form.”

“Let me see if I have this straight. The human fell overboard and you decided to—what? Help out of the goodness of your heart? Get involved in a situation that had absolutely nothing to do with you? Reveal yourself to someone who has no business knowing about us? Is that what I’m hearing?” Nisha demanded.

Kannon cleared his throat. “Hold on, Nisha. We’re missing something here. Isn’t that right, Marcus? I mean, granted, I don’t know you that well, but I know the only time you have anything to do with humans is when you’re looking for sex.”

“I’m more worried about the fact he got involved with the human while in his mer form . Dammit, Marcus.” Nisha massaged his temples. “What were you thinking? You know you’re not supposed to—”

Kannon shook his head. “I’m telling you, there’s something fishy here.”

Marcus glanced at Kannon. “Ironical wording, wouldn’t you say?”

“Marcus!” Nisha growled. “Stop ignoring me. We need to address the situation with this human. Did he see you? Where is he? Did he threaten you? Do we need to make him disappear?”

“Over my dead body,” Marcus snapped.

“Good God, it’s as obvious as the blue hair on your head something’s going on here,” Kannon said.

“What’s going on is he exposed us,” Nisha said to Kannon. He turned back to Marcus. “What did you do with him? I can’t believe you did this. You’re usually one of my most levelheaded—”

“Sardonic,” Kannon added.

“You’re not helping,” Nisha snapped at Kannon.

Kannon poked Nisha in the shoulder. “Unless you want to sleep on the couch, I suggest you tread carefully. You’re not listening to him,” Kannon stressed. “I’m telling you, there’s more to this than—”

“The human is my mate.” Marcus sat back.

“What ?” Kannon gasped.

“What !” Nisha exclaimed.

Both Nisha and Kannon sat stunned, staring at him. Now that they were both finally quiet, maybe he could get a word in edgewise. “I said, the human is my mate. I noticed his scent before he fell into the water. That’s the main reason I didn’t swim away from the boat. I was still deciding what to do when he went overboard, and I

couldn't leave him out there in the water.”

Kannon patted Marcus' hand with his own. “That had to have been truly terrifying.”

“The boat wasn't that tall. It was a two decker, though, and he fell from the top deck.”

“What happened after he hit the water?” Kannon asked.

“Like I said, I couldn't leave, so I went to help.” Marcus shrugged. “I took him back to one of the closer caves we use. I thought he was unconscious, but apparently he wasn't. He told me later he was more stunned due to the impact with the water. Anyway, I started to transform—”

“Oh man,” Kannon said.

Marcus frowned at his coffee. “Yeah. I was already questioning what I'd done. At the time it seemed like a good idea but... The next thing I know as soon as the transformation is complete he's asking me what the hell I am.”

Nisha growled. “He saw you?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Kannon sipped his coffee while they all digested that piece of information. “Well, that's... definitely unfortunate.”

“I'll say.” Nisha sighed. “What happened then?”

“Right the opposite of what you'd expected, I bet. It appears my human—whose name is Blair, by the way—has done some extensive traveling in Africa and

backpacked across Europe.”

“Wait. Africa?” Kannon asked. “Europe, too?”

“Yes,” Marcus said. “Two years’ worth of time in Africa, I believe he said.”

Kannon scowled. “How old is this guy?”

“Um, I didn’t ask, but by his appearance I’d say middle to late twenties,” Marcus said.

“That means he must’ve been pretty young when he did all of this.” Kannon rubbed absently at one of his temples. “That tells me he’s either lying or has money.”

“I don’t think he’s lying.” Marcus repeated the story Blair told him.

“Interesting,” Kannon said once Marcus was through speaking. “That certainly doesn’t sound like he’s lying about his time over there, although it does beg the question of where the money came from. Is this guy rich?”

Marcus shrugged. “I have no idea. Also don’t really have any idea of what you’d consider rich either. I make a little money selling my artwork and jewelry to the local shops. It’s not much, but then, I don’t need much.”

“Does it matter if he has money or not?” Nisha asked.

Kannon sipped his coffee. “It might in the sense that if he’s a multimillionaire—which I can’t imagine how he could be at his age—his name would be well-known. If he is indeed Marcus’ mate—”

“I think I would know if he’s my mate or not—”

“If he is, ” Kannon continued, “it’s going to be really hard for him to just up and disappear.”

“You didn’t disappear,” Marcus pointed out.

“No, I didn’t. But Nisha’s okay with spending part of his time on land. You rarely come ashore. That could seriously be a problem.” Kannon then looked at Nisha. “Anyway, on another note... I guess that answers the question of whether you guys are the only non-humans around. A jaguar shifter. I’d loved to have seen that.”

“I don’t know that you would. From what Blair said, it was a frightening experience.” Marcus remembered how Blair’s voice trembled. That shifter wanted to claim Blair, and that sent a jealous rage burning through him. The idea of someone, or something, claiming what was his infuriated him.

“So he handled knowing what you are without freaking out.” Nisha pursed his lips. “That’s good. That’s really good and one less worry. I’m assuming you haven’t tackled the subject of who he is to you yet, have you?”

“No. I figured I’d already dumped one life-altering event in his lap, it might be better to wait on the other one.” Marcus sipped his coffee again. “Which brings me to exactly why I showed up on your doorstep this morning. It wasn’t because I needed to tell you I found my mate.”

Kannon elbowed Nisha. “Right. The mate you said you never wanted. Wasn’t that you? Weren’t you the one who said he was never getting mated? Never.”

Marcus glared at Kannon. “Shut up.”

Kannon flashed Marcus an evil smile and hummed the wedding march under his breath.

“Can you do something with him?” Marcus pleaded to Nisha.

“I’ve already been threatened with the couch once in this conversation.” Nisha shrugged. “You’re on your own.”

“Will you please stop that infernal sound?” Marcus ordered.

Kannon hooted. “Oh, that’s funny considering some of the sounds I’ve heard coming out of you guys.”

“I’m ignoring you.” Marcus informed Kannon before turning his attention to Nisha. “Anyway, Blair’s my mate. And... I might’ve asked him out on a date for tonight.”

Both Nisha and Kannon blinked. Finally, Nisha spoke. “O-okay. Not sure why you seem so hesitant. Where are you taking him?”

“Sandals. It just so happens Blair is staying at Brett’s resort.”

“That’s good,” Kannon said. “I’ll get in contact with Brett and get you guys a nice table in an out-of-the-way spot for tonight. Well, I would if I wasn’t being ignored.”

Marcus relented and finally looked at Kannon. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Oh yeah.” Kannon smiled. “You better believe it.”

Marcus released the most put upon sigh he could muster. “Fine! I’m not ignoring you. There. Happy?”

“Hmm, could’ve used a little bit more of abject misery in that, but fine. I’ll call Brett,” Kannon said.

“Thank you. I appreciate that. But that still isn’t why I’m here,” Marcus said.

“Stop dragging it out and tell us already,” Nisha said.

“I don’t... I need something to wear tonight.” Marcus wrinkled his nose. “Something appropriate.”

Kannon snickered. “Hmm, is now a good time to point out if you had an aboveground dwelling—”

“I’m never having an aboveground dwelling.”

“Un-huh, keep telling yourself that. For right now let’s focus on your clothing, or the lack thereof.” Kannon scratched his head. “What do you do when you go trolling?”

“Huh?”

“Oh, good grief.”

“What?”

“When you’re out looking to dip your wick. Wanting to bump uglies. You know... do the horizontal hula? Playing on all fours. Sinking the sausage. Bedroom rodeo.”

“Are you even speaking English?” asked Marcus asked, bewildered.

“Jesus. When you’re looking for someone to fuck. Is that plain enough for you?” Kannon demanded.

“You’re a very strange individual, do you know that?” Marcus asked.

“Me? Oh that’s funny.”

“I’m never going to spend much time on land, but if I’m looking for a hookup I normally wear shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals. It’s not as if I’m going to be in my clothes for long. But this is different. I’d like to look a bit nicer than usual.”

Kannon clamped his hand over his mouth and snickered.

Marcus glared at him again. Oh yes, Kannon was having entirely too much fun at his expense. This was probably payback for him poking fun at Kannon shortly after Kannon found out about Nisha and Brett.

“Come on, then. Let’s go see what I have,” Nisha said.

Marcus gulped his coffee then stood. Nisha joined him, and of course, Kannon did too. Marcus’ sigh could’ve felled trees. “You’re not really needed, you know that, right?”

Kannon, grinning, rubbed his hands together gleefully. “I wouldn’t miss this for all the coffee in the world.”

“Lovely.” Yup, Kannon was having too much fun with this.

“Both of you behave.” Nisha picked up his coffee but paused. “This is why I said you need an aboveground dwelling, Marcus. Fortunately, we’re pretty close to the same height and weight so you’re welcome to whatever you find.”

Kannon winked. “And since I’ve been buying his clothes lately, the quality is much better.”

Nisha kissed Kannon on the cheek. “Just exactly what are you trying to say?”

“Nothing much, except I have a better eye than you do.”

“Uh-huh. And it has nothing to do with the fact that Brooke is usually with you when you guys go on one of your shopping sprees, now does it?”

“Oh, absolutely it does. That’s one mermaid who has a fine eye toward clothing,” Kannon agreed as they walked into their bedroom. Nisha opened his side of the closet.

“Shoot me now.” He couldn’t escape the feeling he needed something more substantial than caffeine to get through this.

“Sorry, no. Wouldn’t want to damage the new threads I bought Nisha,” Kannon said. “Okay, we want something nice, but not too dressy. Hmmm.”

“How about this?” Nisha held up a blue silk shirt.

“Huh, wonder how that got in there. That’s actually mine. It’s too much blue with the blue hair and the blue eyes you guys have, but...” Kannon fingered the shirt. “How about...” Kannon flipped through several shirts. “Yeah, here we go.”

Nisha took the silky black short-sleeved shirt. “Ah yes. I like this one.”

“Me, too.” Kannon winked at his mate.

“Spare me,” Marcus begged.

“I’m going to need this back, just so you know.” Nisha laid the shirt on the bed.

“Okay, now for the pants. Hmm, where are those... yes! Here we go.” Kannon pulled out a pair of nice light gray pants. “Perfect. Do you guys wear the same sized shoes?”

Nisha took the pants and laid them on the bed along with the shirt.

“I don’t know.” Marcus looked down at his feet then at Nisha’s. “I’m not terribly fond of shoes.”

“Me neither,” Nisha said.

“I’m aware.” Kannon shook his head as he hunted for dress shoes in the bottom of Nisha’s closet. “Okay, good.” Kannon held up nice black dress shoes.

“Oh, I remember those. They don’t feel too bad,” Nisha said.

Kannon handed the shoes to Marcus. “Let me get you a pair of dress socks to go with those, then you need to try them to see if they fit.”

“What if they don’t?” Nisha asked.

“We’ll worry about that bridge when we get to it,” Kannon said. “Hopefully they’ll fit.”

Marcus sat on the edge of the bed, slipped on the dress socks, and tried on the shoes.

“Well?” Kannon asked.

Marcus stood and took a couple steps. “They’re weird.”

“Okay, what do you mean by that?”

“I mean they’re weird. They feel weird.”

Kannon dropped to his knees and pushed at the top of the shoe. “Hmm, your toe is

right at the end, but that's good. That's what should be. They don't look to be too small. I think they're fine."

Nisha's low sexy growl drifted across the bedroom.

Kannon and Marcus looked at Nisha.

"I do love seeing you on your knees, mate," Nisha spoke softly. "Just not sure I like seeing you at someone else's feet."

Marcus coughed and stepped back.

Kannon shook his head. "All I'm checking out is the shoe size, mate. Put a cork in it."

"How about a butt plug?" Nisha mumbled under his breath.

Marcus' cough suddenly became very strained as Kannon turned an interesting shade of red. It was one of the things he noticed about Kannon. Since his hair was auburn and he was fair complexioned, he blushed easily. Nisha made it his mission in life to keep his mate an appealing shade of red.

"TMI," Marcus muttered, because seriously? He did not need to know that. "Back to these infernal shoes. I guess they feel funny because I'm not used to wearing them."

"Most likely." Kannon stood after shooting Nisha a very interesting look. "But they're good quality and extremely soft. I think you'll get used to them." Kannon waved his hands at the clothes on the bed. "Why don't you try those on? Nisha and I will wait for you in the kitchen."

Marcus nodded. "Yes, I guess I should make sure they fit. Do you want me to come

in there after I'm dressed?"

"Yes. I need to make sure they fit correctly. If they don't, we may have to go on a quick shopping trip," Kannon tossed over his shoulder as he walked out of the room.

"Shoot. Also need to call Brett, too. Get a move on, Marcus!"

Marcus cringed. Shopping? He prayed such a horror didn't await him.

CHAPTER SIX

THE FIRST thing Blair did that morning was buy a new cell phone and then stop by Sandals for a late breakfast. The restaurant wasn't too crowded considering how late in the morning it was. Last night, when he finally arrived at the resort, he walked into the chaos he knew waited for him. It took hours to get everything settled.

No one seemed able to understand how the dinner cruise staff could've missed him floating out there in the water. The other thing stumping the police was why it took him so long to return to the resort.

Blair didn't have a reasonable excuse for his absence. Deciding it was easiest to stick with the truth—as much as he could—he simply said he'd been stunned when he hit the water, but things were vague. He went on to say that by the time he managed to swim to shore, he was lost and confused.

It certainly sounded better than saying a merman rescued him, took him to a cave, and flirted with him. And, oh yes, they had a date tonight. They'd probably whisk him off to the nearest hospital to have his head x-rayed.

No charges were filed against the guy who ran into him while he was still on the boat, although the police asked him several times if he was sure he didn't wish to do anything. He reassured them he didn't.

The guy had rushed him, but he'd also been drunk. And furious. Never a good combination. Blair really didn't think he meant to knock him overboard. Beat the crap out of him? Possibly. But try and kill him? Probably not.

Then things got very interesting after the police left. The owner of the resort, Brett Navarro, introduced himself. Blair wasn't surprised to know the owner researched him and knew he had money.

After Blair repeatedly reassured Brett he was fine, and no, he didn't need anything, he finally managed to return to his room. There was something about Brett that sent his nerves dancing and left the hair on the back of his neck standing up. He had no idea why. Brett didn't feel threatening. He felt... different.

There was also the possibility he was overreacting considering he met a creature who he had thought didn't exist last night. Good enough reason for his nerves to be on high alert today. But then again, after spending entirely too much time in the rainforests of Africa, he learned to trust his gut.

And his gut said something was off with Brett.

“Good morning. Do you mind if I join you?”

Speak of the devil. “Of course not.” Blair waved at the seat across from him. “And good morning to you too.”

Brett sat down. “Thank you for letting me join you. I hate to interrupt your breakfast, but I saw you sitting here and wanted to check on you again.”

“I appreciate that, but I really am okay. Last night was— exhilarating, fascinating, thrilling — unsettling, but I bear no ill effects from it.”

“I'm glad to hear that.”

Good. So why are you here? For the life of him, Blair couldn't figure out why the owner of the resort sat across from him. Blair might have money, but he certainly

didn't move in the same circles as this guy did. "So...?"

"So what am I doing here, you must be wondering." Brett suddenly smiled, his white teeth flashing in his darkly tanned face.

"I have to admit, the thought crossed my mind, yes."

"Well then, let me share with you this interesting thing that happened this morning. You see, my best friend lives on this island. He called me with a very... unusual request. One I can promise you I never saw coming in a million years."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. My friend, Kannon, asked me to reserve an out-of-the-way spot for Marcus and you for tonight."

Blair shifted in his seat. Surely not. "I see."

"I wonder, do you?" Brett asked quietly.

"Probably not, but this isn't the first time I've been thrown into the deep end of the pool. I know how to swim." Blair calmly put his coffee down. Things kept getting weirder. "What are you?" Blair asked just as quietly.

"Interesting choice of words. Are you finished eating?"

"It appears so. Why?"

Brett's smile was all teeth. "Can I interest you in joining me for a walk?"

Blair shrugged mentally. Why the hell not? There was something going on, but he

didn't sense a threat from Brett. At least, not a threat toward him. "Sure. Just let me pay—"

Brett waved his hand and caught someone's attention. A server hurried over to him. "My treat."

Blair hiked an eyebrow but didn't say anything until after the bill was taken care of. He took one last sip of his coffee. "You must know I am more than capable of paying for my meals."

"Oh yes, I thoroughly checked you out. But as I said, my treat. Shall we?" Brett stood.

Blair stood also. "Lead on."

He followed Brett outside and away from the resort. Slowly they made their way toward the jungle. Blair noticed how isolated they were, which was probably good, considering Brett obviously wanted to speak to him. It was also a little unnerving. It was really isolated.

"I guess the first thing I should say is they rarely let humans know of their existence. It's against their rules. From what I've read on you, you seem like an intelligent man, so I'm sure you can figure out why they're so careful."

"Yes." Blair didn't say anything else.

"The Islanders know what they are, of course. The natives were here long before the white man stepped foot on their shores. They jealously guard the merfolk's secret, too. I should also point out they don't think like humans. Their morals, value system..." Brett waved his hand aimlessly. "Their concepts are completely different from what you're used to. You need to be aware of that."

Blair slipped a hair tie off his wrist and pulled his hair back. Here in the jungle it was much more humid. “Okay, that’s at least the third time you’ve use the word ‘human.’ You speak as if you aren’t. Human, that is.”

“I’m not.”

Blair nodded. A chill raced across his skin. It certainly explained why Brett made his nerves jangle. “Then what are you?”

“I’m... I guess hybrid would be a good description. I’m not a full-blooded merman. I can’t transform like they do.”

Blair wrinkled his nose. “Yeah, about that. I saw Marcus changing.”

Brett cringed. “Not the best introduction to them.”

“Yes, it was something out of a horror movie. He was in pain.” That was putting it rather simply. There was no blood involved, and he still wasn’t sure how that could be. When something tore in half... Well. There was usually blood.

“Yes. It’s painful, but the pain doesn’t last long. At least that’s what I understand.”

“Okay, again... how do you know all this?”

Brett sighed. “I’m mated to a mer, and when I say mated I’m not talking about being buddies. She’s my everything, and I love her. I’d do anything for her, including becoming what I am now. Mating is a soul deep commitment and... I don’t have words to explain how important she is to me. We’ve been together for several years now, and her name is Brooke. She is also legally my wife.”

“I see.” He did. He was beginning to see a lot of things. They continued slowly

walking until finally Blair spoke again. “And your best friend?”

“Kannon is mated to Brooke’s brother. His name is Nisha. They’ve been mated for a year.”

“And how does Marcus fit into this?” Blair asked.

“The easiest way to explain it is to say Marcus is like a security guard. And yes, males stake out territory. The more powerful the merman, the bigger region he has. Nisha’s is the entire island.”

“Females don’t have territories?”

“None that I know of. Now, what goes on elsewhere in the world, I have no idea.”

“Wow. In the world. That’s...”

“Scary?”

“I was going to say unbelievably fantastic.”

“It is. It really is.”

“It sounds as if they might follow the same principles as wolves.” Now wasn’t that interesting? “Is Nisha the Alpha? Do they have betas and so on and so forth? Omegas?”

“No. There are no titles. Nisha isn’t called Alpha. He’s just... Nisha. He’s the dominant male. Nisha allows certain males in his area, that’s true, but those males are not as powerful as him. Or else those males haven’t struck out on their own yet. Some are mated too and don’t want the responsibility of maintaining a region.”

“Fascinating.”

“I’m not really sure why Marcus is still in Nisha’s territory, outside the fact they’re very good friends. A course, now that he’s found you, his mate, that may change.”

Brett’s heart stuttered then launched into a hard, pounding beat. Mate. Brett called him mate. Holy shit. After listening to the explanation of what a mate was, his heart tried to crawl out of his throat. Shit. Shit . Wasn’t it funny Marcus neglected to tell him that last night?

“Anyway, back to tonight. Marcus doesn’t spend a lot of time on land, so he went to Kannon and Nisha for help on your date. He really wants to do something special for you. Kannon called me, so I reserved you two a special spot at the restaurant.”

“I see. That’s very sweet, thank you.”

“Sweet?” Brett came to a stop. “I want to make something perfectly clear. I’m not sweet. I’m very protective about these guys. I consider them my family.”

“I… okay.” Blair held up his hands palms out in the universal sign for “hold up” or “calm down.” “Sorry. I didn’t mean to sound insulting.”

“You didn’t,” Brett huffed. “I didn’t mean to come off as overbearing, but you’re handling this remarkably well. Too well. I freaked out, and so did Kannon.”

“I’m neither you nor your friend,” Blair pointed out.

“I understand, but I still say you’re handling this too calmly.”

“Would it make you feel better if I ran around, waving my hands in the air, and screaming bloody murder? Sorry. I got all that out of my system in Africa. While I

find Marcus fascinating and attractive, he's done nothing to scare me."

"He wouldn't. Of course he wouldn't. You are his mate."

Blair's heart thudded hard once more. "Yes, well, that jaguar shifter... he, he... I hate to call him animalistic, but it describes him, and not because he changed into and out of an animal. He was primitive, but I don't mean in the sense of being uncivilized. He was a predator and wasn't nearly as considerate as Marcus has been to me."

"Don't fool yourself; Marcus is a predator, too. They all are. But he'd never hurt you."

"No, I don't think he would. I'm trying to explain to you why I'm not in the middle of a complete meltdown."

Brett stared. "Hmm. The information I found on you said you've been on your own for quite a while."

Blair shrugged. It didn't take much digging to find that. "That's true."

"That'll certainly make somebody grow up in a hurry, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. Look, I don't want to be offensive, but what are we doing here?" Blair waved at the two of them standing out there in the middle the jungle. "You trying to warn me away or warning me of what I'm getting into?"

"I'm giving you a heads up. Both Kannon and I were plunked down in the middle of this new life we found ourselves in with little to no warning. Neither one of us reacted well." Brett ran a hand through his hair. "I guess I'm trying to spare you the same anguish we went through."

“Anguish?” Blair nibbled his lip. That sounded rather extreme. “It was really that bad?”

“Any time you have emotions involved, it can get messy. That’s all I’m going to say. Oh, and I’m also going to add I consider Marcus a friend. Don’t hurt him.”

Blair shivered slightly in the warm tropical air. “What about me? Shouldn’t somebody be warning him not to hurt me?”

“He’d rather die than hurt you.” Suddenly Brett sighed. “But that doesn’t mean you won’t end up getting hurt regardless. No matter how good the intentions, things can still go wrong. Just... trust in him. And yourself. He wasn’t expecting this anymore than you were.”

“That’s oddly... deep.” Blair patted Brett on the shoulder. “He’s stumbling around, too? Excellent. If I’m going to be fumbling around here in the dark, the least he can do is join me.”

Brett snorted. “I think I’m going to like you. Ready to head back?”

“Absolutely. I’ve spent a little bit more time in this jungle than I wanted to.”

Blair was relieved to see the conversation heading back was not quite as heavy. Once they left the jungle, he followed Brett back to the resort.

“Okay, I’m going to leave you here. Oh, listen. Tonight, when you get here, give the receptionist your name. She’ll escort you back.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, my pleasure.” Brett snickered. “Absolutely my pleasure. Hope you enjoy

yourself. See you later.”

Blair was pretty sure that “absolutely my pleasure” meant something, but he wasn’t sure what. He checked his cell and was surprised to see close to two hours had passed. The whole day stretched in front of him, but he hadn’t planned anything. He pursed his lips. The pool did look rather inviting.

Mind made up, he returned to his room. He’d kill little time at the pool, maybe eat lunch out there, and then grab a nap before tonight... all while trying to figure out what the hell he going to do with the little bomb Brett dropped about him and Marcus being mates.

Satisfied with that, he changed clothes. Slipping on his sandals, he grabbed a towel and his room key before heading back down to the pool. He found a nice spot where he could sunbathe and lay down.

Wonder what Marcus is doing?

CHAPTER SEVEN

WONDER WHAT Blair's doing?

Marcus bet it was more pleasant than the activity he was currently involved in. After he tried on the borrowed clothes, he returned to the kitchen and stood silently while both Kannon and Nisha checked him over.

“Not exactly a perfect fit, but close. These will work.” Kannon checked the waist of the pants Marcus wore.

“Stop that.” Marcus swatted Kannon's hand.

“Just checking to see how much give there is.”

“I'm good. Seriously. I don't particularly like clothes, but if I have to wear them, these are fine.” Marcus took a breath and threw himself off the cliff. “All right, how do I look?”

“Wasn't there a show called that?” Kannon mused.

“I have no idea what that means, and I don't want to know. Just tell me if I pass.”

“One day we simply must introduce you to the joys of television.” Kannon studied Marcus, tapping one finger against his lips. “Hmm, I have to say you do clean up rather well. You're going to knock his socks off. Now, why don't you come over this afternoon before your date so you can shower here?”

Marcus grimaced. Yet another thing he didn't consider.

"Oh, and what are you going to do with your hair?" Kannon continued.

"Excuse me?" He didn't understand the question. What was Kannon talking about now? It was hair. It was on his head. What more was there? What exactly did Kannon mean do with it?

Kannon waved his hand at Marcus' head. "How are you going to fix it for tonight?"

Marcus opened his mouth then closed it. "Wash it and dry it?" Hopefully that was the correct answer.

"Good lord." Kannon rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Have you ever had your hair professionally cut?"

"I don't know what that means ." Aggravated, Marcus turned to Nisha. Maybe his friend could help him out... like out the back door. "Nisha?"

"What my mate is asking is if you've ever gone to somebody on land and paid money to have them cut your hair," Nisha replied.

Marcus stood in the kitchen staring blankly at Nisha. "You must be kidding me. Why pay somebody to cut my hair when I can use a knife?"

Kannon's eyes widened, and he blinked. "A knife. And you're asking if I'm kidding?"

Suddenly it was all too much. The walls closed in on him. He couldn't do this. Shaking his head frantically, he backed up. What in the world was he thinking? His home was in the ocean, not the land, and all of this was... was...

“I can’t. I…” He bumped into one of the cabinets and came to a halt, still shaking his head.

Nisha crossed over to where Marcus managed to corner himself. “Easy now.” Nisha laid a hand on Marcus’ arm. “Breathe.”

“I can’t do this.” Marcus dropped his head and stared at the floor, even though Nisha’s gaze drilled into him.

“You most certainly can. And you know why?”

Marcus shook his head, the movement sharp and abrupt.

“You will do this because Blair’s your mate, a mate who happens to be human. You will do this because no matter how uncomfortable you are now, in the end it’ll be worth it. You will do this because for as long as I’ve known you, I’ve never known you to back down from a challenge. That’s all this is. A challenge.”

Marcus lifted his head and swallowed. He stared back at Nisha, the assurance Marcus needed so badly in that gaze. Nisha thought he could do this. Nisha believed in him.

“Remember this feeling, Marcus, because I promise you if things go as you wish, your mate will soon be experiencing the same thing,” Nisha said.

“You might feel like a fish out of water now—”

Marcus rolled his eyes but chuckled nevertheless. Leave it to Kannon.

“But keep in mind you, as a person, aren’t going to be changed.” Kannon’s light, easy tone dropped away and suddenly he was serious. “You may be uncomfortable on land, but Blair is going to be subjected to something far more stressful once you bite

and mate with him. His basic makeup is going to change so he can also become a creature of the water.”

“He’s right,” Nisha added. “Something we, as merfolk, never think of.”

“ You will still be yourself, but Blair’s going to be transformed into something completely new,” Kannon continued. “Don’t you think a little bit of the uncomfortableness you’re feeling now is worth that, considering what he’ll do for you?”

Marcus stood tall and squared his shoulders. They were both right, and his moment of self-doubt vanished. Kannon, in particular, knew of which he spoke. What was Marcus sacrificing? A couple of uncomfortable hours on land, in a restaurant, surrounded by other humans? Wearing clothes that were borrowed? That even to get ready for the date he needed Nisha and Kannon?

In the long run, that was nothing. If Blair accepted him and his way of life, Blair would give up far more. Marcus had stated, quite venomously, he couldn’t live on land. But was he going to ask Blair to live in the ocean with him and give up all he knew? Did he really have that right?

Suddenly he saw how selfish his expectations were. What right did he have asking Blair to make all the adjustments in this relationship? None.

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right.”

Nisha patted him on the arm, then stepped back giving him a little room. “We ask a lot of our humans. They’re strong, our half-human mates, and I firmly believe they’re our mates because of that strength.”

Kannon hip-checked Nisha on his way to the sink. “Got that right. We have to be in

order to put up with some of the things you guys do.”

Nisha followed Kannon to the sink, scowling. “What exactly does that mean?”

Kannon stepped back so he could look around Nisha at Marcus. “I’ve been meaning to ask you, you know the powder you guys use that’s made from fish—oh, you know the one? That powder which makes you aware but unable to move? I’ve been wondering if maybe I could get my hands on some of—”

Nisha growled playfully, picked Kannon up, and tossed him over his shoulder. He swatted Kannon’s ass as he headed outside toward the pool. “I don’t think so.”

Kannon laughed hysterically as he kicked, playfully pounding Nisha’s lower back. “Oh my God, what is it with you throwing me in the—”

Marcus stayed by the counter, watching out of the kitchen window as Nisha carried Kannon outside and promptly tossed him in their pool. Personally, he agreed with Kannon. What was Nisha’s deal with throwing his mate in all that nasty chlorine water? Although he did enjoy the spitting and stuttering Kannon did when he surfaced.

Then there was another splash. Marcus bet Nisha joined Kannon in the pool. Deciding to leave his two friends to it, he wandered back into the bedroom and changed out of the borrowed clothes. As he laid them out on the bed, he heard a quiet moan and slap of a tail against water through one of the bedroom windows.

He redressed and slipped out of the bungalow so he wouldn’t disturb Kannon and Nisha. As he walked toward the ocean, he wondered if he could make love to Blair in his merman form. It was something he had never done.

Taking his time, he strolled down the beach looking for shells and other things to use

for the jewelry he made. The things he collected he took back to a certain underwater cave he claimed as his. The cave was part of a cliff projecting into the sea.

The part above the water boasted a soaring ceiling of mossy rock. It opened to the jungle. The sandy beach knew only his footsteps. Speleothems drooped eerily from the ceilings like icicles or emerged from the floor. The water was the clearest of blues.

The cliff's pathway wound through the densest part of the jungle, and it hadn't been cleared of brush. It was literally nothing more than a beaten path. The natives were the only ones brave enough to walk into the unexplored part of the jungle and skirt the narrow path along the cliff. And they certainly had no reason to.

Marcus didn't worry about humans finding his place because what pathway there was—was next to none. The jungle had all but reclaimed it, and unless you knew where it was, it was hard to find. There he had the barest of essentials for his time in human form.

He had some clothes, a lantern for light at night if needed, and a long table he used to assemble his crafts. The tools he needed he'd bought with the money he made from the sale of his art. As he walked his thoughts returned to Kannon and Nisha.

While they still spent the majority of their time in the ocean, they had an aboveground dwelling with all the comforts that any human could want. Electricity. Coffee. A bed. That irritating thing called TV.

Another disturbing thought intruded. If Kannon was right about Blair having money, why would he want to give his creature comforts up to basically live in a cave? The question was could he—which was interesting, since he found himself asking a lot of “could he” questions, too. He stopped on the beach and stared out at the waves. He couldn't ask Blair do that, any more than Blair could ask him to give up the ocean.

So where did that leave them?

He didn't know, except for he was sure of one thing. He wanted Blair as much as he wanted to swim the currents. Maybe it was the mating pull, but Blair was the one for him. No one else interested him.

He wasn't stupid enough to think it would be easy—Kannon and Nisha were a perfect example of how rough it could be. But Blair was his, and he'd do whatever was needed to make this work.

A crab scurried by his foot toward the water. It lived on land and in the sea, as did many other creatures. He sighed. The answer was obvious even though sometimes it was hard to see the kelp forest for all the seaweed. He picked up a couple of interesting shells and then turned and started making his way toward Brett's resort.

It appeared an aboveground dwelling was in his future.

“YOU'RE KIDDING, right?”

Marcus struggled not to roll his eyes. “Does it sound like I'm joking?”

“No, and that's what bothers me. Are you sure you want to do this?” Brett asked.

Marcus glanced around the fancy penthouse suite. It was beautiful, stylish, and decked out with the latest amenities, he was sure. The view was spectacular, and the air was pleasantly cool. It made his balls want to climb up inside him.

He sincerely hoped this wasn't something Blair was attached to because, while he was willing to compromise, this was too... too sterile, too remote feeling, too cold. How Brooke stood it was beyond him, but that wasn't his problem.

“I thought about it, and yes, I’m sure. This needs to be done.” Even if it did make him dreadfully uncomfortable.

“Never thought I’d see the day you’d voluntarily stay on land in an aboveground dwelling.”

“It’s not like the end of the world is about to happen.”

“Are you sure?” Brett joked.

“Ha-ha. Look, how long would it take to build a home? I assume you have the work crews and... whatever you need to make stuff like this happen.” Marcus’ jaw clenched. He didn’t even know the right terminology for what he was asking.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t want to look around and see if you can find something already built?”

“Absolutely not. While I understand Blair needs an aboveground dwelling, I still need to be close to the ocean.”

Brett nodded. “I can see that. There is property attached to the resort—”

“Is Nisha’s bungalow built on that?”

“No, he’s on the other side of the island, remember?”

“Oh. I didn’t know maybe if you owned property over there.” Marcus sighed. This was turning out to be a lot harder than he thought. “Did Nisha buy that land?”

“Quite a bit of it actually, and it was a long time ago. If you’re serious about this, why don’t you ask him if he’ll sell you part of that land?”

“You think he’d do that?”

“I have no idea, which is why I said you need to ask him. It’s isolated and close to the water, but you’d still be close to the two of them. I don’t think taking Blair out to the middle of nowhere with no humans around is going to go well. Humans are, for the most part, social animals.”

“I see.”

Brett paused then cleared his throat. “Can I ask you something?”

“Please do.”

“What are you going to use for money?”

“Don’t worry about that.” Marcus shrugged nonchalantly. “There’s been more than one ship sunk off the coast of Africa I’ve scavenged. I can afford the house and land.”

Brett’s mouth fell open. “Lord, are you talking about—”

“Gold coins. I assume you can help me sell those, or whatever, to get money for them?”

Brett whistled. “Aren’t you full of surprises today? Yes, I can help with that.”

“Good.”

Brett glanced at his watch. “In a couple hours it’s going to be time for your date. Do you have everything you need?”

“Yes. Nisha and Kannon helped me. I’m going to go over there to get ready.”

“Okay then, it’s getting late.” Brett stood. “You might want to head on over there.”

“Thank you. Seriously, thank you for everything.”

Brett patted Marcus on the back as he escorted him to his private elevator. “Glad to help. Have fun tonight.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

BLAIR OPENED his eyes and blinked. Staring up at the ceiling, he yawned. Lying out by the pool sapped him more than he thought. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he sat up. Man, he'd slept hard. He glanced out the window of his room at the ocean. The first glimpse of the water snapped him awake... water.

Ocean.

Shit.

And somewhere out there was a merman who considered him his mate. If that didn't get the old blood pumping, he didn't know what would. He sat in bed staring out at the beautiful blue water replaying yet again everything Brett told him. He found Marcus endlessly fascinating, and there was no doubt he was attracted. Very much so.

But...

Yeah, but. From what Brett told him, this was no fling. No vacation spent fucking a hot guy. According to Brett, Marcus considered him his mate. And after listening to what Brett explained a mate was, Blair didn't know what to do.

He'd never thought about settling down, but to be fair, that was mostly because he worried more about being used for his money than most people did. Of course, in this instance, that didn't seem to be a concern. What was concerning was, physically speaking, he'd be changed if he pursued this.

He didn't know what those changes were yet, but from what Brett said, he would no longer be human. It made sense once he thought about it. Brett's mate belonged to the water, so he needed a way to be able to do that... like ability to breathe underwater.

The longer he sat there, and the more he thought about that, the more fascinated he became. How cool would it be to have the ability to breathe underwater? To explore the ocean? Did it scare him? He picked at the sheet covering him. Of course it did. That was part of the thrill.

That was why he spent years in Africa, why he paraglided in Interlaken, Switzerland. Why he waded in Devil's Pool at Victoria Falls in Livingstone, Africa. Why he hiked the Most Dangerous Trail in the World on Mount Huashan, China. He was an adrenaline junkie, plus he had the money to indulge his need. Now he had the opportunity to literally ride the tide.

He glanced back at the ocean beyond his window. Which was cool and all, but what did he really know about these people? Brett warned him mating was a serious deal. And pretty final, too. Did he want to be mated?

Brett described it as a marriage, only more. He had the distinct impression that meant no divorce. What if after the lust burnt off they couldn't stand each other? Were they stuck? He didn't see them being okay with him leaving once he became part of their group, or like them... or whatever the hell the correct word was.

Could the mers force him to stay? He was pretty sure that jaguar shifter intended to do that. But somehow, he didn't see Marcus doing something similar. He didn't give off that kind of vibe. But what did he know? Nothing.

That was the point.

Blair bit his lip. Even though he was rich, he wasn't well known. If he disappeared

who would care? His parents were gone, and he didn't have siblings. Wasn't there an old saying about how the ocean didn't give up its dead?

For the first time since he met Marcus the adrenaline pumping through his body left his stomach twisting uneasily and his heart pounding in an obnoxious way. Oh God, what if Marcus forced him? A cold chill raced over his body, and he shuddered.

What if Marcus changed him without asking? He hadn't thought of that. How strong were they anyhow? Shit, shit, shit. Suddenly he was hot... burning up. A headache came out of nowhere and slammed into his left temple. Great. Helplessly, he rubbed the spot.

Was he totally overreacting?

He could run. Would they try to stop him? He could leave all his shit here, walk out of the resort, and be on a plane in next to no time. Brett had money—a hell of a lot more than he did, most likely—but Blair was by no means poor.

Fight or flight? Run or stay? Shit or get off the pot? The last one made him snort hysterically, but it was appropriate. Did he trust his gut—which was saying Marcus was not a threat? Or his head—which was screaming bloody murder at him to leave.

He didn't know, and that was part of the problem. The logical side of his brain said talk to Marcus. He hadn't done anything to deserve the things Blair was contributing to him—things he hadn't even done yet and might never do.

Besides that, Marcus did help him last night. He didn't have to do that, and Blair was sure the attack wasn't a setup. But then again he had wondered if that guy was playing him in an effort to get his billfold.

What if the whole damn deal was a scam? Something done so Marcus could get a

hold of him? And there was no way to know for certain he wasn't being played or that the mers didn't have humans helping them. Brett was human at one time.

"Oh, fuck me." Elbows resting on his knees, he buried his head in his hands. "What do I do?"

He checked his cell phone. There were still a couple of hours before they were supposed to meet. His stomach rolled uneasily. He needed to think about this, seriously think about this. Holy shit, this would change everything he knew, everything he was. This was beyond serious and, dare he say it, life-changing... and he couldn't think here.

Chaotic thoughts bounced around in his head. He felt safe, but he didn't. He didn't think anything bad would happen to him, but he wasn't sure. Marcus hadn't threatened him in any way, and honestly, neither had Brett... but still.

What did he really know besides what they told him? He could Google Brett but what he found on the Internet would only be the basics. It wouldn't give him insight into the man. They both seemed nice, but some the most prolific killers in history were charismatic too. And Jesus, wasn't that a lovely thought on top of everything else?

He needed to think about this. He glanced around his nice hotel room... a room which belonged to Brett. The owner of the resort. The very same person who made it very clear he considered these people his family.

"Shit." The struggle not to panic finally was lost.

Brett hopped off the bed, grabbed a pair of khaki shorts, and pulled them on. He yanked a shirt out of the closet, not really paying attention to what it was, and threw it on. He pushed his feet into his sandals, picked his billfold off the counter, and crammed his cell phone into his pocket.

Fuck, he was panting. A quick glance in the mirror showed that he was flush and sweaty. He looked panicky or like someone who was up to no good. He took a deep breath, then another one. Running a hand through his hair, he rushed into the bathroom. Quickly he brushed his teeth and splashed water on his face. He needed to get out of there, but he needed to calm his ass down, too.

Five minutes later, he left his room. Not long after that he was walking out of resort. He did his dead level best to appear normal as possible, but that was asking a lot considering he couldn't grab onto one thought longer than a few seconds.

Thank all that was holy he didn't run into Brett. Part of him urged him to run, push people out of the way, and grab the first taxi he saw. Another part was shrieking that he was making a huge mistake.

He hailed a cab, got in, and asked to be taken to the airport.

A COUPLE hours later, he sat in a comfortable leather chair staring out a window. The ocean was picturesque, a beautiful sight he normally would've enjoyed as the jet steadily climbed higher. Not this time, though.

He sighed. Money talked, as he saw yet again. Once he had arrived at the airport, a few discreet inquiries, along with verification he had money, managed to net him a privately-owned jet to fly him out of there. It hadn't taken long, all things considered.

But he still was on pins and needles until he finally strapped in and they took off. Only... now that he was on his way home, he assumed the crushing weight in his chest would ease up. It hadn't.

Panic still flitted through his system, and he wasn't sure why. He was safe. No one—or no thing—had tried to stop him. Guards hadn't rushed him at the airport, whistles hadn't blown shrilly, no one had asked him to step into a sequestered back

room.

No muss, no fuss. He didn't know what he had expected, but simply walking out the resort, getting on a plane, and leaving hadn't been it. Never would he have dreamed it would be quite that easy. He rubbed his chest aimlessly.

Did that mean he overreacted? He glanced back out the window. Now all he could see was clouds. Thank goodness the small crew attached to the privately owned jet didn't bother him. Which was fine. He wanted to be alone.

The last thing he wanted was to talk to people. Wasn't that why he ran? So he could think? Well, considering how long it took to get from the Seychelle islands to where he was going, he'd have plenty of time to do nothing but fucking think.

He debated returning to his beachside home in California, but decided not to. Frankly, the ocean was a little too close for his peace of mind right now, so he went in the opposite direction. He owned an apartment in New York City—nothing grand, but nice.

He planned to stay there until he got his head on straight. Whenever that came about. Closing his eyes, he leaned the chair back. He was fidgety but also exhausted. As he drifted off to sleep yet again he remembered the conversation with Brett. Was it just earlier that day?

Hadn't he been the one to reassure Brett he wasn't going to have a meltdown? Wasn't he the one who said he wasn't going to run around screaming and hollering, freaking out? No, all he'd done was get on a plane and hightail it out of there.

So much for not panicking.

CHAPTER NINE

Marcus had been poked, prodded, and pressed within an inch of his life. His hair had been cut—he still couldn't believe he allowed Kannon to do that—and he smelled delightful, if he did say so himself.

Whatever shampoo Kannon and Nisha used left his hair with a sheen. The silk shirt clung to his skin like a black cloud of temptation. The gray pants showed his ass off perfectly. Even the shoes felt okay. He turned this way and that, admiring the image reflected back at him. He felt good . Sexy.

“Satisfied?” Kannon asked.

“I look good. I mean, that sounds like I'm bragging and I'm not, but I really look good,” Marcus whispered. He couldn't believe the vision in the full-length mirror. Never had he seen himself look so... He didn't know what the word was he wanted. “I look...”

“Sophisticated,” Nisha said when Marcus trailed off.

“Fucking sexy.” Kannon wagged his eyebrows at Marcus' reflection. “If that doesn't get you laid, you're hopeless.”

“Getting laid has never been a problem.” Marcus sniffed, and Kannon snorted. “But usually I'm not concerned with what they think of me. The men I bedded were hookups, nothing more. This time, I want to make a good impression. I want...” Marcus frowned at the mirror.

“You want him,” Nisha supplied.

“That goes without saying, but that’s not what I meant.” He rubbed his chest. “I want to make him happy. I definitely want him to feel safe around me, but his happiness suddenly is very important. I want to see him smile, and hear him laugh. Know what his favorite foods are, and what he hates to eat. What type of music does he listen to? What color does he like? I want to know him .”

“Got to love the mating instinct,” Kannon said.

“Is that what that is? Is that all it is? Just instinct?” Marcus asked.

“In the beginning, yes,” Nisha said. “Don’t discount instinct. It’s what drives us, protects us. But don’t fool yourself into thinking it’s just instinct. Blair is the perfect individual for you. He meets your needs and your wants, just as you will meet his. I’m pretty sure you’ve already found out there’s chemistry there.”

“Oh yes,” Marcus said, licking his lips as he remembered their kiss.

“It can be quite explosive. But it’s more than chemistry and instinct. You’re already worried about his reactions, thinking about his needs. You want him to be happy.”

“What are you saying?” Marcus asked.

“I’m saying instinct and chemistry are the building blocks of any relationship. Just because you feel a pull toward him, and he might be the perfect person for you, doesn’t mean it’s going to be easy.”

Kannon snorted again.

“As with anything that’s worth value, you have to work for it. And you will want to.”

Nisha clasped Marcus on the shoulder. "I know you didn't want to be mated."

"No, I didn't. But here I am."

"Yes, here you are. Also know you didn't want to live aboveground."

"No, I didn't, but I talked to Brett about possibly buying land and building something for us. It's not right for me to ask Blair to give up the land since he comes from it."

"You're right, it's not. And those are the actions of someone who cares," Nisha said. "Of someone who's beginning to fall a little bit in love."

"Well, in case Brett didn't add this, I will. You might want to wait on buying anything until you talk to your mate," Kannon added. "I wouldn't advise springing such a major purchase on him."

"It was also pointed out to me Blair is a very capable individual and that some of my actions, if I wasn't careful, could come across as being slightly, um—"

"Cavemanish?"

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "Humans are the ones who lived in caves, not us. But we'll go with that word for the sake of argument."

"See?" Kannon waved his hand at Marcus. "He knows to agree with me."

"More like I'm trying to avoid an argument." Marcus fluffed his hair. He couldn't get over how different it felt without the salt from the ocean in it. "Besides, I'm not your mate. I don't have to appease you."

Kannon picked up the hairbrush Marcus had thrown on the dresser. "Nisha doesn't

either.”

Nisha picked up the towel Marcus had left lying on the floor and popped Kannon on the rear end with it. “Excuse me? I don’t try to appease you?”

Kannon yelped, jumped, and grabbed his ass. “Hey now!”

Nisha twirled the towel again, getting ready to strike. “Let’s try this again. Are you saying I don’t try to appease you?”

Kannon ducked behind Marcus. “This is your idea of appeasing me?”

Marcus moved out of the way.

The towel lashed out.

Kannon yelped again.

Nisha stopped twirling the towel, threw it over his shoulder, and grabbed Kannon. He pressed a quick kiss to his lips. “We’ll discuss matters after Marcus leaves.”

“Good grief.” Marcus rolled his eyes, but it was more for show.

He looked forward to being able to joke around as they did with his own mate. Nisha and Kannon were so connected, they moved smoothly together instead of against each other. That wasn’t to say sometimes they didn’t rub each other the wrong way and sparks didn’t fly. He wanted that too with Blair.

Kannon discreetly rearranged himself. “What are you going to do after dinner?”

“I thought maybe we could walk around. There’s plenty to do at the resort and

surrounding areas. We could maybe even go into town.”

Nisha picked up his billfold off the dresser. He flipped it open and pulled several bills out. “Here. If you’re going to do other things beside eat, you’re going to need cash.”

Marcus scowled. “I hate taking money from you.”

“Do you have any of your own?” Kannon asked.

“Not this paper money, no. But I talked to Brett, and he’s going to take care of that for me along with that endless paperwork humans seem to require for getting things done.”

“The gold coins?” Nisha asked, laying his billfold back down on the dresser.

“Yes.”

“Ahh. About time.” Nisha nodded. “I guess the paperwork you’re referring to is stuff you need to be legal?”

“Yes. Shortly I’ll have a human identity.” Marcus moved his hands down his chest. Okay, he was ready to go.

“Good. I’ve been telling you for a while now you needed to do that.”

“I know.” Nisha had. Repeatedly. “I’m ready. Are you two ready to go?”

“Anxious much?” Kannon slapped him on the shoulder as they walked to the front of the bungalow.

He was, but he refused to admit it out loud. Instead he dodged the subject. “I

appreciate you guys driving me over.”

“It’s no problem. And don’t forget Brett has extra golf carts if you need to use one of them,” Kannon said.

“I will.” He climbed in the back seat. He couldn’t help but notice Kannon was driving, which was probably a good thing. He wasn’t sure how much experience Nisha had, and he didn’t want to find out right now.

It didn’t take them long to reach the resort. They dropped him off and left. Marcus was glad to see they hadn’t intended to stay. Kannon looked like he wanted to... in which case Marcus probably would’ve strangled him.

He walked into Sandals, and the hostess met him immediately. Thank goodness Brett set all this up for him. He followed her to a table that was indeed set out of the way with a lovely view of the ocean. He seated himself, and a glass of water was put in front of him. He thanked the waiter, picked up the glass, and took a sip.

Now all he had to do was wait.

TWO HOURS later, he stormed out of the restaurant, chest tight as fury rode him hard. It was all he could do not to growl at the passing humans. At least they had enough sense to get the hell out of his way.

Gritting his teeth, he tried to ignore his pounding head as he marched toward the ocean. He grabbed the top of the shirt, seconds away from ripping it off, when he remembered Nisha saying he wanted it back.

Chest heaving, and nearly at his wits end, he stumbled to a stop. As badly as he wanted the clothes off, he couldn’t destroy them. Not after all the time and trouble Nisha and Kannon had gone through. But if he didn’t get off of this bedamned land,

he was going to lose his mind.

Blair stood him up.

He buried his head in his hands, a strangled sob escaping him. Of all the things he expected tonight, this actually never crossed his mind. More fool him, apparently. He choked the tears back. He'd cut his own tail off before he let them fall. He was a warrior, strong and brave, and he'd be damned if he was going to let a human do this to him.

His upper lip pulled back in a snarl exposing one of his sharp canines. Humans. Fucking humans. This, this was why he didn't want to be mated to one. They were unpredictable. Uncaring. A mer would have never done this to him. He flushed. He sat in that restaurant for hours on end, waiting. Nervous. Excited.

Then time dragged out and the nerves grew teeth in the pit of his stomach. Other humans cast glances his way, but he refused to make eye contact. They knew what was going on. The pity in their gazes lay heavily upon his skin. But still he waited. Hoped. More time passed. The server's trips to the table became less frequent; he too was unwilling to make eye contact.

Nerves and excitement gave way to bewilderment and finally anger. There was also a good dose of mortification in there. Two hours. Two hours he sat there like a dumbass waiting for someone who obviously had no intention of showing up.

The look on the humans' faces as he stormed out of the restaurant only added to his embarrassment. How dare Blair do this to him? How dare he? But underneath his resentment and anger, pain curled around his heart.

His mate rejected him. He was unwanted—cast aside. And if he didn't get out of these clothes and into the water soon, he was going to completely break down.

Unable to see a way around it, he stomped back to the resort.

He went straight to the front desk and demanded they call Brett. He stood in the lobby, fidgeting, wishing Brett would hurry up and get there. What little hold he retained on his temper was quickly disintegrating.

“Hey! What’s up? Do you need the golf cart after—”

Marcus jerked around at Brett’s voice.

“Oh. Oh, damn. Shit.” Brett hurried to Marcus’ side and gently—almost as if he was scared to touch him—grasped Marcus’ elbow. “O-okay, why don’t we head up to my place?”

Marcus didn’t say a word, just let Brett steer him where he wanted him to go. He centered his attention on his breathing. That seemed to be the only thing he could control, so that was what he focused on.

Because frankly, he was afraid if he opened his mouth he’d start screaming—and the sound would not be human. Visions of shattering all the glass around him entertained him as it exploded and rained down upon the humans.

The elevator opened to Brett’s private suite, and Brett urged Marcus into the room. “What happened?”

“I can’t...” Marcus took another breath. “I need out of these clothes. Now. Before I rip them to shreds, and I don’t want to do that. Can’t do that. That’s not the way to repay... help me .” Marcus closed his eyes. He never asked for help. That’s what that fucking human had reduced him to.

“Absolutely. What do you need?”

“Shorts. Swim trunks. Something, anything. I need clothes you don’t give a damn about being destroyed so I can get to the water. Please.”

“Give me a few minutes, and I’ll have what you need. Why don’t you start taking off those clothes? Just throw them on the couch. I’ll be right back.”

One breath in. One breath out. One breath in. One breath out. In. Out. In. Out. He stripped out the clothes and tossed them on the nearest couch as he was told.

Brett hurried back out with an old pair of swim trunks. “Here. Brooke hates these things, so it’s no loss if I don’t get them back.”

“You’re not getting them back. And thank you.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“No. Actually, yes. Could you get those clothes back to Nisha or Kannon? I’m probably not going to be around for a while.”

Brett shook his head sadly. “I will. And I’m sorry, Marcus.”

“Yeah, me too.”

THE TRIP from Brett’s penthouse to the water passed in a blur. Marcus carefully kept his mind blank, kept the anger and pain repressed. The closer he drew to the ocean, the more it sang to him. Called to him like a lover.

His need and desperation grew. His brisk walk quickly turned into an all-out rush. He hit the water running and dove in as waves crashed over him. Fuck. Why would he ever want to leave this? What was he thinking?

He surfaced and swam as far away from the land as he could. Even in his present state he knew he couldn't transform this close to the beach. He swam on, his body cutting through the water. If he never saw a human again, it would be too fucking soon. Pain threatened to rear up and choke him. He shoved it down, farther this time. His body warmed as his mind screamed from one topic to the next. Onward he swam, determination fueling him.

The moon shone on the water, its reflection bent and twisted—kind of like him. Bent. Twisted. Possibly broken. No. Fuck that. He's not worth it. Finally, he stopped and treaded water. He looked back the way he came, the land far, far away. Perfect. Off the shorts he borrowed from Brett went. He took a deep breath and submerged.

Immediately he calmed as his world surrounded him. Lighting and sounds were so different here. He cleared his mind, and the transformation flowed over his body taking him back to his preferred form. His skin prickled and stung.

His tail formed, and he stretched, shaking out the length and flexing his caudal fin. Water rushed over his gills. Colorful tropical fish darted in and out along the coral reef. Using his powerful tail, he swam closer to the reefs.

A sea turtle floated past. There were mollusks and sponges, too. Zooxanthellae, algae, and sea grasses swayed in the water. It was dark, but he could see just as well at night as he could during the day.

Beams of moonlight tried to penetrate the water, the light dissipating the deeper it went. A lobster wandered by, and a shrimp scurried across a piece of coral. Marcus grabbed it and bit into it, snacking as he let the water soothe him. Hunters hunted, and prey attempted to scamper away. A giant grouper edged past him. Maybe it sensed his sour mood.

A flash caught his eye, and a reef shark darted in at him. Marcus growled and

activated the defensive spikes that extended from his clenched fist. The spikes were close to a foot long and needle sharp at the end. Their structure was rigid and made of dense material—possibly bone—embedded in the skin musculature. He needed to be in his mer form to activate them.

The shark, almost sensing Marcus' hostility, veered off, giving him a wide berth. The spikes slid back in his skin again. Which was just as well. He would defend himself if needed, but killing the shark wouldn't erase what happened or make him feel better.

He swam farther into the ocean, letting the tides take him where it would. The creatures of the deep avoided him, almost as if they understood. He thought about returning to his cave but decided against it. What would he do there? Sit and brood? At least out here he could swim and brood.

Listless, he continued his journey, staying close to the ocean's floor. Off in the distance he could see a murky shape. Skeletal remains of a shipwreck rose from the sandy bottom of the ocean—the mast pointing toward the surface.

Colorful coral covered the wreck. Sponges, tunicates, and anemones that lived on the adjacent reef were also on the wreck. Many different species of stony corals and soft corals adorned the ship's surface. In many ways, it had become part of the sea floor. He swam closer. While some wrecks were literally repulsive to marine life, others became home to new, unexpected communities of animals as this one had.

The wooden parts decayed but the steel didn't, which offered a good foundation for coral. An accidental shipwreck soon became an artificial reef. The pink sea fans on the wreck grew surprisingly fast. He didn't know when the ship sank, not that it mattered.

Time lost all meaning as he explored the wreck. It wasn't his first time there, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Eventually fatigue pulled at his mind, and he turned

away from his explorations to return to his cave. Tomorrow, after he rested, maybe he would head out into the open ocean. Maybe do a little exploring. The Indian coastline might be nice to visit or even Thailand.

Anywhere but here.

CHAPTER TEN

BLAIR OPENED his eyes and frowned at the unfamiliar ceiling. What the hell? That doesn't look like— he groaned as the events of yesterday tackled him. Eyes squeezed shut, he scrubbed his hands over his face.

Exhaustion rolled over him, but that wasn't surprising considering the hours spent on the plane trying to get back to the continental US. Sleep called to him, but nature was demanding his attention, too.

Opening his eyes, he kicked the sheet off and rolled out of bed. After he used the restroom, he washed his hands. As tempting as returning to bed was, he resisted. He grabbed a pair of shorts and slipped them on.

A quick check of the alarm clock on the side of the bed told him it was late afternoon. He wandered into the kitchen absently scratching his belly. There wasn't much food in the apartment since he hadn't been able to give his landlady much of a warning he was coming, but there was coffee.

He fixed himself a cup and wandered into the living area. Curling up on the couch, he stared out of the window that looked over the city without really seeing it. He thought of Marcus and guilt slapped him hard. He just... He wasn't ready to think about the situation. Carefully he blanked his mind and finished his coffee.

There were things to do, but nothing was going to get accomplished with him sitting around on his ass. But still he sat. He lacked the energy to do much of anything. He picked up the remote and turned on the TV. Was it him, or did there seem to be an

abnormal amount of commercials featuring sand, sun, and beaches?

Restlessness set in, finally driving him off the couch. He wandered back into the kitchen, set the coffee cup in the sink, and opened the pantry. He wasn't hungry, but eventually he would be. Looked like a quick trip out was called for.

After a shower, he dressed then spoke with the landlady, letting her know he was there and he planned to stay for a little while. He had an agreement with her—along with the rent, he also paid her a bonus for keeping an eye on his apartment since he wasn't there all the time.

Once he'd checked in with her, he picked up a few things to tide him over for the next couple of days and returned to his apartment. He put everything up, and yawning every other breath, finally relented and returned to bed.

THE NEXT few days passed in an endless cycle of erotic dreams and binging on Netflix. Tossing his bedsheets into the washing machine again —courtesy of yet another wet dream—he prowled around his small kitchen.

He glared at the coffeemaker silently demanding it to hurry up. Damn thing with useless. He'd dropped a pretty penny on the stupid thing and it ran slower than Christmas. He gritted his teeth. Come on, come on, come on.

He needed caffeine, and he needed it yesterday, because by God, he was tired. He slept like shit, and the stupid dreams were driving him crazy, not to mention his cock might fall off from overuse.

“Come on already!” Blair yelled at the coffeemaker, fist clenched.

The urge to toss it across the room was overpowering and... whoa. Was he seriously getting ready to beat the crap out of an inanimate object? Flabbergasted, he stared at

the poor, defenseless coffeemaker. That wasn't who he was. He wasn't prone to such violent outbursts.

Then he cringed. Lately he'd done a lot of things that were out of the norm for him... like being such a colossal ass. He dropped onto the kitchen chair and buried his head in his hands. His temper was frayed, and he was unraveling faster than a ball of yarn.

For the past several nights his dreams consisted of him and Marcus together, making love. Sometimes Marcus had legs, sometimes he had a tail. The thought of Marcus making love to him in his merman form inflamed Blair. Or maybe it was simply the thought of Marcus. Either way he couldn't get the merman out of his head.

"What have I done?" Blair groaned.

He panicked, pure and simple, and he couldn't believe he did that. Looking back on it, he saw clearly what he did. Of course, he was also sitting in his apartment in New York City and not in a resort run by one of Marcus' friends.

Why had he got it in his head Marcus was going to do something shifty? Neither he nor Brett remotely did anything to make Blair feel that way. No, he just took a thought and ran with it... and ran in the stupid direction.

He panicked, and how mortifying was that? He lived for danger, but this time he completely lost his shit. He never panicked. But there was no getting around the fact he most certainly did this go around. But that wasn't the worst of it.

He stood Marcus up.

"He's never going to forgive me. And why should he?" Blair lifted his head and ran his hand through his hair. How could he have done that? He knew what it felt like—how mortifying it was. "And I did that to him."

And as bad as that was? There was the issue of him being Marcus' mate. He didn't understand the pull Brett tried to explain to him, but he knew what it and get hurt. Times that by hundred and he still probably wouldn't come close to what he did to Marcus.

“Shit.”

The coffeemaker beeped, and he fixed a cup. He sipped the lifesaving brew as his thoughts circled in his head. He screwed up. There was no getting around that fact. He let his fear decide his course of action... which was running—after claiming he wouldn't run around screaming. He was an idiot.

While there were no doubt valid concerns, he let everything get blown out of proportion. He sighed. Panic wanted to sink its icy cold grip in him again, but this time for a different reason. He refused to let that happen, so what exactly did he do now?

Marcus apparently considered Blair his mate, but hadn't told him. So why hadn't he? Now that Blair's thoughts were calm, the reason was obvious. He didn't tell him because he didn't want Blair to panic. Which he did anyway.

He also knew Marcus must have told Brett, and Brett hadn't realized what he let slip when he told Blair. The man ran a multimillion-dollar resort so stupid he was not. Brett probably wouldn't have told him if he realized Blair didn't know. It was a good guess Brett wasn't trying to run Blair off.

And finally, would Marcus forgive him? Or had he screwed up any chance with Marcus? He set his coffee cup down. Now wasn't that an interesting thought? He hadn't decided what he wanted to do and here he was worrying about future chances.

“Well, obviously I want one, or I wouldn't have thought that.”

How did one go about wooing a merman who was probably not only hurt by Blair's actions, but also pissed off? And how pissed off was pissed off?

"Lord, what a mess." It wasn't as if he could Google "satisfying your merman" or look up in a magazine article about "making amends to the merman you pissed off by standing him up." "What do what I do?"

There were no books or lectures to help him out. There was nothing. Merman didn't exist. So...? Brooding, he stared into his coffee, the dark liquid surface... dark. His coffee was black since he didn't normally doctor it like some people, and that darkness reminded him of a certain someone's black hair and dark skin.

"Hell yeah!" He jumped up, hurried to his bedroom, and grabbed his laptop. "Come on, come on." He navigated to the site he wanted and clicked through several tabs until he found what he wanted. "Yes!"

He grabbed his cell, and with fingers crossed, made the call.

YEP, THE conversation turned out to be as unpleasant as he thought it'd be. He found the number for Brett's resort and called it directly. He tried sweet-talking whoever was on the phone, and when that didn't work, flat out begged to talk to Brett. He finally gave the person his name and promised them Brett would be very interested in speaking with him.

While he was on hold, he mused Brett probably would indeed like to speak to him... to rip him a new one for what he did. Desperation set in when Brett finally picked up the phone... and yes, the coldness in Brett's voice left Blair shivering. He honestly didn't think Brett was going to help him, and he finally broke.

A grown man sobbing over a cell phone was never a pretty thing, but apparently that's what Brett needed to hear. So what if his pride was left in tatters? After what he

did to Marcus, he was sure he deserved worse. Brett certainly thought so.

He told Brett he planned to return to the island, and he wanted Brett to help set up a meeting between him and Marcus. His plan was simple. He needed to apologize and beg for forgiveness, which he was willing to do, he just needed Marcus to agree to meet with him.

After some heavy duty begging on Blair's part, Brett finally relented and said he'd do what he could. Then Brett dropped the bomb that nobody had seen Marcus since Blair left the islands. Apparently, he'd disappeared.

It looked like Blair might have a very long wait.

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS later, he was standing in another suite in Brett's resort. Fortunately, the clothes he left behind were delivered soon after he arrived. He was lucky Brett didn't toss them. A knock at his door dragged his gaze away from the ocean that was right outside his window. He crossed the lush carpet and opened the door, unsurprised to see Brett standing there.

"Come in." Blair stood out of the way so Brett could enter, then closed the door. "I was hoping I would get a chance to see you. I'd like to thank you—"

"Save it."

Blair gritted his teeth. He knew this wasn't going to be easy, but rudeness was hard to tolerate, even if he deserved it. "Sure thing."

Brett strolled over to the window overlooking the ocean view. "This isn't a friendly visit."

"Believe it or not, I'm picking that up."

Brett turned from the window and glared at Blair. “You don’t get to be a smartass. Understand? Nor do you get to act like you were the offended party in this situation.”

Blair sighed. “I know that. I screwed up, and I freely admit it. But what do you want from me? Would you like for me to open a vein? Would that make you feel better? I am sorry , and yes, I know that isn’t enough, but that’s why I’m here. I want to try to make it better.”

“Well, if you can find him you might be able to. But as I said, no one has seen him since you stood him up at the restaurant. And you should know, that date meant a lot to him.”

Blair closed his eyes as shame washed over him. Brett certainly wasn’t pulling his punches. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I am so, so sorry.”

“Marcus doesn’t have an aboveground dwelling like the majority of us since he spends most of his time in the ocean. But for you, he put his pride on the back burner and went to Nisha and Kannon. You see, he wanted to look nice but didn’t have the appropriate clothing.”

Yep, Brett planned to make this as slow and painful as possible. “I don’t care what he wears.”

“I don’t think you’re getting it. He wanted to make a good impression on you, and he didn’t have the necessary clothes, so he borrowed some from Nisha. He needed everything, right down to the socks, and if that wasn’t humiliating enough, he even had to use their bathroom to get ready.”

“God. I had no idea. I didn’t know any of this.” Agonized, Blair searched Brett’s face. “How could I? I just met him, but I didn’t want to... I never meant to hurt him.”

“Really? Because from where I’m standing, I don’t see it that way.” A chilly expression crossed Brett’s face. “What did you think was going to happen when you didn’t show up that night?”

Blair wanted to scream. “I didn’t think. I panicked and ran.”

“Panic? What the hell could he have possibly done to make you panic? Or, for that matter, me?”

“I started getting all these crazy thoughts.” Blair threw his hands in the air. “Come on, man. Do you mean to tell me you can’t see my point at all? You were human at one time! And weren’t you the one who told me you also freaked out when you found out your wife was a mermaid?”

The icy look slipped from Brett’s face. “Yes, I did say that.” He sighed, and his shoulders relaxed. “Look, I apologize for being so abrupt with you, but Marcus is a friend of mine. You hurt him. I honestly don’t think you understand how much that hurt him. You basically rejected him. Having a mate reject you is... I don’t know if I can find the adequate words to explain this to you.”

“Yes well, about that. Marcus never told me he was my mate. I actually found that out from you. And yes, after listening to the description of what a mate was and what it entailed, I was overwhelmed.”

“Wait. Are you telling me...?” Brett gulped. “Oh Jesus, please tell me I’m not the one who... Marcus never told you?”

“No. He never said a word to me about it.”

Brett staggered over to the couch and dropped down on it. “Fuck. Oh dear God, this is all my fault. We couldn’t figure out why you would react in such a way. It never

crossed any of our minds... Marcus is going to kill me.”

Blair sat on the couch next to Brett. “If we’re going to take bets on who’s going to be on the receiving end of his temper, I’m sure it would be me.”

“No.” Brett shook his head. “That’s just it. Mates are... He would never do anything to hurt you.”

“Yes, well, as we know there are all different types of hurts. I didn’t stop to think about my actions, and I hurt him—apparently bad enough he disappeared.”

“We’ll fix this. At least I now know you’re not the asshole I thought you were.”

Blair raised an eyebrow. “I’m glad to hear that. Now quit treating me like one.”

Brett suddenly laughed. He held his hand out to Blair. “Deal.”

Blair shook Brett’s hand. “Deal. Tell me, what the hell am I going to do?”

“About that, I have no idea. Nisha checked Marcus’ cave, and there’s been no sign of him. He’s also thoroughly searched his territory too. Marcus hasn’t been here at the resort either, but that’s no surprise. He’s not overly fond of land.”

Blair’s stomach dropped. “How can I apologize if no one knows where he is? It’s not as if I can go look for him. I’m not like the rest of you. I can’t breathe underwater.”

“Well, I have an idea, but it’s not something I can do.” Brett wandered over to the window. He stood staring out at the ocean. “We’ll need Brooke and Nisha.”

“I’m all for it, but just out of curiosity, why do we need them?”

“Because when they’re in their mer form, they have the ability to... sing. I guess that would be the best description. They can talk to other animals like whales and dolphins. The sounds that Nisha and Brooke make are nearly identical. They can sing to Marcus and let him know you’re here and want to speak to him.”

“Oh.” Blair joined Brett at the window. He had a couple of CDs with whale songs on them. The sounds were beautiful. “That’s a... wow. Do you think they’ll help me?”

“You’re going to have to talk to Nisha. There is no getting around that. Marcus is his warrior, and this is his territory. I’ll be honest with you. Nisha’s unhappy with you, and that’s putting it nicely. But...” Brett turned away from the window. “But I’ll talk to him first and explain.”

“Thank you. I’m going to need all the help I can get.”

“At least we understand what drove you away. Hopefully that’ll make a difference to Nisha. There’s only one problem with that.”

“Of course there is.” Why should he be surprised? Nothing else had gone right. “What’s the problem?”

“Kannon and Nisha are not on land right now. Kannon promised Nisha they’d spend the next two weeks in the ocean. They plan to go farther out into the Indian Ocean and do some exploring.”

“Two weeks?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Okay. Two weeks. I can handle that. It’s not as if I didn’t bring all of this on myself, after all. I certainly don’t expect them to upend their plans just for me.” Blair met

Brett's concerned gaze. "But tell me honestly. Do you think Kannon will have a hard time understanding why I reacted the way I did?"

"Kannon was human, and their mating got off to a rocky start—which was due to Nisha's actions. If anybody can understand why you acted the way you did, it's going to be Kannon. And trust me when I tell you, Nisha wants his mate happy. You get Kannon on your side and you're halfway there because he'll be able to talk Nisha around. And ultimately, Nisha is the one you need to be concerned with."

There were a lot of "what if's" in that scenario. "And if I can't get Nisha on my side?"

"Then you have a problem."

THE TRIP from New York to the Seychelle Islands was over seventeen hours long. By the time Brett left, Blair was exhausted. Even though he knew he'd regret it, he napped. Two seventeen-hour-plus trips practically back-to-back was more than any one person should have to do. He woke several hours later still fuzzyheaded and tired.

A quick glance out of the window told him he'd slept most of the day away. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat there, elbows on his knees and head resting in his hands, as he replayed the conversation with Brett.

From the sounds of it, he was going to be apologizing from now until the end of time. Kannon didn't worry him so much as the one called Nisha did. He was the one with the power, and the one he was going to have to win over. Which might be a problem since he wasn't good at sucking up.

Disheartened, and not particularly hungry, he dressed and headed down to the beach. If this was the only way to be close to his merman, then so be it. Holding his sandals, he walked in the shallows as the sun set.

Shading his eyes, he glanced out across the ocean. Something on the horizon jumped and splashed. A pod of dolphins frolicked in the water. He was tempted to throw his shoes onto the beach and swim out toward them. Then he remembered the last time he saw the dolphins, and his shoulders slumped.

Turning away, he ignored their playful calls and continued his walk down the beach, torches from various beach parties and lights from the resorts lighting his way. Hours passed as he aimlessly wandered up and down the beach, laughter drifting across the sands. Finally, his stomach growled. Taking one last look across the water, he turned from the ocean and walked back up the beach.

For the next several days he woke up, ate, and then spent the rest of the day messing around the beach. As more time passed, he wandered farther and farther away from the resort. Eventually he rented a car and started going to the other side of the island where he also wandered aimlessly.

Eventually the wandering became too much, and he talked to Brett about renting a very small, privately owned yacht for a week or so. While it wasn't top-of-the-line, it was more than sufficient for him.

After reassuring Brett that yes, he could indeed handle one of those, he signed a short-term lease, stocked the ship, and made his way out to the ocean. He had the boat for two weeks.

THE SUN beat down as he glared out across the water. "I'm an idiot."

It finally hit him this morning the only reason he rented the boat was the hunt for Marcus. He'd lost his mind; there was no other rational explanation. But that was the problem. He wasn't being rational. Somewhere along the way he decided to spend the two weeks Nisha and Kannon were going to be gone hunting for Marcus.

How he thought he'd accomplish that he had no idea, though. It was like hunting for a needle in a haystack... or in this case a merman in the deep blue sea. But doing nothing wasn't an option he could handle, which was why he was on a rented boat not far from the Seychelle Islands aimlessly floating around.

“Seriously, biggest idiot ever.”

Heartsick and more than a little disgusted with himself, he grabbed his fins and his snorkeling mask. Okay, so he was an idiot, but he certainly was not a quitter. He didn't know where Marcus was, so labeling his adventure as futile was an apt description, but spending time in the water did relax him. As much as he could relax in such a situation.

So back into the water he would go in the vain hope that somehow, someday, Marcus would know he was looking for him. Yep. An idiot. He strapped the dive knife to his thigh, put on his mask, and slipped on his fins. He slipped into the water enjoying the weightlessness. The feeling of helpless excitement as he floated got his heart to thumping.

Sunlight filtered through the water, and fish swam around him. He loved this, loved the world underneath the waves, but could he live here? Considering Marcus was the creature of the water, it stood to reason their majority of the time would be spent there. Could he do that? Give up the land?

Maybe.

Trying to live without Marcus left him unhappy. So much so that he not only returned to the islands, but he rented a damn boat and took to the waves in a futile search for his merman. The fish darted playfully around him, then fled.

Their retreat was sharp and abrupt and left him wondering what exactly he did to

scare them. From the murky depths something swam toward him, coming fast. Blair's blood ran cold when he saw what it was. Oh shit! Shit! Tiger shark. He tried not to flail around in the water.

Movement caught their attention, he knew that. As calmly as he could, he tried to surface, even as he kept an eye on the fast-moving object heading his way. Had it seen him? Or had he just happened to be in the way it was swimming? He needed out of the damn water before the shark focused on him.

Just as he thought he had a chance, the shark suddenly jerked his head toward him. Oh, fuck me. It was big, very fucking big. Twelve feet maybe? Who gave a shit? It had teeth, and that's all he was concerned with. It came straight at him, swimming fiercely.

Blair pulled a knife from his holder and prepared to fight the shark. Drown or be eaten alive? What a fucking choice. Okay, you bastard, I'm not going to go easily. A sharp trill blasted through the water, and the shark did the unbelievable—it passed him. It swam close enough Blair saw one eye looking at him.

With all his strength Blair swam toward the surface. Get to the yacht, get out of the fucking water... now! He didn't know what distracted it, and frankly he didn't care. A scream cut through the water, and Blair's heart missed the next couple of beats.

That... that didn't sound human. Suddenly getting to the surface wasn't the most important thing. He stopped swimming and glanced back down through the depths. He blinked once, then twice, unable to believe what he was seeing. There, quite a distance below him, two figures fought.

Both had long tails and a fin, but only one had a human torso.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BEING IN the open ocean was dangerous, but Marcus found an abandoned underwater cave for his use. Even though he debated leaving the area, he couldn't. Something tethered him there. Instead of leaving, he explored the area around the cave he temporarily claimed as his.

Far above him, nearer to the surface, dolphins played. A school of fish darted back and forth, a wave of wiggling bodies that drifted aimlessly. The engine drone of a small craft caught his attention, and he glanced up. A solitary shark wandered aimlessly overhead sending the fish scattering. Tiger shark. Dammit.

He curled his lip at the ridiculous name humans assigned the animal. Nisha told him once the name came from the stripes found on its body that resemble those on a tiger. Then, of course, that led to the explanation of what a tiger was.

How like humans. But they were right about one thing. The shark was lethal. Mers considered them one of the most dangerous. They were curious—and contrary to humans' research—aggressive. This was a large one, too, at least twelve feet.

He stayed still, crouched by a rock formation. The boat on the surface stopped not far from where he and the shark were. It circled the surrounding area investigating and occasionally going after whatever fish caught its attention. Patiently Marcus waited. Eventually the predator would get bored and move on, and since Marcus was in no hurry, he was content to wait it out.

He glanced past the shark back up to the boat bobbing on the surface. It was fairly

large. Maybe it was a charter service and soon fishermen would drop their lines in the water. With any luck maybe one of the humans up there would catch the damn thing.

Then there was a splash as a body hit the water.

Oh, fuck me. Seriously? This was the last thing he needed. Marcus glanced at the body in the water then over at the brute. Lovely. His and the shark's attention were centered on the human. Even from his spot by the rocks he heard the hungry growl of the thing. Slowly Marcus faded into the shadows of the rock formation. What was about to happen was none of his business, and he didn't intend to get involved.

Shark attacks on human were rare, but they did happen. He certainly wasn't going to expose himself for some human. He bit his lip, though. Even as annoyed as he was with them in general, he didn't relish the thought of watching the one above him get ripped to shreds.

Then the human's smell drifted down through the water, and the fragrance—heady and tropical—slammed into him, and his heart stuttered as the aroma teased his senses. No! Oh fuck, oh fuck, no! Defensive spikes exploded from his clenched fists. With a hard thrust of his tail, he propelled himself up, angling straight for the shark. Even in his merman form it had several feet on him.

He screamed, an angry trill that sliced through the water echoing outward. He rammed it, the two of them twisting and turning in a macabre dance as Marcus repeatedly drove the spikes into whatever part of it he could reach.

He matched the shark move by move in an effort to avoid those viciously sharp teeth. Blood filled the water, turning it a murky pink. He screamed again, the noise inhuman. In the distance a click answered him.

Never had he been so relieved to hear the sweet sound of the dolphins' call. Three

males left the pod and made a beeline straight toward Blair. The other two danced around the shark, distracting him. Although they couldn't stab as Marcus could, they irritated the beast and kept its attention away from Blair.

A low, rolling grunt heralded the appearance of a monstrous stingray. Marcus could've wept with joy. He knew the dolphins would answer his distress call, but he wasn't sure the stingray would—they tended to be ornery creatures.

The stingray joined the fray. The shark and the stingray clashed, the water churning around them from powerful sweeps of the shark's tail. Every fish in the surrounding area fled in a desperate bid to get away from the two predators.

After a near miss from the stingray's tail, the shark gave up the battle and darted off into the gloomy darkness. Marcus softly trilled his thanks, and the stingray answered with a short grunt. It turned and drifted back off into the deep.

The dolphins raced to him, fluttering about as he willed the defensive spikes back into his skin again. He glanced up and shoved his hair out of his face so he could see better. Above him Blair treaded water, the dolphins still staying close by.

Now that fear released its icy grip, anger stormed through him. What the hell was the human thinking? More than a little annoyed, he powered through the water heading straight for Blair. As soon as Blair surfaced he should've gotten out of the water.

He popped up next to Blair and grabbed him by his shoulders. "Are you okay?"

"I... I... holy shit, there was a... a... sh-shark and..."

Why was Blair stuttering? The shark hadn't come close to him, so what was his problem? Only then did he notice how Blair shook under his hands. Was something else wrong with him?

“M-M-Marcus...”

Now Blair was chattering, and his skin was cool, clammy. His breathing was also rapid and shallow. Shit. Was he injured? Had he somehow gotten hurt? Maybe he fell off the boat instead of jumping in. Wouldn't be the first time.

Marcus pulled Blair closer and wrapped his arms around him. “Are you hurt? Did you fall off the boat again? Are you okay? Blair!” Marcus' heart rate spiked. “Answer me!”

“You... You... You...”

“Okay, that's it. We've got to get you in the boat. Is there a phone on there? A radio? I have no idea how to drive one and you're not in any condition to... Where did you get a boat?”

“Rented it.”

“Okay. Okay, here's what we're going... oomph!”

Marcus flailed inelegantly as he tried to keep Blair and himself from submerging. Suddenly his mate was doing a fine imitation of an octopus—Blair's arms and legs banding around him as Blair plastered his mouth against Marcus'.

Marcus immediately dropped his hands to Blair's ass and cupped it, pulling Blair as close as possible as the kiss they shared turned frantic. Using his tail to keep their heads above water, Marcus allowed Blair to plunder his mouth. And plunder Blair did.

Desperation tainted the kiss. The moans coming from Blair were closer to sobs than pleasure. The furious battle of tongues eased as Marcus gentled the kiss. As much as

he hated letting go of Blair's fine ass, he did and gently rubbed his hands up and down Blair's back. He ended the kiss and licked his lips as Blair buried his face in Marcus' neck.

"I need to know you're okay," Marcus whispered. "Can you at least tell me that?"

Blair, still refusing to look up, nodded miserably against Marcus' shoulder.

"Nothing hurts?"

Blair shook his head.

"That means you're probably either scared or in shock. You need to get back on your boat—"

"No!" Blair yelled, rearing back. "Don't leave me, don't leave me. Please!"

"Hey, hey." Marcus patted Blair's back. Well, he certainly hadn't been expecting that reaction. "No one said anything about leaving. I thought that maybe we needed to get you on the boat and warm you up."

"The w-water's warm."

"Exactly. The water is warm, and you're still shaking. You might be going into shock. Don't you usually need a sugary drink during times like this, too?"

"I'm fine. Really. I... I didn't see the shark, and... and then the shark was there and suddenly you were there, and, and, and I had no idea you were around, and the dolphins came out of nowhere and, oh my God, I thought I was going to die."

"You're going to if you don't take a breath."

Blair giggled and dropped his head on Marcus' shoulder. "Okay, yeah. Yeah. Breathe."

Marcus still thought that giggle sounded a little on the hysterical side, but Blair seemed to be calming down. His breathing evened out, and his heart didn't pound quite as fiercely anymore. Not sure what else to do, Marcus trilled softly, the sound low and soothing.

Almost immediately Blair relaxed in his arms. The pod of dolphins moved back, giving them privacy. He held Blair, neither of them speaking as they floated in the water. He closed his eyes, content for the first time since Blair disappeared.

"I'm sorry," Blair whispered against Marcus' shoulder. "I am so, so sorry."

Marcus sighed deeply. The anguish in Blair's voice batted at him. That soft, trembling voice shredded him. He let his anger go as the waves carried it away. "I need to know why, Blair. When you didn't show that night... That really hurt."

"Oh God, I'm so sorry." Finally, Blair leaned back and looked at Marcus. "I'm an idiot. Truly. When I replayed the events in my head and look at them now, I can see clearly how I worked myself into a panic. And I can also see how stupid I was."

"Just tell me why you ran."

"I don't know where to begin. I... all these thoughts suddenly hit me... like what if you forced me to change? What if this was some sort of scheme to get my money? I wasn't sure if I wanted to spend my life underwater. I mean, it's underwater. What do I know about being underwater ? I know nothing about how the change happens either or how to be a mate to you, and—"

"Wait." Marcus couldn't believe his ears. "Mate? Why did you say mate? Where did

you get that idea from? I never once said..." Suddenly a lot of things he hadn't understood made sense. "Shit."

"No, you didn't tell me I was your mate."

"Dammit!" Marcus wanted to beat his head against the boat bobbing up and down next to them. No wonder Blair ran. In his place Marcus might've done the same thing. "Who told you?"

"Brett did, but he didn't realize I didn't know."

"What?" Forget beating his head against the boat. He was going to beat Brett's. "When the hell did you talk to Brett?"

"The morning after you saved me. The day we were supposed to have the date. I was eating a late breakfast and suddenly Brett was at my table. He asked if I'd take a walk with him. He wanted to talk to me about certain things. While we were walking, he was telling me some... information, I guess you could say, and he let it slip."

"Son of a bitch." Actually, now that he thought about it, beating Brett's head against the boat wasn't enough.

"I was overwhelmed, and I panicked. It was only after I got to New York I realized what I'd done. Also realized not once—not since I laid eyes on you—had you done anything to threaten me." Blair laid his head back on Marcus' shoulder. "And now you've, yet again, saved my dumb ass. God, Marcus, I'm so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

"I wish, I really wish, you would've spoken to me before you ran." He squeezed Blair lightly when it looked as if Blair was going to speak again. "But I can see why you didn't. I'm assuming Brett told you what he is."

“Yes. And that he’s mated to a mermaid named Brooke. She’s Nisha’s sister, and Nisha’s mated to someone named Kannon who happens to be Brett’s best friend. Needless to say, I was feeling a bit outnumbered.”

“I would imagine so.”

“Plus, I’m guessing Brett has a lot of money since he owns the resort. I started imagining all these wild schemes—that looking back on now seems ridiculous—and well, I ran.”

“This is the second time you mention money. Just curious, exactly how much do you have?” Marcus asked.

“The last time I checked it was around five million.”

“Ah. I see.”

“You, um, don’t seem overly impressed.”

“I’m not really sure how much that is, but from the way you’re looking at me I’m going to assume it’s quite a bit.” Marcus shrugged. “I don’t really understand the human’s paper money system, but I don’t need much to sustain me. So, no, money isn’t a driving factor in my life.”

“Wow. Just wow. I think I’ve been looking for someone like you for the better part of my life. And when I found you, what’s the first thing I did? I ran.” Blair shook his head. “I… I needed time to think.”

“I can understand that.”

“Here’s what I find funny, though. Brett tells me you’re my mate, but not once during

this conversation have you confirmed it.”

Leave it to Blair to cut straight to the heart of the matter. “You are my mate, yes. We’re able to tell by scent, and yours appealed to me.” Then Marcus frowned. “Actually, that’s not an accurate description. The scent wrapped around me, grabbed me by the balls, and demanded my attention. I couldn’t very well refuse, now could I?”

“Let me understand this. A scent tells you if you’ve found your mate?”

“Yes. It smells like the best thing ever. It also tells us that person is compatible with us, too. And yes, I’ll answer the next question before you ask it. Just because we’re compatible doesn’t mean our relationship will be perfect. Compatibility means exactly what it says—and applies to not only a sexual relationship but also a social relationship.”

“All that based on a smell.”

“Hey, scent is very important in the animal world.”

“And are you saying you’re an animal?”

“Well, I’m certainly not human.”

Blair nodded slowly. “No, no you’re not. I have a million questions and, and I was wondering if maybe you could answer them. I guess what I’m asking is would you come aboard? I’d like for you to hang around and talk to me. Frankly, I feel kind of silly floating around out here in the water. Will you... Will you spend some time with me? Tell me everything I need to know?” Blair trailed off and gulped.

It didn’t escape him this was exactly what he wanted that night Blair stood him up.

Blair opened himself up and it would be very easy to repay the pain Blair caused him. But that wasn't the type of person he was, and Blair didn't deserve that.

Yes, he'd been mad, and yes, the pain was almost more than he could stand, but at least he understood what motivated Blair to do what he did. Also, the thought of purposely causing his mate pain disturbed him on a primitive level. This was what he wanted, so why purposely sabotage it?

A grin raced across Marcus' face. "I'd like nothing better."

CHAPTER TWELVE

BLAIR RETURNED to the boat and paced. Blair said he'd transform and then come aboard. He understood his reasoning—it was daylight. Marcus didn't have the cover of darkness to help hide what he was.

Blair hated the idea of Marcus out there going through the pain all alone. He didn't have the isolated caves to use since they were the middle of the ocean. Could a merman drown in human form? He had no idea.

He was seconds away from working himself up into a fine snit when he finally heard Marcus climb the ladder and step aboard the boat. He gulped, willing his body not to react as he grabbed a towel off a lounge chair and hurried to Marcus.

His fingers itched to touch all that lovely, wet skin, but now was not the time. They needed to talk, and if he had any hope of focusing, Marcus was going to have to cover up certain interesting bits. Hopefully later he could uncover said bits.

“Here. I got this for you. Wasn't sure if you wouldn't want to—”

Marcus took the towel but dropped it at his feet. Instead he reached for Blair. Blair went willingly into Marcus' arms and trembled slightly as Marcus brushed his lips across his. Closing his eyes, he gave himself over.

The kiss, so sweet and so gentle, nearly undid him. The stress from the past few days finally bubbled over. Tears tracked down his face, tickling as they fell. He thought he'd never feel Marcus' arms around him or breathe his subtle oceany scent.

Marcus kissed a path to Blair's ear. "Why do you cry?"

The words were nothing more than a soft breeze. Still, Blair felt them down to his toes. "I was afraid you had disappeared from my life forever, that... that I screwed up so badly and drove you away."

"But you came back."

"I knew I fucked up, and I had to try to make it right. When they told me no one had seen you since I left... I felt sick. Brett told me I needed to talk to Kannon and Nisha. Hopefully I'd get them on my side so they'd help me find you. I was scared, terrified actually—"

"Why?"

"Why? They are your friends. They're important to you. What if they refused to help? They're both like you. They belong to the water, and I don't! But I was determined to do whatever it took. Then Brett told me they were gone for two weeks," Blair sobbed. "Two weeks. I walked the beach endlessly hoping you would somehow know I was here."

"Blair—"

"I know, right? Stupid. You weren't even around. But I didn't know what else to do, but staying on land didn't seem to be the answer. In a moment of insanity I rented the boat. You belong to the water. I thought maybe, maybe if I was out there in the water, too... I don't know what I thought."

Marcus cupped Blair's chin. "You came looking for me."

The wonderment in Marcus' face brought fresh tears to Blair's eyes. "I ran from you.

So yes, it only seemed fair I be the one to come looking for you.”

“Sheer luck.” Marcus shook his head slowly, amazed. “It was sheer luck you stopped here. That I happen to be right here .”

Blair nodded slowly. “It’s almost like something brought us together. Do... do merfolk worship a god?”

“No. The Islanders once considered us gods.”

“Well, there’s not a doubt in my mind something brought us together.”

Marcus kissed Blair’s lips one last time. “This time we’re going to make it count.”

“Yes.” Blair sighed against Marcus’ lips. He ran his hands down Marcus’ back and clutched his ass. “As much as I love having you naked, pressed against me, I really need you to put some clothes on. All this naked flesh is distracting me, and we really need to talk. There are things I need to know.”

Marcus ground his hardening cock against Blair’s groin. “I have no clothes with me.”

“Fortunately, I do. Please?”

Marcus kissed Blair’s forehead. “For you, I will.”

Marcus step back and picked up the towel he dropped on the deck. He wrapped the sun-warmed cloth around him and held his hand out to Blair. “You still look a little pale. Let’s get one of those sugary drinks in you, shall we? Then we’ll talk.”

“Come with me?”

“I’d love to.”

Blair led them down to the cabin. There was a small U-shaped galley with a decent sized U-shaped settee to port with a high-low coffee/dining table. To starboard was a built-in cabinet with a high-low TV and two chairs that fit snugly on either side of the credenza. Blair ducked into the small galley. He got a soda for himself and a bottle of water for Marcus.

“Here you go.” Blair handed Marcus the water. “Give me a second and I’ll get you something to wear.”

Marcus took the water and opened it. “Sure. And thank you for the water.”

“No problem.” Blair watched as Marcus lifted the bottle to his lips and drank. Blair licked his lips. Marcus’ throat moved as he gulped the water, and wasn’t that the sexiest thing ever?

“Um, yeah. Be right back.” Blair darted into the stateroom and rummaged around for a pair of shorts—and finally finding what he wanted—hurried back to Marcus.

“Here you go.” Blair held them out to Marcus.

Marcus dropped the towel and slipped on the khaki shorts. Only then did Blair notice he forgot underwear. Great. Now that would be preying on his mind. Marcus sat and scooted to the middle of the settee and patted the place next to him. Blair sat and slid over next to him.

“I guess it’s time for a crash course about merfolk history. You already know, thanks to Brett, who you are to me and that we can scent our mate. When two mers mate, it’s no big deal, but when a mer takes a human everything changes. There’s something in our bite—maybe bacteria?—which is toxic to humans.”

Blair blinked. “Bite?” Had he somehow missed that?

“Yes. We bite our mates. It’s one of the many uses of those sharp teeth you saw when I’m in my mer form.”

Blair shivered. Holy mother of God, Marcus wanted to bite him. That was insane. That was terrifying. That was... making his cock hard. “Does it hurt?”

“Having never been bit, I don’t know for sure.” Marcus cleared his throat. “But from what Kannon has said, that small instant of pain is quickly forgotten thanks to the pleasure.”

“If you bite me, I’ll feel pleasure?” Blair clarified.

“That’s my understanding, yes.”

Good to know. “Some sort of bacterial thingy in your saliva gets mixed with my blood, right?”

“Yes. When a merman or maid bites a human, the saliva enters the human’s bloodstream. 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. Then you’re able to adapt to our world.”

Sounded like a bunch of mumbo-jumbo to him. “What exactly does that mean? I need you to spell it out for me.”

“It means you’ll develop gills.”

O-okay. “Gills.”

“Yes, gills.”

Blair ran his hand along his neck. “Here?”

“Yes, there. Once the gills are developed, you’ll be able to breathe underwater.”

“Wow, gills. Talk about a mind fuck. These gills... Obviously they can’t be seen all the time or people like Brett wouldn’t be able to carry on a reasonable normal life on land.”

“Right. The gills are always there but there are these things called skinfolds which hide them when not in use. You can still swim around humans and keep them hidden if you wished.”

That actually made a lot of sense. “Water doesn’t make them automatically—I don’t know what the right word is here—activate, or something like that?”

“No, water has nothing to do with it. It takes a conscious decision to use them. When you need to breathe underwater you’ll have to make a concentrated effort to open them until it becomes second nature to you.”

“Okay, good. Last thing I need is for them to be popping out in an inopportune moment.”

Marcus snorted. “None of us want that.”

Blair could only imagine. He stared at the table trying to make sense of everything Marcus told him. It all sounded so outrageously unbelievable, but then when he actually thought about it, it did sort of make sense.

He knew before he met Marcus there were other creatures who walked the earth.

They had to have a way to hide, otherwise mass panic would ensue. Humans didn't do well with things they didn't understand.

"Are you okay?" Marcus finally asked after several minutes of quiet.

"I... yes. Just thinking. It's, ah... a lot to take in." Blair gulped his soda. "Tell me more about the transformation process."

"Well, like I said, it takes two bites. After the second bite the transformation begins and your body changes. Kannon said while that happens, you'll most likely pass out. I guess it makes it easier on you. Then, once you awaken, it's a possibility you'll have a headache and might even be nauseated."

"Okay, that doesn't sound too bad, considering you're basically changing my DNA." It sounded unpleasant, yes, but at least he wouldn't be flopping around like a fish out of water. Then he cringed mentally. Probably was a good thing he hadn't said that out loud.

"I can't tell you how relieved I am to hear you say that," Marcus continued. "After you have completed the transition I'll take you to a private place—most likely my cave. Once we're alone I'll change into my merman form and teach you how to open and close your gills."

"You'll teach me how to breathe underwater."

"Yes." Marcus covered Blair's hand with his own. "How are you doing so far?"

Wasn't that the five-million-dollar question? "I won't lie. It's kind of scary. You're talking about changing who and what I am. That's hard to wrap your head around, you know? I'm guessing once this is done it can't be undone."

“I honestly don’t know.” Marcus threaded his fingers through Blair’s. “No one has ever wanted to go back to being human. If I had to guess, I’d say the process is permanent. You’ll be my mate, and you’ll live two lives: one on land and one in the ocean.”

He’d never admit it out loud to Marcus, but hearing he’d be spending time on land helped. “Fascinating. Scary, too, but utterly fascinating.”

“You also need to understand that while merfolk aren’t immortal, we do live longer than humans. Once we mate, your life expectancy will extend. You will live as long as me.”

“And how long is that?” Blair took several sips of his soda.

“It’s pretty much like how human’s age—some live to an old age and some die young. I’m sixty years old.”

“Holy shit!” Good thing he swallowed before Marcus told him that or he’d have spit Coke all over the table. “You look half of that.”

“Thank you.” Marcus winked at him. “Your aging will slow tremendously, too.”

“Good to know.” Then Blair sighed. “I’m all for hanging onto my youth, but this... this is really major. We hardly know each other and we’re talking about a commitment that’ll transcend anything I’m familiar with. I don’t see how I can do that.”

The air chilled between them as Marcus slowly spoke. “Are... are you rejecting me?”

“No! Oh God, no.” Blair squeezed Marcus’ hand. “I did not mean that. I’m saying I think we need to spend some time together. I mean, come on Marcus, we just met

each other. I know absolutely nothing about you as a person, and you know nothing about me. I'm not saying no."

Marcus pried his hand away from Blair's and scooted around the other side of the settee. He stood and walked over to one of the port windows. "What are you saying?"

"I'm asking for time. I want to eat meals with you, watch TV, spend time goofing off, go to bed together, and get up together. I want to sit across the breakfast table from you in the mornings and brush my teeth next to you at night. I want to explore your world as best I can since I am still human, and I want to spend time with you in my world, too."

"So, what?" Marcus turned to face Blair. "Are you suggesting we... live together?"

"Yes!" Blair nodded frantically. He stood and quickly made his way over to Marcus. He grabbed both his hands. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

"We live together, and we get to know each other."

"Yes. Exactly."

Sighing, Marcus kissed Blair's knuckles and pulled his hands free. "The problem is I'm going to want to make love to you."

That was a problem? It was no problem as far as he could see. "Hey, I'm totally on board with that."

"Yes, well, the problem is I'm going to want to bite you and start the mating process. I'm not sure I can... You really have no idea what you're asking of me... I'm not even sure where I stand with you." Marcus stuck his hands in his pockets.

Blair blew out a deep breath and ran his hand through his hair. Didn't know where he stood? Blair told him he wanted them to live together. Then a thought struck him. Marcus was insecure. "Okay, how about this? Didn't you tell me there needed to be two bites?"

"Yes."

"Good." Actually, it was perfect. "Then here's what I propose we do. You bite me now. That way you know I'm serious about this. Would that help?"

Marcus cocked his head and stared intently at Blair. "I... huh. Yes, some."

"Basically, that bite would be my commitment to you. But it also gives me time to adjust. You get what you want, and I get what I want. Can you do that, Marcus? Can you meet me halfway?" Blair held his breath. This, this right here, would tell him everything he needed to know about a future relationship between the two of them.

Suddenly Marcus smiled, and Blair's heart fluttered. The delight in Marcus' face was more than he could have hoped for. That smile told him everything he needed to know. Everything was going to work out with them.

Marcus reached for Blair and pulled him close. "You're brilliant."

Blair snuggled in closer. "Yes well, I have my moments." He looked at Marcus. "Does that work for you?"

"More than. This is going to sound really primitive, but I need to stake my claim on you. That first bite will essentially give me what I need, which is for other mers to know you're mine."

"And then you can give me time?"

“Absolutely. I said I never intended to get mated, but here I am. I said I never intended to have an aboveground dwelling, but while we get to know each other, I want us to look for something. I said I would never spend time on land, but I can’t wait to spend it with you.”

“Thank you.” Blair kissed the tip of Marcus’ nose. “Now, about that bite?”

“How soon do you want to do it?” Marcus asked.

“Does now sound good?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MARCUS SWEPT Blair into his arms and carried Blair into the stateroom where he gently lowered him to his feet. “Don’t move.”

He shut the door, and a decidedly wicked smile crossed his face. Attached to the back of the door was a full-length mirror. Oh how perfectly naughty. He glanced over his shoulder so Blair could see his smile. Even from there he heard Blair whimper. He returned to Blair, trailing his fingers across one of Blair’s shoulders as he slipped behind him. He turned Blair so that he was fully facing the mirror.

“Watch.”

Ever so slowly he brought his hands back to Blair’s shoulders. He worked the tense muscles under his hands hard, releasing the tension he found there. Then he trailed his hands down Blair’s muscular arms. He kept his touch feather light, and Blair shivered, his nipples hardening.

Resting his hands on Blair’s waist, he pressed his front against Blair’s back and ground his hard-on against Blair’s ass. Again, he moved his hands, this time gently dragging them up Blair’s chest. He watched Blair’s reaction in the mirror. Blair’s stomach muscles jumped, and a flush covered his face. Blair panted.

He rubbed Blair’s smooth pecs, winding his way closer to those hard tips that begged to be touched. The closer he got, the harder Blair’s breath became. When he ran a nail over a nipple, Blair hissed. Marcus’ cock jumped.

“Sensitive?” Marcus asked.

“Yes,” Blair hissed.

“Good.” Marcus said, his voice heavy with intent.

He left kisses along the top of Blair’s shoulders as he flicked a pebble-hard nipple. Quiet whimpers escaped Blair. Unable to resist drawing out more of those sexy sounds, Marcus sucked the patch of skin where Blair’s shoulder and neck met—the exact spot where Blair would wear his mark. He savored the taste of the ocean on Blair’s skin.

By the time they left the boat, Blair’s body would be covered with Marcus’ love bites. He tweaked the other nipple, rolling both the nubs between his fingers then pulling gently. A long rush of syllables passed Blair’s lips then he laid his head back, letting it rest against Marcus’ shoulder. Blair’s hair smelled of the ocean and sunlight.

He buried his nose in the long tresses and sniffed, drawing the scent deep within him. He peeked at the mirror through the wavy, blond cascade, keeping his eyes on Blair’s reflection as he toyed with Blair’s nipples. Blair’s swim trunks were tented, his hips rolling in time with the pulls on his nipples.

Marcus watched the two of them move together in perfect rhythm. Blair panted, his hands fisted by his legs. Gorgeous. Simply gorgeous. He stopped teasing one of Blair’s nipples and sank his hand into Blair’s hair.

He jerked Blair’s head back and took Blair’s mouth in a kiss that was full of teeth and tongue, pent-up passion and need. There was nothing gentle about it. It was an act of dominance, pure and simple. When Blair moaned so sweetly in submission, Marcus released him and licked up his neck then nibbled that perfectly round ear of Blair’s.

“Beautiful,” he whispered.

He released Blair’s hair and scraped his nails gently down Blair’s torso until he paused, his hands back on the top of Blair’s swim trunks. Blair sucked his stomach in, an open invitation to explore. Delighted, Marcus reached inside and wrapped his hand around Blair’s steel hard-on.

He stroked lightly, and Blair squirmed, moaning quietly. Marcus kept his touch easy—teasing. As good as it felt, he knew it wasn’t enough to make Blair come. He thrust his hips, knowing Blair could feel his erection poking him in the back.

“Take them off. I want to see you.”

Blair’s breath hitched as he rested his hands on the top of his swimming trunks. Keeping eye contact with Marcus in the mirror, Blair slid the trunks down his thighs then kicked them out of the way.

Slowly Marcus removed his hand from Blair’s hard cock. It stood proudly, angling slightly to the left and reaching toward his belly button. Now Marcus was the one having trouble breathing. Blair’s lean muscles and golden skin could tempt a saint, which he certainly was not.

Smooth, lean muscles begged to be touched. Blair’s chest was hairless but there was a faint sign of a blond treasure trail leading down to a flawlessly formed cock and balls—a perfect handful. What little hair Blair had was neatly trimmed. He wrapped his hand back around that sweet, tempting cock and stroked until Blair trembled.

A light sheen of sweat covered Blair’s body, and his prick was swollen, an angry red. It leaked like a sieve. Up and down Marcus moved his hand, going from root to tip. Precum dripped steadily, and Blair’s breathing was hard and fast. Little moans, slight puffs of breaths, broke from his lips.

“Not going to last long,” Blair warned, gasping.

Seeing how close Blair was to losing control, Marcus stopped.

Blair shuddered as he helplessly tried to fuck Marcus’ hand. “God, don’t leave me hanging.”

“Shhh. I won’t, but I don’t want you to come yet.” Marcus ran his finger across the top of Blair’s dick.

“If you keep that up I’m going to.”

“Then maybe we need to move on to something else, hmm?”

“God, yes.”

Marcus unbuttoned and kicked off the borrowed pair of shorts. His damn cock needed some breathing room, too. Marcus stepped in front of Blair and Blair reached for him. What a temptation Blair presented. His eyes were heavy lidded, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

Marcus bent down and licked a hard nipple. Quiet whimpers escaped Blair. Unable to resist more of those sexy sounds, Marcus sucked the skin, leaving another mark as he tweaked the neglected nipple. He lifted his head and admired his handiwork.

“I want to taste you,” Blair moaned.

“Yeah, I want to feel your lips on my cock. Just don’t make me come.”

Blair dropped to his knees. Marcus stared in the mirror, admiring Blair’s reflection. What an ass—tight as a drum and muscular. He couldn’t wait to get his hands on it.

He ran his hand through Blair's hair, and the sound of a throat clearing got his attention.

He dragged his eyes away from the mirror and looked down at Blair. Blair let the tip of Marcus' cock brush across his lips. Marcus grunted. He was desperate to get his cock into Blair's mouth but refused to rush him.

Blair played as he held Marcus' cock gently, the licks slowly driving Marcus insane. He tightened his hand in Blair's hair and thrust gently. His eyes crossed when Blair swallowed him down as if his life depended on it.

Marcus threw his head back and spread his legs to steady himself. That hot, moist mouth of Blair's was the proverbial heaven on earth. Gently he thrust, filling Blair's mouth. Blair rubbed his tongue across the head of Marcus' cock then traced the vein that ran down the shaft.

"Mmm, so good." Marcus threaded both hands through Blair's hair. "Let me see those eyes."

Marcus' heart nearly stopped beating when Blair turned those sexy eyes up at him. Blair bobbed up and down the cock tirelessly, sucking hard. He growled when Blair eased his cockhead into his throat and swallowed. His body jerked, and he tightened his hands in Blair's hair as he fucked his throat. The feeling quickly left him dangling on the edge.

He slowed down even though he wished the moment could go on forever. "Stop."

Blair let Marcus fall from his mouth and licked his lips. "You taste good, and some other time I want to suck you until you come down my throat, but I need you in me."

Marcus pulled Blair to his feet. "I need to be in you, too. Please tell me you have

lube.”

Blair quickly opened a little cabinet and pulled out condoms and lube.

“We don’t need the condoms. You’re perfectly healthy. I’d smell if you weren’t.”

“But we’re two different species,” Blair said. “Are you sure going without is a wise idea? I’ve never... It simply isn’t safe to bareback. With the other humans you bedded, did you...?”

“I always use a condom with them, yes. If I tried not to, it’d have brought up questions I didn’t want to answer. But no, our two species aren’t compatible, so you don’t have to worry about me giving you some strange sort of merman disease.”

Blair put the condoms back and handed the lube to Marcus. “But we are going to need this.”

Marcus nodded. “At least in this form, yes.”

“At least in this...” He shook his head. “You know what? Never mind. That’s something you can explain later.” Blair unmade the bed. “How do you want me?”

“On your back.”

Blair climbed onto the bed and lay on his back. With his feet flat on the bed, he opened his knees. Marcus grabbed the reins of his out-of-control desire and settled himself between Blair’s spread legs. He ran his hands up and down Blair’s thighs. The hair on Blair was so light it was almost invisible and soft. So soft.

Outside of the hair on Marcus’ head and his eyebrows, there was no hair on his body, so Blair’s fascinated him. He pressed his lips to the inside of Blair’s thigh and

sucked, leaving yet another mark.

He nipped the area and sat back pleased to see Blair's cock jump against his stomach. Hmm, someone appeared to like that small bite of pain, so he turned to the other leg and left another mark higher up. Blair trembled under Marcus' hands, and his breath caught when Marcus ghosted his fingers over Blair's hole. Blair moaned and reached for his nipples but stopped.

"Yeah, play with them. Tug hard on them, too. I want to see it in your face."

Blair grasped both nubs and twisted them. Pleasurable pain crossed his face. "Oh, oh... God."

Grinning softly at the hazy look on Blair's face, Marcus rubbed Blair's hot, sweet hole, teasing him with what was to come. He kept his touch gentle, not trying to enter Blair just yet. Blair moaned, his hips rocking.

"Please," he whispered. He pinched his nipples harder. "Please."

Marcus picked up the lube, wet his fingers, and danced them around Blair's entrance, spreading the slick. Blair's breathing picked up.

"Give those nips a good tug."

Blair did and arched on the bed, eyes shut tight.

Oh fuck. Marcus nearly had to grab his own shaft in an effort not to come. His breath caught in his chest at the need and desire on Blair's face. He pushed, his finger entering Blair. He moved that one finger in and out. When the tightness relaxed, he added another one... then leaned over and sucked Blair's cock back down his throat.

Blair yelled.

Marcus moved them around, loosening Blair and keeping that slight burn going. He turned his fingers and... Blair yelled again. Marcus smiled. That's what he was hunting for—Blair's hot spot. Marcus repeatedly pegged Blair's prostate. Blair thrust his hips, riding Marcus' fingers as Marcus continued stretching him while bobbing up and down on Blair's cock.

Blair opened his eyes and looked down at Marcus. "Fuck me!"

Marcus pushed another finger inside, banging Blair's ass. He scissored his fingers, spreading Blair open more. He wrapped his other hand around Blair's cock and squeezed, keeping Blair from coming.

Marcus let Blair's cock fall from his mouth and stopped fingering him. He grabbed the lube, and slicking his cock, rose up on his knees. Positioning the head of his cock at Blair's hole, he paused and locked gazes with Blair. As they stared at each other, he entered Blair, sliding all the way inside. Marcus hissed. Blair was so hot and so tight. Blair wrapped his legs around Marcus' waist.

Marcus dropped over Blair, panting. "Fuck, I've never felt anything like this."

Blair tightened his legs and jerked Marcus forward.

Marcus groaned.

"Fuck me and bite me," Blair demanded.

What little human rationale Marcus managed to acquire over the years fled. Braced on his hands, he pounded into Blair, his hair shielding the both of them. He slammed into Blair, hitting his hot spot repeatedly. The merman side of his nature rose up, and

he trilled softly as Blair locked his heels behind Marcus' back. Need built.

"Going to come. Going to bite you as I do." Marcus' voice was much rougher than normal.

Blair slid his hand behind Marcus' neck and jerked him down. He threw his head back exposing his throat.

"Come!" Marcus growled, then lunged forward and bit Blair.

"Oh... fuck !" Blair yelled.

Marcus pumped his hips, filling Blair up. Warmth sprayed his stomach as Blair came also. He sealed his lips over the bite mark, his body operating on instinct only. Pleasure hummed through him, and he closed his eyes, overcome. Blair raked his fingers down his back, and Marcus jerked, pleasure spiking.

Blair groaned as Marcus gently licked the bite mark. "Holy fucking Christ."

Marcus grunted in amusement as he found an appealing spot near Blair's collarbone and sucked up yet another mark.

Blair squirmed underneath him then snorted in amusement. "Toothy."

Marcus lifted his head and grinned at Blair. "You have no idea." He pulled out and slowly rolled onto his back. "Damn, my heart is still pounding."

"Why, thank you." Blair snorted, moving carefully so his head rested on Marcus' chest.

Marcus played with Blair's long, blond hair as they waited for their breathing to even

out. “Feeling okay?”

“Yes. I... I still feel like me.”

“Of course you do. The first bite’s like a marker to other mers that you’re in the process of being claimed.”

Blair trailed his fingers down Marcus’ arm then quickly skidded off the bed. “I’ll be back in a minute. I need to... ah, clean up.”

Marcus reclined on his elbow. “Why not jump in the ocean? Plenty of water out there.”

Blair paused. “Seriously?”

“Sure, why not?”

“You coming?”

“Already did.” Marcus grinned as Blair rolled his eyes. “I’m certainly not going to miss a chance to swim the ocean.”

“Well, come on, then.” Blair hunted for his swim trunks.

“Nude. We swim nude.” Marcus added as he crawled off the bed.

Blair dropped trunks he picked up. “Of course we do.” A funny look crossed Blair’s face. “In fact, the sooner, the better. Come on.”

Marcus grinned as he followed Blair up top. How primitive was it of him that he enjoyed watching his come drip down Blair’s legs? Blair dove off the boat, and

Marcus followed him.

He didn't intend to transform into his preferred form, especially since he just gave Blair the first bite in their mating. He didn't expect there to be any problems—there usually wasn't—but he wanted to be able to help in case. They swam in the ocean, laughing and playing, for several hours. The grumbling of Blair's stomach finally drove them back aboard ship.

MARCUS SPENT the rest of the two weeks on the boat Blair rented. Outside of a few stops inland to restock and get gas, they stayed on the open water but close to the Seychelle Islands. There wasn't much to do outside of make love and talk, something they both needed.

Marcus shared funny stories of the things he and Nisha got into through the years. Through them Blair began to get to know Marcus' friends. Marcus also shared as much as he knew about matings.

Blair told Marcus he inherited three million from his grandmother upon her death when he was twenty-two. He used the money and created an online business which he sold around age twenty-four then he traveled for the next couple years... years he spent all alone in the world. His parents had died in a car wreck when he was a child, and his grandmother had raised him.

It was another lazy afternoon, and they were on the deck sunbathing. No matter how much sun Marcus got, he never tanned. No one knew exactly why, but several mers theorized it was so they would blend while underwater.

“Oh.” Marcus raised his head. “Remember we were talking earlier about mating?”

Blair raised his head. “Yeah?”

“I remembered something about mating I forgot to tell you.” Marcus turned onto his side so he could see Blair better. “Nisha told me—before I met you—bonded mates are eventually able to speak telepathically to each other.”

Blair blinked. “Wow. Not sure how you could’ve forgotten that, but cool. So not only do I get gills, but I’ll be able to speak to you in my mind?”

“That’s what I hear.”

“Huh.” Blair scratched his belly. “Odd, though. I wonder how that came about.”

“Well, it’s really helpful when your mate is a mer.”

“What do you mean?” Blair sat up.

“Look at it like this,” Marcus said sitting up, too. “You can’t talk underwater, right?”

Blair nodded. “Of course not.”

“Right. Human vocal cords are not made that way,” Marcus said. “Mers can make sounds like whales and dolphins, but that’s not something you can do. I guess, over time, the ability to speak telepathically developed so human mates could communicate with us underwater.”

“I can hear you in my head, but you can’t read my mind, right?”

“No. Two totally different things.”

“I think that’s good.” Blair winked at Nisha. “When you give me the second bite, that’ll happen for us?”

“That’s what Nisha says, yes. It takes some time for that to develop, from what he said, too.”

“You know, I don’t see any cons to this mating deal.”

“I’m very pleased to hear that.”

“Speaking of mating and merfolk, I was wondering something.”

“What?”

“Do your people have a written history?”

“No, unfortunately. There are rumors of cave drawings scattered throughout the world in underwater caves, but I have no idea if that’s true or not. Mainly we pass our history down from generation to generation by stories.”

“Huh. Well, I guess I can understand that. Paper and water don’t exactly go well together. Does anybody have a clue how long you guys been around?”

“According to the things I’ve heard 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.”

“I… Fascinating. I guess it makes sense, in a way. Part of your merman form does look humanoid.”

“True. You might find it interesting that hundreds of years ago the islanders here worshiped us as sea gods. They know better now, but they still treat us with respect and awe. They take note of us when most humans don’t.”

“I wonder if that has something to do with their cultural beliefs.”

“It’s possible.”

Blair shrugged. “We’ll probably never know. Anyhow, I’m getting hot. Ready to go for another swim?”

“Always.” Marcus followed Blair over the side of the boat.

They swam for little while then came back aboard. It didn’t take Blair long to notice Marcus needed to drink several glasses of water a day to keep hydrated.

Later that evening Blair anchored the boat not far from a small, uninhabited island Marcus told him about. After dinner they planned to return to the water.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“ARE YOU sure?” Blair crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Marcus.

“Yes.” There was an underwater cave Blair could reach even though he couldn’t breathe underwater. There was a beach and tunnels leading aboveground. “Stay on board until I transform.”

“I’ve seen you transform before.”

“I know, but it isn’t pretty. I’d like to spare you from that.”

“Fine! I don’t know what the big deal is, but I’ll wait here until you tell me to join you. Happy?”

Marcus pressed a brief kiss to Blair’s lips “Yes. And thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Blair waved his hands toward Marcus. “Get on with it already.”

With a laugh and another stolen kiss, Marcus dove over the side of the boat. He didn’t know what the big deal was about him being in the water when Marcus transformed, but he wasn’t going to argue over it.

Blair waited by the ladder, his fins ready. He thought about bringing his snorkeling mask, but what was the point? He almost wished he’d rented scuba gear so he could stay under longer with Marcus.

From the second he found out exactly what Marcus was, Blair wanted nothing more than to explore that fabulous tail of his. He clutched the railing, his anticipation building. He'd been swimming with Marcus several times, but not like this. Not in his merman form. Well, he did during the attack, but he'd been too shaken up to notice much.

The water churned where Marcus went in. Blair stared. Under the water Marcus twisted and turned. It was hard to see since the sun had set and twilight was upon them. A shadow moved under the water, a shadow which was suddenly much longer than a human body. Blair slipped on his fins and waited for the final signal. Finally, Marcus' head cleared the water and he waved.

And just that quickly, he was gone, but it was long enough for Blair to notice the pointed ears and something on Marcus' wrist that humans didn't have—a fin. Excitement raced through him. This was an opportunity precious few humans ever had.

He slipped into the water. Off to the right and several feet below him something floated, but he wasn't concerned. He could see the blue hair in the water. Taking several deep breaths, and clearing his mind, he prepared to submerge.

He slipped under the waves, enjoying the water closing over his head. His first glimpse of Marcus in his merman form, and his natural habitat, almost stole his breath away. Lord, with that tail of his he was a really, really long—and sleek. Sinuous.

Blair wanted to get his hands on it. Like his hair, Marcus' tail was blue, but that didn't begin to describe the color. Iridescent came to mind. The luminous blue colors seemed to change as Marcus' tail moved lazily in the water.

Marcus fit his surroundings perfectly, as did his gorgeous blue hair. He'd wondered,

but now Marcus' coloring finally made sense. He was part of the landscape—something that Blair obviously was not, with his tan skin and golden blond hair. Marcus' long blue hair floated around his head.

Fascinated, Blair watched Marcus' tail swish back and forth gently in the water. His beauty was otherworldly and a little eerie. Still, he took Blair's breath away. Marcus called to him in a short, sharp click as he rose through the depths.

He held his hand out, and Marcus clasped it. Surprised, he glanced at their hands. Marcus' was webbed. He pulled Marcus' hand closer wanting to examine it but Marcus clicked again and wrapped his arm around Blair's waist. Oh yeah, he forgot about the whole breathing thing.

Marcus whistled and they took off. The water rushed past Blair as they swam past huge coral reefs that exploded with color. A multitude of fish darted in and out. As they swam past, Blair noticed the rocky outcrop covered with algae not far from them. He wrapped his arms around Marcus.

With a flip of his tail Marcus propelled them toward the opening of the underwater cave. He barely noticed the trash humans scattered about on the rocky ocean floor. As they drew closer to the cave opening he glanced toward the surface.

Beams of light penetrated the water. A click drew his attention, and he glanced at Marcus. The sound was reminiscent of a dolphin and just as loud. It made him smile as they ducked through the opening of the cave and shot toward the surface.

His head cleared the water, and he took a big gulp of air. There were several holes in the ceiling of the cave that let the rising full moon shine inside. Surprisingly it was brighter than he would have thought.

The next several hours they swam in the cave, playing around. Blair laughed

helplessly. Not only could Marcus outmaneuver him, he could out-swim him. Of course. He splashed Marcus and found himself pulled underwater.

They play fought, rolling and tussling together in the dark waters. The fins didn't do him much good. They certainly couldn't compare to Marcus' tail. He smiled inwardly. Marcus was very careful with him, always making sure not to keep him under longer than he could tolerate.

During one of their mock battles, Blair lost his swim trunks... which ended up on the beach. Finally, when Marcus sensed Blair was getting hard, he swam toward the beach beckoning Blair to join him. He rested on the beach, still mostly in the water. He reclined on his elbows, his tail flipping lazily as he stared at Blair, a dare clear on his face.

Blair snorted as he joined Marcus on the beach. "What was that look supposed to be?"

Marcus' tail slashed the water. "What look?"

"That look that said I'm might be scared to join you here on the beach." Blair traced Marcus' lips. "I'm not afraid of you."

Marcus raised a blue eyebrow. "No?"

"No." Blair shook his head. "You would never hurt me."

"You're right. Not only would I never hurt you, I will kill anything that tries to."

Blair shivered. The honesty and possessiveness in his voice went straight to his cock.

"Want to take a look?" Marcus' long tail twitched, splashing in the water as a

seductive grin crossed his face.

“Fuck yes. I’ve been waiting on this since I laid eyes on you.” Blair scooted down then knelt in the water.

His emotions rose up. How many people, ever, had a chance to do this? God, he didn’t know where to start. Some of the pictures on the Internet were actually pretty close to form.

Marcus was part fish from the waist down. And speaking of his waist, his human form ended around his belly button, which, oddly enough, he did have one. But from there on down nothing else was human.

He reached out but paused. “May I touch?”

“Please do.”

Hesitantly he reached out and laid his hand on Marcus’ stomach. The muscles under his hand jumped, and Blair grinned. He’d stumbled across the fact Marcus was ticklish during one of the many times they made love.

Apparently that still applied in this form, too. He ran his hand from Marcus’ stomach over to his hip, or where Marcus’ hip should’ve been. Instead there were scales, which were silky and smooth. He traced them, surprised at the warmth.

Each scale 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. Fascinated, he leaned closer for a better view, his nose practically glued to where Marcus’ hip should be. The fragile scales were molded together, as small as his fingernail.

“Jesus, this is... is... damn, Marcus. I think I actually may be jealous, and I’ve never been jealous in my life. I wish I had one.”

“You might change your mind the first time you had to transform.” Marcus flipped his tail in the water.

“Maybe, but I imagine it would be worth it.” On his knees, Blair moved down Marcus’ tail, trailing his hand over it until he reached the caudal fin, which was forked. He stroked the fin and felt it twitch under his hand. “Can you roll over? I’d like to see the other side of you.”

Marcus flipped over onto his stomach, his tail bending where his knees should have been. Blair ran his hand over where Marcus’ ass would have been if he were in human form.

Marcus hissed. “Even though I don’t have a human ass, I’m still very sensitive there.”

Blair calmly patted him on what he hoped would have been Marcus’ ass and said, “Good to know.”

He explored Marcus’ tail then moved back up his body. He sat down next to him. Even though he was still half in, half out of the water, he lay back. Marcus moved to where he was leaning over Blair, looking down at him.

Blair braced himself on his elbow and threaded one hand through Marcus’ hair, pulling him closer. Their kiss was soft and gentle—nothing more than a teasing of lips and tongue. Small waves washed up against them as they explored each other’s mouth.

With the last kiss Marcus lifted his head. “Ready to go back yet?”

“It’s pretty dark outside now. Do you think it would be safe for us to swim in the ocean?”

“Sure. If that’s what you want.”

“You think, maybe, you could call the dolphins?”

Marcus laughingly tapped Blair on the lips. “Ah, truth comes out. You want me because of my dolphin connection.”

Blair snorted. “Right, that’s the only reason I want you.”

“Well, come on then. Hold on to me, and I’ll have us out of here.”

They surfaced again right as his air began to run out. Marcus called, and a short time later, dolphins did indeed show up. They frolicked in the water together after Marcus introduced Blair to the dolphins.

It was the only way Blair could think to describe the conversation between Marcus and the dolphins that consisted of clicks and whistles. Once the noise stopped the dolphins came to him, and Blair ran his hand over their backs.

Much later, Blair tapped Marcus on the arm. “Hey, my stomach’s growling. Are you ready to eat?”

“More than.” Marcus whistled, and the dolphins answered with a short squeal then disappeared under the water.

“Almost hate to see them go.”

“There’s always tomorrow,” Marcus reminded Blair.

Blair watched the dolphins dart off. Together he and Marcus swam to the boat. “Yup. And I can’t wait.”

Blair climbed the ladder and grabbed a towel as he waited for Marcus to transform. He grabbed a few more towels and then stood by the ladder, waiting. A couple minutes later Marcus climbed up, and Blair held out a towel. “You okay?”

“Yes. It takes a minute to adjust.”

“Come on, then. Let’s get you settled, and I’ll whip us up something to eat. Oh, by the way, I’ve been thinking...”

Marcus snorted. “Yeah?”

“How would you feel about owning a boat?”

Marcus stumbled as he and Blair went below deck.

THE REST of the time left on the boat rental passed entirely too fast. Soon it was time to drive the boat back.

He dreaded what was to come. In the next day or two he would meet Nisha and Kannon, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Well, actually, yes he did. He was terrified. What if they held a grudge for what he did? Brett made it very clear Nisha was considered an Alpha, and Marcus lived in his territory.

What if Nisha kicked Marcus out because he started the mating process with Blair? He clutched the wheel, his knuckles white. Then there was Kannon, Nisha’s mate. Kannon, who used to be human. What if he took a dislike to Blair?

Eventually he got the boat back to where he rented it, filled it up, and signed off on

the paperwork to get his deposit back. He'd checked out of Brett's resort since he'd spent the last two weeks on the water.

He flagged down a taxi, and checked back into the resort, Marcus with him. During one of their conversations Marcus told Blair what he intended to do about converting his money and the paperwork that would make him legal.

They settled in their new room, and Blair went to take a shower. After he was done, he walked out, the towel wrapped around his waist to find Marcus and Brett in the seating area of their small suite. Well Jesus, why hadn't Marcus told him they had company?

"Well, hello." Blair glanced at Marcus, unsure exactly what was going on. "Um, is everything okay?"

"Oh yes," Brett said. "I got word the two of you checked back in. I wanted to stop by and say welcome back."

"Oh. Okay." Yeah, this wasn't uncomfortable at all. "Ah, give me a second to get dressed and I'll join you."

"That would be great."

Blair ducked into the bedroom, pretty sure now this was not a courtesy call. He dressed and quickly rejoined them.

"I was telling Marcus that Nisha and Kannon got back yesterday," Brett said.

"I see." Blair sat next to Marcus on the couch. He clasped Marcus' hand, suddenly needing the reassurance.

“We’re having a gathering at Kannon and Nisha’s tonight at eight o’clock. Nothing fancy, mind you,” Brett said.

“Do we need to bring anything?” Marcus asked.

“No. As I said, this is very informal. Might want to bring your swim trunks, Blair. They have a pool.”

Marcus wrinkled his nose.

“Yes, yes, we all know how you feel about pools, but Blair may want to swim. The rest of us probably will, too,” Brett said.

“I’ll never understand how you can stand the stink of chlorine.” Marcus shrugged.

“But nevertheless, we’ll be there. Just not exactly sure how we’ll get there.”

“I can pick you up,” Brett volunteered.

“Okay, thanks,” Marcus said.

Brett stood, gave his goodbyes, and left.

Blair turned to Marcus. “Um, I know you’re not very familiar with human activities, but next time let’s talk about something like this before you accept and commit both of us.”

Marcus patted Blair’s knee. “I would have, but that ‘request’ to join them tonight was more of a demand. Nisha wants to meet you.”

Blair dropped his head into his hands. “Shit.”

“Hey now.” Marcus pulled on Blair’s arm until Blair looked at him. “Whatever’s going on in that head of yours, just stop it. Nisha isn’t a bad guy.”

“Maybe not, but he’s well aware of what I did—how I stood you up and ran. What if he refuses to accept our mating? We’re not fully mated even. What if he kicks you out of your home!”

“Okay, that’s not going to happen. First off, he has no control over whom I mate, so I don’t really give a damn if he accepts you or not. But he is going to accept you, so there’s nothing to worry about there. If he does lose his mind and kicks me out of his territory, it’s not the end of the world. I’ll either claim my own territory or petition to join somebody else’s as I did with Nisha.”

“But that’s your home .”

“You don’t get it, do you? Before I met you, I would’ve agreed that my little underwater cave was home, but now? That simply isn’t true. Home is wherever you are.”

Blair’s lower lip trembled, and his eyes stung. A lone tear snaked down his cheek. “Jesus.”

Marcus leaned closer and calmly licked the tear off of Blair’s cheek. He smacked his lips. “Yum. Salty.”

He scrubbed his hands over his face, his laugh on the soggy side. “You don’t say.”

Marcus winked at Blair. “You know how I like salty things.”

Blair shoved his damp hair out of his face. “You are so bad.”

“Maybe so, but I got you to laugh.” Marcus threw his arm around Blair’s shoulders, suddenly serious. “Look, you’re mine and nobody, and I mean nobody , gets to hurt you. Not while I’m around. Nisha may be my friend, but you are my mate. The fact we’re not fully mated doesn’t affect how I feel for you.”

“I don’t want to be the reason the two of you have a falling out.”

“You won’t be.”

“I hope so.” Blair stood. “We’ve got the better part of the day before we’re due over there, so you want to go eat? Then maybe we could go into town and play tourist?”

Marcus stood. “Sounds good. Do you mind if I borrow more clothes?”

“Of course not.” Blair wrapped his arms around Marcus’ waist and hugged him. “I, um, kind of enjoy seeing you in my clothes.”

“But you enjoy seeing me out of them more, right?” Marcus wagged his eyebrows.

“Absolutely.” Blair stepped back.

“That’s the right answer. Why don’t I go shower, and you throw some clothes on the bed for me to wear.”

“Sounds like a deal.”

After Marcus showered and dressed, they went to Sandals and ate lunch. From there Blair flagged down a taxi, and they went into town.

HOURS LATER they returned to the resort, showered again, and dressed. Brett called and asked them to meet him in the lobby.

“You ready?”

“No, but let’s get going any way.”

Marcus caught Blair by the elbow and pulled him closer. “It’s going to be okay. I promise.”

Blair bit his bottom lip. “You can’t know that.”

“Okay then, how’s this?” Marcus ran his hand up and down Blair’s back. “If you’re uncomfortable at any point while we’re over there, just say so, and we’ll leave.”

Blair stared into Marcus’ eyes. “You would do that for me?”

“Absolutely.”

Brett blew out a deep breath. “Okay, that helps some. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me for caring about you. You’re my mate, so of course I want you to be happy. Or in this case, relaxed. Like I said—say the word and we’ll be out of there.”

“Okay, okay.” Blair straightened his shirt. “Well, let’s go meet Brett.”

He followed Marcus to the elevators. He’d picked much fancier clothes which Marcus immediately vetoed. He claimed all they needed were shorts and T-shirts, and they’d be good. After a short, heated discussion over what informal meant, Blair finally gave in. These were Marcus’ friends and he knew better than Blair what was appropriate for tonight. All Blair knew for sure was he wanted to make a good impression.

When they got down to the lobby, Brett was waiting for them.

“Hey, where’s Brooke?” Marcus asked, looking around. There were people everywhere, but no, sexy, blue-headed female.

“Something came up with her friend Cora. She’s not going to make it tonight,” Brett said, playing with his truck keys.

Marcus frowned. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” Brett shrugged. “It’s a mermaid thing.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“CORA WOULD so kick your ass for saying that,” Marcus joked, sidestepping several kids whose parents were trying to catch up with them.

“Hey, what she doesn’t know won’t hurt me,” Brett said.

“Blair, Cora also lives in Nisha’s territory.” Marcus tugged gently on Blair’s hair to get Blair to look at him. “She and Brooke have been friends for quite a while.”

“She was Brooke’s bridesmaid when we married.” Brett glanced at his wedding band, a smile softening his face.

“You got married?” Blair asked. “Like... well, you know... married.”

Brett grinned. “Yep. Right there on the beach with Nisha and Kannon attending. Then they took a turn. They didn’t have the legal paperwork like Brooke and I did, so I guess you’d call it a dress rehearsal for the real thing.”

Marcus slipped his arm around Blair’s waist. “Kannon says they’re going to do it legally, too.”

Brett nodded. “Once Kannon gets something in his head he’s pretty hard to dissuade. Are you guys ready?”

“Yes,” Blair said. The three of them walked out to Brett’s vehicle. Marcus was friends with Brett, so Blair got in the back seat. Once they were settled, he brought up

something that caught his attention. “You said you and Brooke legally married?”

Brett glanced in the rearview mirror as he drove out of the resort. “Yes, why?”

“Oh, I hope I didn’t insult you by asking. I just wondered if that was something mers do,” Blair said.

“I wasn’t offended. We actually may be the exception to the rule. I own property, and there’s a lot of money involved. If something happened to me, I wanted Brooke legally taken care of. Even if she never touched any of the money, it’d be there if she needed it.”

“That makes sense,” Blair said.

Brett kept the conversation going as they drove to Kannon and Nisha’s house. Marcus turned partly in the passenger seat so he could see Blair as the three of them talked. He hoped Blair would calm down, but he wasn’t seeing signs of that, not yet.

Tension radiated off of Blair. He wished there was something he could say or do to relieve it. While he understood, he was unconcerned. He meant what he said earlier—as long as he had Blair, where they lived didn’t matter. Talk about an extreme change of heart.

They arrived at Kannon and Nisha’s bungalow, and immediately Kannon went out of his way to make Blair feel welcome. Marcus was glad to see it, although he really wasn’t surprised. If anybody understood the pressure of being a mate, it was Kannon. Marcus was much more easy going and laid back than Nisha, but unlike his friend, Marcus spent time around humans and had an inkling of their thought process—something Nisha didn’t.

Dinner went well, and, although they brought their swimming trunks, nobody seemed

to be in a rush to get into the pool, even though they were sitting out by it. In Marcus' opinion they were still too close.

Nisha sipped his bottled water then put it on the table. "So, Blair, do you think you're going to stay this time, or are you planning to run again and break Marcus' heart?"

Kannon choked on his drink and quickly set it on the table. "Dammit, Nisha—"

"Must you always be an ass?" Marcus demanded.

Brett rolled his eyes. "Does the word 'tact' mean anything to you?"

"No more so than the word 'consent,' apparently." Kannon snapped, glaring at Nisha.

Marcus slammed his hand down on the table. "I'll not have my mate talked to like—"

Kannon perked up. "Mate?"

Brett ran his hand through his hair. "Way to go. You just insulted Marcus' mate."

"It's only the first bite. I know better than most you can do that and still walk away," Nisha pointed out.

"Sure you do, seeing as that's exactly what you did, Nisha," Kannon added. "And let me tell you what fun for me that was."

Marcus growled, the sound low and mean.

Blair held up a hand. "Can I say something please?" Nisha, Kannon, and Brett stopped arguing, their heads snapping around to look at Blair. "Marcus? Calm down, please. I had a feeling this was coming." Blair took a deep breath and let it out. "I did

run, yes. I panicked and overreacted, but at the time it made sense. I've talked this out with Marcus, so I'm not going to go into my reasons. Quite frankly they're none of your business."

"Damn straight," Marcus muttered. "If you want to leave, we'll walk out of here right now."

"No, I don't want to leave," Blair said. "I panicked and ran from you once. I'm not about to panic and run from yet another situation that scares me. Besides, these are your friends."

"But you're my mate. That's the main thing," Marcus said.

"While I do appreciate that, you have a long-standing history with them." Blair reached out to Marcus. "Let's see if we can work this out, okay?"

"If you're sure."

"I am." Blair glanced at each person at the table until he finally came to Nisha. "As I said, it's none of your business, but I don't want to be a wedge that drives you and Marcus apart, so... When I got to New York, I realized what a horrible mistake I made, but I needed time to think. I returned with basically nothing more than the clothes on my back."

"That's true," Brett added. "Fortunately for you I hadn't tossed your clothes."

"The first thing I did was ask Brett for help. He told me no one had seen Marcus and that the two of you were on vacation and unreachable. I scoured the beaches, even though I knew it wouldn't do any good, but I hoped that maybe he'd sense I was here. When that didn't work, I rented a boat and went out to the open water."

“He ran, but he came back. He tried to find me,” Marcus reminded everyone.

“I did, even though I knew it’d be like searching for a needle in a haystack. But I had to do something. I spent a lot of time hoping and praying.”

“How did you finally find each other?” Kannon asked.

“I was out in the open water. I planned to leave the area, but couldn’t. I was checking out this underwater cave when suddenly a boat showed up. Then there was a splash, and a body hit the water,” Marcus said.

Blair snorted. “I rented a small yacht and basically drifted aimlessly. Every day I went swimming. Instead of finding Marcus, a tiger shark found me.”

“Damn.” Nisha fingered his shark tooth necklace. “Fuckers are aggressive.”

“I attacked but also called for help. A couple of dolphins showed up, but they were nothing compared to the massive stingray that decided to help,” Marcus continued.

“Stingray?” Shock covered Nisha’s face. “That’s a rarity. They usually can’t bestir themselves to help much of anyone.”

“Yeah, so you can imagine my surprise. Between me, the stingray, and the dolphins, the shark decided he’d had enough and left,” Marcus said.

Kannon rested his chin on his hand. “Almost like it was meant to be.”

“We talked—actually, I begged for forgiveness,” Blair said.

“Good,” Nisha said. Everyone at the table rolled their eyes, and Nisha huffed. “Everybody can roll their eyes as much as they want, but rejecting a mate is a serious

deal.”

“But I didn’t know that I rejected him. I didn’t even know I was his mate until Brett let it slip,” Blair said.

“Oh shit, really?” Kannon asked.

“Yes. That’s part of the reason why I freaked out.” Blair toyed with his drink. “There was so much I didn’t know. Then my mind latched onto this wild idea, and I completely blew it out of proportion.”

“What wild idea?”

“That maybe he wasn’t as sincere as he seemed. That maybe this was a setup to get to my money. That he could possibly... possibly change me without my permission,” Blair said.

Kannon coughed, and Nisha glared at him.

“I left in order to think,” Blair said. “I didn’t stop to think of the consequences. Actually, I wasn’t thinking at all, which became pretty obvious once I landed in New York.”

Nisha stared silently at Blair then he finally sighed. “Who am I to judge? I ran across Kannon while he was on vacation with his dad. They were snorkeling in my territory when I first saw him and instinct took over.”

Kannon snorted. “In other words, he lost control.”

“I gave him the first mating bite, but he was still so young. Just barely an adult and I... His dad was frantically searching for him... I could hear the pain and terror in his

voice. I let Kannon go.”

“You did?” Blair asked.

“It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, plus what I did really messed Kannon up. He saw me, but he didn’t know exactly what I was, even though the tail was a pretty good indicator. I bit him. He didn’t know what that would do to him, and he certainly couldn’t ask me.”

“I refused to go anywhere near the ocean for the next fifteen years, until my best friend over there”—Kannon pointed at Brett—“got married, and I returned here. Next thing I know this sexy guy with beautiful blue hair was constantly hanging around me.”

“You?” Blair asked Nisha.

“Yes, me. Kannon was only here a week to attend Brett’s marriage, and this time I wasn’t letting him go. Because of my actions over that week, and before, Kannon and I got off to a rocky start.”

Blair slowly nodded. “Thank you. It means a lot to me that you’d share that with me.”

Nisha stared at Blair. “It’s hard to admit when you royally screw up, but you did. I admire you for that.”

Apparently, Nisha wasn’t going to be that big of an ass. “Just to make sure I understand you, I can still stay in your territory? Me and my mate?”

“Yes.” Nisha held his hand out to Blair. “As mate to one of my fiercest warriors and good friend, I welcome you, Blair, to my territory.”

Blair gulped. “Oh well, thank you. I was so scared you’d hold what I did against me.”

“You made a mistake.” Nisha shrugged. “My mistake was forgetting the mistakes I too made. And for that, I apologize.”

Marcus jumped up, his chair flying back. He hurried around the table, dragged Blair into a bear hug, and kissed him soundly.

Kannon sighed, happily watching the other couple. “Don’t you just love it when things work out?”

IT WAS late afternoon when Blair dropped anchor.

A year had passed since he returned to the islands after his harebrained flight from Marcus and what he was. During that time Brett acquired papers for Marcus, making him legal. Once Marcus could prove his identity, Blair helped him open a checking account to deposit all the money from the gold coins he sold. Blair also bought a little touristy shop in town where he featured many of the local artist's work, including Marcus'.

After they established the business, they bought oceanfront land that fell somewhere between Brett's resort and Kannon and Nisha's bungalow. They were in the process of building a bungalow with a nice boat slip for the yacht Blair bought not long after he moved to the islands.

Blair stood on the deck watching the sunset below the ocean's horizon. They came together first on the boat. Now that his life was changing again, it seemed appropriate the next step—the last mating bite—happen here, on his boat.

Warm, bare arms wrapped around Blair's waist. A long, dark lock of blue hair fluttered in the breeze. "How do you feel?"

"Pretty good, actually. The nausea has passed, and my head no longer hurts." Blair turned in Marcus' arms.

They had made love earlier, and as Blair came, Marcus bit him again. Everything was a little fuzzy after that—but he was pretty sure Marcus fucked him unconscious. He'd been out for several hours, and apparently Marcus also napped during that time.

Blair woke to a warm sensation spreading from the bite on his neck, but it quickly faded. It wasn't painful. His body tingled—legs, arms, back, neck—which was what woke him up. He was restless, and seeing how peaceful Marcus looked, he decided not to bother him.

He slipped out of bed and left the cabin to go stand on the deck. The toxins or bacteria—whatever it was in a mer's bite—took a few hours to integrate fully into human cells. There was a scar where his shoulder and neck met, proof of their mating. He wore it proudly.

He gently touched both sides of his neck where his gills were. The skinfolds Marcus told him about hid the gills, so they weren't noticeable. Now that the transformation was completed, the gills would always be there whether he was in the water or not—whether he was using them or not.

Marcus kissed the bite mark on Blair's shoulder and stepped back. "Do you want to try?"

"Are you kidding me? I can't wait."

"Okay, then." Marcus took Blair by the hand, and they headed back down.

Blair went willingly. He understood the need for caution. Last thing he wanted was for some satellite or something to get pictures of them while they worked on opening his gills.

They both sat on the edge of the bed, Marcus still holding his hand. "Okay, this is going to sound funny, but work with me. I want you to clear your mind and think about how you breathe. Your diaphragm tightens and moves downward. Your lungs expand. Now push the air out and exhale. Focus on the pattern. In and out. In and out. Good."

Blair smiled. Marcus sounded so serious.

“Turn your attention to your neck. It’s long, and smooth, and there are muscles there, right? Nerves too. Focus on your neck and see if something feels different. Odd.”

Blair frowned and shook his head.

“It’s there, trust me. Tried to visualize your neck in your head. Can you see it? Maybe if you closed your eyes?”

Struggling not to become annoyed, Blair did as Marcus suggested. He closed his eyes and tried to visualize his neck, but he got nowhere. Finally, he sighed and opened his eyes. “Nothing.”

Marcus stood and tugged Blair to his feet. “Okay, let’s try this.” He pulled Blair over to a mirror in the cabin and stood behind him. “Look in the mirror. Now, I want you to try to imagine what it’ll look like if you had gills there. Concentrate for me.”

Several minutes passed as Blair stared into the mirror. A bead of sweat traveled down the side of his face as he stared. So engrossed with staring at the mirror, he almost missed the first tingle. Hot damn, that was a fucking tingle. He jumped.

“What?” Marcus asked.

“I... I don’t know.” Blair frowned. “My neck kind of... tingles.”

“Oh, that’s good. That’s exactly what we want. Concentrate on that tingle.” Marcus’ voice dropped. “Now, I want you to focus on your breathing. Hear the air rushing in and out of your lungs and try to lose yourself in the rhythm. Keep focusing on the tingling.”

Blair went back to staring hard in the mirror.

“Perfect. I think you’re ready. Kannon said to tell you to pretend you’re opening a window—a window that’s been painted over and is stuck. I want you to force the window open, Blair.”

Blair tried to visualize what Marcus told him. He pushed at the imaginary window, but nothing was happening. His breathing increased as tension flooded his body. He glared at his image. He kept visualizing the window, but that was getting him nowhere.

Maybe I need some fucking imaginary hands to open this fucking imaginary window. Dammit. This isn’t working. Time for Plan B. In his mind he created a glass container with a lid—like what pickles came in. Those fuckers were hard to open.

Closing his eyes, he tried to visualize himself gently tapping the glass bottle on a counter to loosen the lid and then gripping it firmly. He strained trying to unscrew the top. Teeth gritted he put more force behind opening that lid. By God, he was going to open it if it was the last thing he did. One more violent turn and suddenly something quivered on his neck.

His eyes popped open, and his glance went immediately to his reflection. He gasped. “Oh. My. God!” He had gills—three perfectly shaped gills on each side. Blair reached for his neck, but Marcus caught his hands.

“Whoa, now,” Marcus said from behind him. “They’re new and very sensitive. You want to be very gentle if you touch them.”

“Fuck man, that’s the coolest thing I’ve ever seen.” Blair turned his head this way and that, trying to see his neck at every angle. “I can touch them?”

“Yes, you can’t hurt them just from touching, but like I said, you need to be very, very gentle.” Marcus pulled Blair’s hair away from his neck.

Blair tentatively ran a finger over the right side of his neck where the gills were. “Oh wow, it tickles... and feels so damn strange.”

“I imagine it does.” Marcus kissed the back of Blair’s shoulder. “I’m very proud of you.”

Blair turned around and went straight into Marcus’ arms. “I did it.”

Marcus hugged him back and pressed a kiss to the side of his head. “You did. I never had any doubt. But we’re not done.”

Blair stepped back, a question on his face. “No?”

“No. Unfortunately the next part isn’t going to be as easy, so listen while I explain the mechanics to you. Fish breathe oxygen, right?”

“Yup.”

“Their gills pull oxygen out of the water. Merfolk do the same, and now, so can you. The most simplistic way to explain it is water is forced across the gills. Dissolved oxygen is taken in by tiny blood vessels and veins in our gills. Seawater carries away the carbon dioxide.”

“Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating, but what I really want to do is hit the water.”

“We’re getting there. As I said, the next part isn’t going to be as easy as you think. You’re no longer human, but I promise your mind hasn’t adjusted to that yet. You’re not used to breathing underwater. Your instinct will be to hold your breath. That’s exactly what you don’t want to do. You can’t drown, but unfortunately your mind hasn’t had a chance to accept that truth yet.”

“But you’ll help me.”

“Yes, I will. Remember, you can not drown.”

“Oh man, this next part is going to be a pain in the ass, I can tell.”

“Until you overcome the fear of drowning, most likely. Let’s get in the water to do this next part. I’ll go overboard first and change. Then join me and I’ll take you through it.”

Blair rubbed his hands together. “Right. Let’s do this.”

They went back on deck. Marcus stripped off his boxers and dove into the ocean. Blair struggled to keep from pacing while he waited for Marcus to signal he was ready. Blair’s excitement built, but there was also nervousness.

Marcus surfaced and waved for Blair to join him. Blair dropped the boxers he wore—to an appreciative whistle from Marcus—and dove into the water. He popped up next to Marcus, and holding hands, they sank beneath the waves.

Blair tried to clear his mind, but a voice in his head insisted on counting off the seconds he was submerged. He tried to focus on Marcus in his merman form and how otherworldly he looked to distract himself... but nothing helped. He seemed stuck and unable to make himself let go and do what he needed to do.

His heart raced, and he glanced toward the surface. He knew he couldn’t drown. Marcus’ words pounded through his head. He knew that. He’d seen the gills. He understood how they worked. But he couldn’t make himself let go of his preconceived notions.

As he was ready to struggle toward the surface, Marcus wrapped himself around Blair. His mouth slammed down on Blair’s. Passion flared brightly between them as Marcus rubbed against Blair’s groin.

Shocked, and aroused beyond belief, Blair grabbed a handful of Marcus' hair and returned the kiss just as fiercely. He jerked back, his eyes crossing, when Marcus grabbed a handful of his cock and ran his thumb over the tip.

And Blair took his first breath underwater.

Blair jerked. He blinked then a grin split his face. He released his hold on Marcus' hair and grabbed him by the shoulders. Holy cow, he was breathing. Breathing underwater. He couldn't believe it! Dear God, this was the best rush ever. He was breathing underwater!

He opened his mouth to tell Marcus and nothing came out that remotely resembled speech. Surprised at how strange that felt, he slapped his hand over his mouth. Marcus made a strange clicking sound and winked at him.

Then he remembered Marcus also said since he had human vocal cords and wouldn't be able to speak underwater. Well, damn. Now he was impatient for their bond to hurry up fully form so he could speak telepathically to Marcus. Marcus trilled, and Blair fell a little bit in love with that sound.

He blinked at Marcus in shock. Well hell, the "L" word came out of nowhere. There were a lot of things about Marcus he truly enjoyed—like his humor and his patience. He'd also found Marcus had a wicked sense of humor, but he kept it pretty much under wraps except around his friends. He was loyal and would literally give the shirt off his back to someone who needed it.

What was there not to love?

Marcus reached out and Blair threaded his fingers through Marcus'. He lifted their joined hands to look at the webbing. Then he looked at his hand. He didn't have that webbing nor did he have the fin below Marcus' wrist.

Marcus whistled. Blair glanced back at him. With his other hand, he reached out and traced that pointy ear of Marcus'. Marcus shivered. They never made love while Marcus was in his merman form and suddenly Blair burned to do just that.

Hanging suspended in the water, he wrapped his legs around Marcus' waist. Marcus let go of his hands and cupped Blair's ass. He rubbed his hard cock against Marcus, his intentions clear. Marcus' cock slowly protruded and brushed against Blair's.

Blair gulped. He knew Marcus' cock was contained inside Marcus' body in a pouch. When aroused, it protruded through a slit in the skin exactly where his human penis would've been. Their cocks rubbed together as Marcus' long tail slowly moved back and forth as they sank deeper, both of their hair floating gently above their head as they descended.

As much as he wanted Marcus' shaft in him, he also wanted to see it. He wiggled. Marcus let him go, his eyebrow raised, but gave a sharp thrust of his tail to stop their descent. Maybe Marcus figured out what he wanted.

He placed his hands on Marcus' hips to steady himself as he floated down. His body was stretched out behind him. Maybe he looked odd, but who was going to see him? Besides, he had something else on his mind. When he was level with Marcus' groin, he kicked lazily in the water to keep him where he was.

The tip of Marcus' cock was rounded and narrow, but he also noticed how it flared out as it grew. Blair bet that would open him up nicely as it slid inside. He started to touch, but paused, glancing up at Marcus. Marcus threaded his hand through Blair's hair and urged him closer.

Now that he had the green light, he hesitantly stroked it. Even though his shaft looked different in this form, it was still warm and firm—and an iridescent blue, just like his tail. Well now, of all things he'd been expecting, that never occurred to him. He stroked Marcus' cock from root to tip. Above him Marcus shuddered.

Oh yeah. Merman cock or human... when you stroked one of these bad boys you got the same response. Marcus trilled, a soft growling sound that struck a chord of need deep within him. He stroked faster, his cock arrowing up toward his belly. Marcus' tail jerked and thrashed as Blair worked him.

Finally, Marcus grabbed him by his shoulders and frantically urged him up. God, Blair wished he could speak to him. Marcus grabbed Blair's legs and once again wrapped them around his waist. This was going to be interesting, if Marcus was about to do what Blair thought. Blair wrapped his arms around Marcus' neck and planted his mouth on Marcus'.

Marcus tongue-fucked his mouth as his cock, hot and slick, probed at his entrance. He arched in Marcus' arms, suddenly unsure. Marcus hadn't prepped him at all, and they had no lube. Thank God they had made love earlier and Marcus had pounded his ass. Hopefully he was still greased up and loose.

Grabbing his ass, Marcus' shaft slid inside, opening Blair up like he thought it would. He moaned, but the water washed the sound away. Holy shit, that felt different from a normal dick. It wasn't bad, only different. Using his tail to thrust, Marcus fucked into him. He tightened his hold on Marcus and held on. He just thought he got pounded before.

The warm water caressed him as they moved together, swirling around his skin and increasing his pleasure. Marcus released his lips but immediately buried his face in Blair's shoulder. He nibbled at the skin, leaving little stinging bites as he fucked Blair harder.

Blair grabbed a handful of Marcus' hair and tugged, hoping Marcus understood he was about to come. Marcus thrust harder. Blair threw his head back and screamed. Blair's orgasm forced Marcus to come, his seed flooding Blair.

Marcus pressed a gentle kiss against his lips as he supported Blair's weight. Blair

sighed, again wishing he could speak. He shivered as Marcus' cock slipped out of him. He unwound himself from around Marcus and watched as Marcus' cock slowly returned to his pouch and disappeared. Neatest. Thing. Ever.

Together they treaded water. Marcus pointed up at the boat then lowered his hand and motioned toward the landscape around them. Eagerly Blair nodded his head. They might not be able to talk but they could still communicate. And no, he wasn't ready to return to the boat. Taking Blair's hand, Marcus led the way to a coral reef they could explore together.

Blair glanced at Marcus, and his heart gave one hard thump. Never in a million years had he imagined a life like this, and he couldn't wait to see the new things Marcus would introduce him to.

If he could find the guy who knocked him overboard on that dinner cruise so long ago, he'd shake his hand and thank him for the priceless gift he found—his very own merman.