



# Somewhere Beyond the Sea (Valleywood Season Three)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Do you ever just feel drawn to a certain place with no explanation why?

Zack

I have no idea why I dropped everything in my life to move to Valleywood so I could pursue...stand-up comedy? Really? Me? A mousey little omega who would rather fall off a bridge than have people stare at him?

Funny thing about that whole falling off a bridge thing, because that's exactly what happened. I fell off a bridge and straight into the arms of...a merman?

Lucas

I wanted to be where the people were, especially since the people were staging an original musical version of The Little Mermaid with an open casting call. Was I allowed to leave home for Valleywood so that I could audition? Heck no! Did I go anyhow? Yep.

Whether I get the lead or not, disobedience is immediately worth it when a funny little omega fell from the sky and into my life. Zack thinks I rescued him from a watery grave. When my family finds out where I am and why, he might just be the one rescuing me!

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## CHAPTER ONE

Zack

Valleywood. It was the place where dreams were made. Or so I gathered. I didn't really know much about the place, since I'd only arrived the day before and I hadn't really had a chance to look around yet. But so far, so good. I'd found a tiny, furnished apartment in a building near the Valleywood Performing Arts Center, I'd bought things like sheets and towels that made it actually livable, and I'd even found the closest supermarket and stocked my freezer with pizzas, fries, chicken fingers, and pretty much everything else I could throw in a microwave or the oven for a few minutes and call it nourishment.

"I think I'm going to be okay," I told my Grandma Thalia as I puttered around the apartment, putting away groceries and the stuff I'd bought for the bathroom and laundry. "At least I'm not going to starve."

"Frozen pizza and chicken fingers do not count as food," Grandma said in her lilting voice. Even when she was chastising me, she still sounded like she was laughing. "You aren't twelve anymore, Zakai. You need real nourishment. You need fruits and vegetables."

"I know, Grandma, I know," I sighed. "I'll definitely get some on my next trip out."

"You're a grown man of twenty-seven and you're on your own now, Zack," Grandma reminded me. "You should know how to cook and take care of yourself."

“I know, and I do,” I insisted. “At least, I think I do.”

The truth was that I’d never really had to take care of myself before. Grandma had done such an amazing job all these years. She was the one who had raised me since my mom had gone off to do...actually, I wasn’t sure what my mom had gone off to do. She’d left when I was a toddler and I didn’t really remember her. She didn’t keep in touch. That had never bothered me, though. Grandma Thalia filled her place in my life. I’d had the best childhood ever. The two of us were always laughing and finding something to smile about.

That’s probably why I’d delayed moving out of our home back in Philadelphia. I hadn’t really needed to set out on my own. We were well-off. Well, didn’t have a ton of money, not, like, Main Line money or anything, but I didn’t have to worry about things like college tuition or my car.

I had a job, mind you. I wasn’t a complete waste of time and space. I had friends and I dated, especially around the time of my heats. But working in IT for an insurance company and having a string of alpha boyfriends who were great but not the one just hadn’t been doing it for me lately.

I’d done a lot of theater in school, usually tech, and I’d run the lights for a local community theater production a few years ago, so when I saw the almost invisible little ad in the corner of a Valleywood newspaper that someone had left on a Septa train by accident, I was interested.

No, not interested. That little ad had ignited something in me.

“ The Hailstork Theater Collective is pleased to announce its production of an all-new, musical adaptation of the Hans Christian Andersen tale, *The Little Mermaid* , to be performed this spring in association with the Valleywood Performing Arts Center. All roles, including leads, will be filled via open casting call, to be held March 18, 19,

and 20<sup>th</sup> at the VPAC. No agents or previous experience required. Backstage and technical help will also be hired during those days. We'll see you there! ”

I'd been so thrilled with that little ad that I'd read it five or six times to see if I was imagining things. Theater was exciting. And all-new musical was even more exciting. But it was those magic words, “no agents or previous experience required”, that had made me catch my breath and quit my job.

My destiny awaited me on the stage of the Valleywood Performing Arts Center. I'd known it then, and I still knew it now, weeks later, as I stacked cans of soup in the otherwise empty cupboard of my new apartment.

“...proper nutrition,” Grandma was saying as I let my mind wander. I had my phone wedged between my shoulder and my ear as I took a few boxes of pasta out of the reusable shopping bag, but it was starting to slip. “Otherwise, I'm going to worry about you the entire time you're there. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, Grandma, I swear, I understand,” I said, straightening and shifting the phone to my other ear. “Fruits and vegetables.”

Grandma sighed. “We've moved on from that, dear. I was saying that you can't eat sugar all the time. I know you like your pie, but please eat real food.”

“I swear to you, I will,” I said. “Although once this production gets going, I'm not sure when I'll have time to eat. Stagehands are constantly busy, even during rehearsals.”

“I don't know why you think you're not good enough to audition for a part, love,” Grandma said, her voice full of cheer and confidence. “You're so charming, and everyone loved you last Christmas, when you recited that silly poem at your company party.”

I flushed at the reminder, and not just because that whole thing had turned out to be an embarrassment on an epic scale. The poem about falling in love with Santa was just a little too NSFW, half the people listening to me had been drunk, but getting up in front of people and making them laugh had been one of the single most awesome experiences of the last few years.

“I’m just an omega, Grandma,” I said with a shrug. “No one is going to cast me in anything. I’m not sure that’s what I want either.”

Grandma snorted, like I was lying. I wasn’t really lying, though. I had loved being the center of attention and making people laugh. It had sparked something within me that had made me take notice of the ad for *The Little Mermaid* , which had led to me being here now. The idea of auditioning for a scripted play where I would have to learn someone else’s lines and then remember them when it counted did nothing for me, though.

Basically, I felt called to be in Valleywood and to work on *The Little Mermaid* , but I had no idea why.

“You’re not paying attention to me,” Grandma said, startling me into realizing I was just standing there, leaning against the kitchen counter, lost in my thoughts. “I love you, Zakai, but there’s no point in talking to you when you’re in your happy place.”

I laughed. “Sorry.”

“You’re not getting anything done when you’re in a mood like I know you are now,” she said. “It’s a lovely, spring day. Go outside and walk around your new home. Take a look at the surroundings and maybe you’ll get a better sense of why you felt so compelled to go there. Though to be honest, I’m fairly certain I know the reason why.”

“It’s because of the show, Grandma,” I reminded her, pushing myself away from the counter. “But you’re right. I need to get out and walk around. If Valleywood is going to be my new home for a while, I should learn where everything is and maybe even meet some people.”

“Yes!” Grandma shouted as I walked into the main room of the apartment to grab my jacket from where it was draped over the sofa. “By Zeus, yes! Meet people. Make friends. Surround yourself with people who can look out for you, because gods only know that you cannot look after yourself.”

“Ouch,” I said, shrugging into my jacket while trying to keep my phone pressed against my ear. “Thanks, Grandma.”

“Well, dear, you know it’s true,” Grandma said. “I love you, but you need a support network to keep yourself out of trouble. You definitely need to find a particular friend before your next heat. It’s coming soon, isn’t it?”

“Not for another two months,” I said. “It’ll show up just after closing night of the show. I’ll be fine. So you can stop worrying about me.”

“Zack, you are my grandson, my flesh and blood. I will always worry about you, through ages and ages.”

I smiled. Grandma always had a funny way of talking about time. To hear her talk, you’d think she’d been around since the dawn of time and had lived through History personally.

We said our goodbyes and I grabbed my wallet and keys and headed out of the apartment. I’d only really just come back from grocery shopping, but to be honest, I liked being outside and around people and nature more than I liked being cooped up inside. Especially when my new digs didn’t feel like home yet.

I hadn't been lying when I'd said I wanted to explore more of Valleywood, too. Somehow, I'd never heard of the place until just recently. It was like the worst kept secret on the East Coast, really. Sure, I'd heard whispers of places that you didn't really know about until you were already there and towns where people who were different felt right at home, but I hadn't imagined that they were real.

Now that I was in Valleywood, I was surprised at how big the place was. It had everything anyone could have asked for in terms of nightlife and entertainment. There were more restaurants than you could shake a stick at, some big and fancy, some just little holes in the wall. The town hall complex was particularly interesting and reminded me of something out of a comic book, for some reason.

I let my feet and my instinct lead me down wide, friendly boulevards that looked like they had recently been planted with spring flowers. I could see the lake and the new bridge that was partially built in the distance, and for some reason, the water called to me.

I made up my mind to head down there and see if I could walk out onto the bridge to get a different sort of view of the city.

On the way there, I couldn't resist stopping for an ice cream from a shop that looked like it had just opened for the season. Grandma would probably complain about the sugar, but, I mean, come on, it was ice cream. A little ice cream wasn't going to hurt me.

Famous last words.

I swear I wasn't trying to draw attention or make a fool of myself. I was just walking along, licking my cone, enjoying life. There was a family just finishing up lunch at a café with outdoor seating as I strolled by, humming one of my favorite old songs, *Beyond the Sea*, and minding my own business. They had a dog with them.

Everything unraveled before I knew what was happening. The toddler in her papa's arms saw my ice cream and reached out with a squeal. The omega holding her dropped the jacket he'd been trying to stuff the girl into. It landed on the dog, who barked and jumped to the side to get away from it.

I tried to swerve as the dog nearly barreled into me, but I was halfway through licking my cone. Instead of a lick, I smashed the thing into my face. My nose ended up covered in ice cream right before the cone broke and the whole thing tumbled to the pavement.

It didn't stop there. The dog was suddenly exuberant at the new treat I'd inadvertently offered it. It lunged for the fallen cone, somehow managing to wrap its leash around one of my legs as it did. I twisted and flailed in an attempt not to fall and ended up grabbing the arm of the omega holding his daughter.

"Sorry! I'm sorry!" I said.

Of course, that was right about when the dog spotted another dog across the street and straightened to protect its ice cream treasure by barking. It moved just enough to drag my foot with the leash around it up, leaving me balanced on one foot while gripping the other omega.

And to top it all off, my trousers ripped.

The laughter started small, with the toddler in the omega's arms. Then a group of teenagers sitting at one of the other tables started to laugh. Once they were snorting their drinks, a few other passersby started to laugh as well.

Even I laughed, precariously balanced as I was. "Lovely weather we're having," I told the other omega as I shook my leg, trying to get the dog's leash untangled from my ankle.



That caused the omega to laugh. “I’m sorry, let me just help you.”

The omega shuffled his daughter in his arms then stepped forward in an attempt to secure his dog. In the kerfuffle that followed, I stepped in the ice cream. The dog wasn’t in any mood to be caught by its owner, so there was a short chase in a circle around me until the omega had things under control again.

By then, we had an entire audience and everyone was in stitches. I loved the sound. That deep feeling of rightness I had every time I made people laugh washed over me. It happened wherever I went. Funny things were always happening around me. Situations that could have been dangerous, like the dog tangling its leash around me, always ended up being occasions for comedy instead of tragedy. It was just the way things were for me.

Once I was finally free and everything was back to the way it should have been, someone clapped. I couldn’t resist. I took a bow and gestured for the omega to bow as well. More people applauded, like the whole thing had been some comedy mime act that we’d planned in advance.

It was the best start to my venture into the world of Valleywood that I could have imagined. I made sure the omega papa was alright, then I walked on, down toward the lake, a smile on my face and a spring in my step.

I knew Valleywood would be a good idea. Answering that call I’d felt within me had seemed a little out there at first, but now I felt good about the decision. I mean, I was out walking on a brisk and sunny day with ice cream on my shoe and the seam of my trousers split, but my jacket covered the damage and all seemed right with the world.

The Valleywood bridge was a sight to behold. It was clearly still under construction, but there was a walking path along the part that was finished that allowed people to cross over and get a good look at both the lake and the city. I joined the trickle of

walkers and bikers in heading up the gentle slope and walking on, the sun bathing me from above. I breathed in the air, surprised that it didn't smell like exhaust and city.

I couldn't really explain it, but as much as Valleywood felt like home, the farther out over the water I went, the more I felt like I was where I belonged. I couldn't explain it, just that something inside me settled. It might have taken a while to get started, but my life was finally beginning, and I was exactly where I needed to be.

I paused way out on the bridge and turned to get a look at the city. It seemed to sparkle in the fresh, spring light, like it was full of magic and possibilities. I couldn't wait to show up at the VPAC on Friday to apply for a job working on *The Little Mermaid*. I couldn't wait for the rest of my life to happen.

It was the city that had drawn me to move across the state, but after a while, I turned away from it and stepped to the edge of the guardrail to look over into the water. There wasn't as much to see in its dark, somewhat murky depths, but I found myself staring into it with even more fascination than I'd felt while looking at the city.

Supposedly, there were shipwrecks and things under the water in the Great Lakes. Lake Erie had a long and interesting history, so I was sure there were things under the surface of the water that I couldn't see. I had this funny feeling that if I looked hard enough, the lake would reveal all its mysteries to me.

Without even thinking about it, I started humming *Beyond the Sea* again. Lake Erie didn't exactly have golden sands for my lover to stand on, if I even had a lover, but the song felt?—

One second, I heard the ring-ring of a bicycle bell. The next, something hit me. I have no idea how, but I blinked and I was over the railing, tumbling through the air. I caught the briefest sight of a man in a suit riding a bike past the spot I'd just been before I splashed hard into the cold water.

The shock of the cold and the sudden dark of being underwater froze my body and my brain. I could barely think, and I definitely couldn't move or breathe. My body felt suddenly heavy, and the watery light above me began to fade fast.

So this is how it all ends. And I didn't even get to stand on a stage in front of a full house and make everyone laugh .

As far as last thoughts went, those were pretty lame.

Fortunately, they weren't my last thoughts. Just as the light above me seemed impossibly far away, the water around me warmed up. Not just that, I felt a strong pair of arms scoop around me. The intense burning in my lungs that I'd only just noticed vanished. I could have sworn I was breathing under the water, but that was ludicrous.

Next thing I knew, the light wasn't just above me, it was all around me. My head popped above water, and I took a big, gasping breath. Not that I really needed a big, gasping breath, which was weird in and of itself.

"You okay?" a warm, tenor voice said.

I flinched and twisted in the arms that held me and turned to find the most gorgeous alpha I'd ever seen staring back at me with concern. He had reddish-blond hair, hazel-green eyes, strong cheekbones, and perfect, kissable lips.

And he was naked.

Well, the parts of him I could see, his shoulders and the top of his chest, were naked. There was no telling what sort of scuba gear or thermal bathing suit he was wearing, since I couldn't see that far under the murky water. None of that mattered, though. The man had caught me and saved me from certain death. He was my hero, my

savior, and...and what the hell was he doing swimming naked in the middle of Lake Erie in early March?

“You must be in shock,” the man said, swimming toward the shore. “There’s a jetty just over there where you’ll be able to climb up and find help.”

I was so enamored with the guy’s dulcet voice, not to mention being utterly turned on by the fact that he had somehow swum under the water to grab me and carry me back to the surface in his big, hot, muscular arms, that if I’d been capable of speech, all I would have been able to do was babble incoherently.

“You’re going to be okay,” the man said, swimming incredibly fast for someone who had an omega in his arms. “Get dry as soon as you can. Wrap up in, what do you all call it? A blanket. Wrap up and then get something warm to drink. Do you have someone who can look after you?”

I blinked, mesmerized by his face and lulled by his voice. “Um...I...oh.” Sense finally hit me, and I blinked one last time. “No, I just moved to Valleywood. I don’t know anyone here. I live by myself in the Olympus Apartments, right next to the VPAC.”

“An omega like you? All alone?” he said, as if that was a huge shock.

“I’m not alone now,” I said, cuddling into his tight embrace.

What the heck was I doing? The man was trying to swim me to shore and I was cuddling with him?

Just as I tried to force my brain to work and think of an easier way to hold my body so he could swim more efficiently, we’d reached the jetty he’d mentioned. It didn’t make a lick of sense. No one could swim that far that fast. And with his arms full.

“Here you go,” the man said, shifting me out of his arms and onto the ladder that stretched down into the water. “You’re going to be okay.”

I nodded. I was going to be okay now that I was in his arms.

The second he let go of me, all the warmth vanished. I started to shiver so suddenly that I could barely grasp the ladder to keep myself from sinking back into the lake. I couldn’t remember ever being so cold in my life.

“Whoa there!” someone called from above. “Stay right where you are. We’re coming to get you!”

I gasped and glanced up, spotting a couple guys who looked like they worked in one of the nearby warehouses. They rushed around like they were about to come rescue me.

I’d already been rescued, though. I was safe in the arms of my?—

I twisted to look down into the water, but my rescuer was gone. Like, completely gone without even a trace. The only ripples in the water were from me.

“You’re kidding,” I said, my teeth chattering as one of the men started to climb down the ladder to get me. “And I didn’t even ask his name.”

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### CHAPTER TWO

Lucas

I 'd been wanting to make the move from Blue Haven City up onto land for ages, and at last, the day that I was going to make that happen had come. I told myself that I wasn't sneaking out of the house or running away as I packed a few things in the rucksack I'd borrowed from my cousin Thelxiope, who routinely spent years or even decades in various places on land. I was merely making the long-overdue move to land that everyone in our family eventually made.

Not everyone was as happy about it as I was, though.

"And just where do you think you're going?" my mom asked as I attempted to swim past her to the door of our extensive house in the water suburbs of the city. She wasn't even looking at me as she worked on the tapestry she'd been weaving in her craft room off the main hall, but she knew I was there.

I sighed and let my shoulders drop. Telepathic communication was the norm underwater, where soundwaves didn't behave as they did on land, but I swore that sometimes my mom could wheedle her way into my sheltered thoughts as well.

"Mom, we've talked about this," I said, putting my rucksack aside and letting it float. "I'm going up to Valleywood to audition for that new production of The Little Mermaid."

My mom jabbed her needle into her work with an irritated sound then twisted to face

me.

“All the pitfalls and dangers of dry land aside,” she said, her frown sharp and disapproving, “I don’t see how you can want anything to do with a musical production that will most likely make a mockery of our kind.”

“Mom.” I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms. “There’s nothing wrong with the landies doing a show about The Little Mermaid . It’s a classic tale that has existed for hundreds of years. Even if nobody knows enough about our world to get the details right, it’s still going to be a lot of fun. I want to be a part of it.”

“The details ?” Mom was incredulous. “They don’t know the first thing about how we live. That movie they released the other day with the red-headed fish who idolized landies and collected their garbage was an insult to all of us.”

“They made that movie decades ago,” I reminded her, though it was hard for even me, as a more or less immortal being, to accurately keep track of time in such small increments. “The music was a lot of fun. And besides, with this new production, if I get a part, maybe I can convince them to be a little more accurate with the details and a little less landie-centric.”

“And expose our world and our way of life to everyone?” Mom gaped at me. “Leucosius, you know your father and I moved here to this remote lake to avoid people. There were hardly any landies living anywhere near here until just recently. The last thing I want you to do is give up all our secrets.”

I shook my head and rubbed my temples. Mom’s opinions weren’t the norm. A lot of the people who lived in Blue Haven City liked the advancements that had been made on the land nearby and thought we should have closer relations with Valleywood. A few landies had been granted special permission to come down and live within the magical air bubble that enclosed the heart of the city as well.

“It’s okay, Mom,” I said, swimming closer to her. “You know I’m way past the age when most of my cousins moved up to spend some time on land. I’m eager to see what the rest of the world has to offer.”

“You’re only six hundred years old, Leucosius,” Mom said. “You’re a baby.”

“That’s way longer than most landies ever live,” I fired right back. “And besides, I feel called to this show. Something about it sings to me.”

“That’s our job, not theirs,” Mom said, her eyes narrowed.

She was right. We were sirens. I was named after my great-grandmother, Leucosia, one of the original sirens from Greece. Our family had been singing to lure men to their deaths for millennia.

We didn’t do that anymore, though. Not to their deaths. That had all stopped in the Middle Ages, when more of the family had shifted from the winged siren branch to the aquatic siren branch. My parents’ generation had discovered that they had way more fun wooing sea captains and taking their treasure, especially books, or having torrid love affairs with them rather than killing them. My Great-Aunt Melusine had even charmed some guy in Seattle into putting her image on a coffee cup, and now everyone had to look at her all the time. Classic Great-Aunt Melusine.

Apparently, I was the product of Mom’s dalliance with Dad, a Viking sea captain trying to retrace Leif Erikson’s voyage to Greenland sometime in the fourteen hundreds, but I didn’t ask too many questions about that. I got squeamish over the idea of my mom seducing anyone, but apparently she got around in the High Middle Ages, which was why I had so many older half-brothers and sisters out there in the world. Whatever the case, my dad had chosen to be with her eternally, and she’d shared her magic with him, turning him into one of us.



Come to think of it, my paternity was probably a big part of the reason I had always been so keen to live with the landies for a while.

“It’ll be fine,” I reassured Mom, swimming over to kiss her cheek. “It’s just for a season. The play performances are for two weeks in late May. And that’s assuming I even get a part.”

“You’ll get a part, alright,” Mom said, turning back to her tapestry. “You’re a siren. As soon as you open your mouth, you’ll get whatever you want.”

She had a point. Getting whatever we wanted came with the territory of being a siren. But as the old saying went, a saying my family came up with, by the way, you had to be careful what you wished for, because you might just get it.

As I swam back to grab my rucksack, called out one last goodbye to my mom, then headed out the door, the irony of the fact that I was getting what I wanted by leaving home for an adventure on land was not lost on me. Most of the time, sirens were immune to each other’s songs, but since I was the youngest of my siblings, most of whom were hundreds of years older than me, I generally got what I wanted anyhow.

I swam straight up instead of going inside the bubble to walk around Blue Haven City for a while first. Valleywood wasn’t the only settlement that had grown a lot in the last hundred or so years. Mom and Dad might have picked Lake Erie to settle in because it was remote and quiet, but things had changed a lot since the fifteenth century. Even Blue Haven City was bustling and thriving now. The magic bubble had helped a lot to bring air-breathers there to settle.

Home wasn’t what made me swim as fast as I could toward the surface, though. My eagerness to get to land wasn’t even about *The Little Mermaid*, really, although I would have to fin it if I planned to get there as soon as auditions started so I could get a good place in line. What had me soaring through the water so fast I almost lost my

rucksack a few times was the hope that I might run into the adorable, omega landie I'd rescued from the lake the day before.

It wasn't the first time I'd run into a landie who had been in trouble. In fact, just a month or so before, I'd been on one of my sneaky, exploratory swims around the surface, and I'd run into a flashy, blond-haired guy named Phobos who had thought he would swim down to the bottom of the lake to...blow up? The guy had obviously been having some sort of episode, although if all the rumors I'd heard about Valleywood were true, maybe not. I'd warned him not to go anywhere near the city at the bottom of the lake if he was planning on blowing up. I guess he'd taken me seriously, because that was the last I'd heard of him.

I wasn't thinking about Phobos now as my head popped above the surface within sight of the bridge and the lakeshore. I was thinking that I'd been an idiot not to ask the cute omega's name. He'd felt so good in my arms as I'd swam him to safety, like he belonged there. It had been far harder to let him go, once we'd reached the jetty, than I ever could have imagined.

He'd mentioned something about having just arrived in Valleywood though and living in an apartment near the Valleywood Performing Arts Center. So maybe, if I was lucky, our paths would cross again.

There were several safe points along the lakeshore for merpeople to make the transition from lake to land. I headed to one of them, a building that looked like a restaurant that had closed down ages ago that stood on the end of a rickety pier. It was concealed by magic to look unstable, but in fact, it was incredibly sound and comfortable. It had a long, wide column that descended into the water. I swam up to that, showed the guard my ID, and as soon as I was cleared, I swam into the column and then up.

At the surface of the water, the column opened into a small, tastefully decorated

room. I was the only one there at the moment, although I knew of several merpeople who lived underwater and worked on land who commuted through checkpoints like that one every day. That made me happy, since I wasn't a fan of transforming from fins to legs with other people around. I liked my legs and, not gonna lie, I liked my balls and cock, but I didn't love them hanging out for everyone to see. Showing your legs for merpeople was like walking around topless on land. It was acceptable, but not in every situation.

I moved quickly from the water to one of the changing rooms off to the side, pressing the button for the forced air jets that would dry me and my belongings quickly. I still had to take everything out of the rucksack and shake it in the whirlwind-like air before it was warm and dry enough to get dressed. That was why a lot of merpeople kept lockers with dry clothes in one of the other rooms of the entry point.

As soon as I was presentable, I hiked my now dry and emptier rucksack over my shoulder and made my way out through the second checkpoint on the land side, showing my ID again. That was just a formality, and within minutes, I was strolling along the sidewalk, headed for the bus stop where I could catch a ride up to the VPAC. Not a single landie looked at me funny or turned up their nose, like they smelled something fishy.

That was why so many merpeople had moved near to Valleywood in recent years. Valleywood was a safe haven for all sorts of people, which meant for the most part, no one gave anyone else a second thought, no matter how odd they might have been. Being unusual myself, I could see things in the people on the bus with me and on the streets we passed.

One man standing on a corner waiting for someone had large, luminescent wings that he was stretching, but that I was fairly certain no one else could see. A woman I spotted briefly had curling horns. I could have sworn I saw someone else fly through the air as we reached the VPAC, but either the people out and about in Valleywood

couldn't perceive their differences or they just didn't care.

There was already a line in the lobby of the VPAC when I walked through the front doors, but it wasn't so long that I worried I wouldn't get a chance to audition. It was already the second day of auditions, the third day was for call-backs and not new auditions, so I figured that everyone who had dreams of stardom had either already taken their turn or were in the room right now, waiting.

"I'm here to audition for the chorus," I told the woman sitting behind the table where signs directed me to check in.

Her eyes went wide and her cheeks pinked at the sight of me. "The chorus?" she asked, lowering her glasses so that she could look at me above the frames. Her gaze raked my body, making me wonder if I'd picked the wrong clothes for the day. It had been a couple years since I'd made a jaunt up to land with a few friends. We came up for a day here and there just for fun. I knew fashions changed fast, but hopefully not that fast. Bellbottoms were still acceptable, right? I liked them because they reminded me of having a tail.

"Yes," I said. "Is there a problem?"

"Honey, with a face and a voice like yours, why aren't you auditioning for a lead?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I don't have a lot of experience."

She laughed. "Experience is nothing. Not for someone who was clearly born for the stage." She reached for one of the clipboards spread out on her table and said, "I'm putting you down to audition for the part of Triton."

I laughed before I could stop myself. Triton was a great-great-uncle or something on

my mom's side. He'd been at our house for Saturnalia a few centuries ago. He'd get a kick out of me playing him.

"Alright," I said with a shrug. "I'll give it a try."

"Great. Betty is going to love you," the woman said, writing something on a card then handing it to me.

"Betty?" I asked.

"Betty Hailstork. The casting director and out stage manager. She's Ben Hailstork, the director's, sister."

"Oh. Gotcha."

I winked and then stepped aside, following the directions of a few people with headsets that looked like production assistants. I had no idea how professional theater auditions worked or if this particular production was sticking to standard practices. I had the impression from their ad for an open call that they were doing things their own way.

Once I reached the door to the auditorium, a production assistant took my card and pointed me to an area at the front of the theater, telling me to take a seat. I assumed my name would be called when it was my turn to get up on the stage and sing. I was ready with a song, and even a short monologue, when the time came.

"Of course, this will be the fourth show in a row where I've played the lead," the dark-haired guy with a nose that seemed perpetually turned up said to the man sitting on the other side of him as I took a seat in the front row. "I played Prince Charming and the Wolf in Into the Woods last fall, and last spring, I was cast as Billy Flynn in Chicago."

“That’s nice,” the guy who was getting an earful said.

The one who was talking seemed to notice me. He turned and held out his hand. “Eric Keppler,” he said with a big smile full of veneers. “I’m getting the part of the prince.”

“Lucas Siren,” I said, shaking his hand and grinning back at him. “Have you already auditioned, then?”

“No,” Eric said with a shrug. “But I know I’ll get it. I always get the lead. I have the best voice of anyone in Valleywood.”

“Wow,” I said, trying not to be sarcastic. “I can’t wait to hear it.”

Eric looked past me, then stood with a smile. “And this is my buddy, Greg Wisnewski.”

“Um, hi,” Greg said, glancing confusedly between me and Eric.

“Greg is going to get the part of King Triton,” Eric informed me, throwing his arm around Greg. “All I have to do is tell the director how great he is and he’s a shoe-in.”

“Oh, nice,” I said. “I’m auditioning for Triton, too.”

Immediately, both Eric’s and Greg’s smiles dropped.

A second later, Eric took his seat again and gave me a sympathetic look. “I’m sure they’ll have a part for you in the chorus. Could you scoot over one?”

I wasn’t bothered at all by the man’s arrogance. People like that were all show. I got up and moved one seat over so Greg and Eric could sit next to each other. The two of them fell into a conversation that I clearly wasn’t invited to.

Auditions got started after a while. I enjoyed sitting through all of them, the good, the bad, and the exceptional. There were a lot of people to audition, so everyone basically only had enough time to sing a few bars of one song and deliver a monologue. I was so fascinated by the process that I watched everyone with a smile and applauded when they finished.

Eric and Greg snorted or scoffed at just about everyone and muttered nasty things to each other behind their hands throughout the whole thing.

I was surprised when Eric got up to sing that he was actually pretty good. He wasn't all bubbles and no teeth after all. There was a good chance that he was dead right when he said he'd get the part of the prince.

And then came my turn.

"Lucas Siren," a middle-aged woman who I assumed was Betty called out.

I stood, waved, and walked onto the stage using the small set of stairs not too far from where I was seated.

"Hi," I said as I walked across to stand on the taped X in the center of the stage. "I'm Lucas Siren, and I guess I'm auditioning for the part of Triton."

"Music?" the accompanist seated at the piano off to one side of the stage asked.

"Oh, I don't have any sheet music," I said quietly to him. "Do you know Beyond the Sea?"

The man nodded, then turned and started playing the opening bars.

I faced front again, and on cue, I turned on all my charm and started singing,

“Somewhere beyond the sea, somewhere waiting for me....”

I nearly stumbled. He was here. My omega was here.

He was at the very back of the auditorium and he stood up so fast that he knocked into a woman who was holding a stack of papers. The papers went flying everywhere, but my adorable, sweet omega didn't seem to notice. He lurched to the side, practically tripping over his feet as he made his way to the center aisle. He came a few steps closer to the stage, his face bursting with the biggest smile I'd ever seen, before checking himself and staying right where he was.

My heart suddenly felt so expansive and my lungs so tight I was worried I'd accidentally transformed back into a merman on dry land. It was him. It was actually him. The omega I rescued and let get away. I felt as happy to see him again as he looked to see me.

Fortunately for me, all that excitement and joy went straight into my song. “We'll meet just as before. We'll kiss beyond the shore....” I hoped and prayed with everything in me that we actually would.

It came as a shock when everyone in the auditorium burst into applause. I hadn't realized I'd stopped singing or that the song was over. I couldn't pull my eyes off my rescued omega. Forget the show, I just wanted to go to him and ask his name and see if he'd spend the rest of his life with me.

Or maybe just Friday night.

“Perfect. Absolutely amazing,” the man sitting at a table propped up in the middle of the house said, standing as he clapped. I assumed he was Ben, the director. “I don't think we need to see anything more. You've got the part.”



“What?”

The angry shout came from Eric, who launched to his feet and whipped to face the directors.

“We’ll continue auditions for Triton’s understudy, of course,” Ben said, a little flustered, like he was shocked he’d just handed me the part before auditions were over. I knew what had happened, though. He’d been sired.

“Thanks,” I said, stepping forward and climbing down from the stage right at the end of the central aisle. “I’ll take the part. Just let me know what I need to do and when.”

“Excellent,” Ben the director said. “I’ll send Janet around to get your information. Now, next up we have Greg Wisnewski?”

I tuned everything else out but my omega, who stood at the top of the aisle near the back of the house. His eyes were wide and alive as I strode up to meet him. By the time I was in front of him as Greg took to the stage, my heart was beating so fast I didn’t have room in my head for any other rhythm.

“Hi,” I said, wanting to touch the omega. That in itself was weird and a little worrying. I didn’t have reactions to people like this. Ever. “I see you made it home in one piece.”

“I got warm,” the omega said, eyes starry.

A moment later, he scrunched his face with embarrassment and shook his head.

“I mean, thank you for saving me the other day,” he said, his tone of voice much more down to earth. “I’m Zack, by the way.” He held out his hand to me. “Zack deMuse.”

“Hi, Zack. I’m Lucas,” I said. “Are you auditioning for the show?”

Zack shook his head. “No, I just got hired for the stage crew.”

“That’s great,” I said, ridiculously breathless. Zack and I would be working together for the run of the show. I might even get to see him every day.

I couldn’t think of anything else to say, and evidently neither could he. We just stood there, smiling at each other. It felt like a bubble of warm, tasty water was swirling around us and we were the only two people in the world.

“Um, excuse me. I hate to break this up, but I’m Janet, and I need to get things sorted with you.”

I dragged my eyes from Zack to find a no-nonsense woman with a headset and a clipboard waiting for me.

“Oh. Right,” I said, half turning toward her. My eyes wanted to stay on Zack. “I guess we’ll be seeing a lot of each other during rehearsals and things,” I said.

“Yeah,” Zack said dreamily. “I guess we will.”

“Oh, boy,” Janet said under her breath, rolling her eyes. “Come on, Romeo. Let’s get your info.”

I let Janet pull me away, but I kept looking at Zack for as long as possible. There was something special between the two of us already. Something that felt...fated.

Maybe the urge to spend some time with the landies wasn’t just about adventure after all. Maybe the Universe was trying to tell me something and lead me to my fated mate.

### CHAPTER THREE

Zack

Lucas Siren. That was his name. That was the name of the alpha who had miraculously rescued me from the freezing water. He was even more beautiful and hunky fully clothed and on land than he'd been in the water. If I didn't know any better, I would have said the man was a god.

Literally. Because I'd overheard someone during auditions casually mention something about gods walking the streets of Valleywood and the director of the Valleywood Performing Arts Center, Dion, actually being Dionysus, the ancient Greek god of wine, fertility, festivity, and, you guessed it, theater.

But that was silly, of course. Those gods were just myths from thousands of years ago. There was no such thing as old gods in the new world, only normal alphas, omegas, and betas.

Although I had seen a few things I couldn't explain in the week since I'd been in Valleywood, like when I'd spotted a lion roaming in one of the parks I'd found on a nighttime walk who, when I looked away and looked back, was suddenly a person.

I didn't really care about all the weird things that went bump in the night. All I cared about was seeing Lucas again when the entire new cast and crew of *The Little Mermaid* met up in the auditorium of the VPAC for our first day of rehearsal meeting on Monday afternoon.

“Welcome, everybody, welcome,” Betty, who had helped cast the show but was now the stage manager, greeted everyone from the front of the stage as we filed into our seats. “We’re so excited to have you here for this scintillating new production of an old classic. My brother, Ben, who is your fearless director, and I wrote this musical version ourselves.”

“We’re aiming for a family-friendly extravaganza that will also appeal to the adults in the audience,” Ben said, stepping slightly in front of his sister. “That’s why we’ve cast the brightest and best.”

Speaking of brightest and best, I sat a little straighter in my aisle seat and glanced around, looking for Lucas. I was happy to be a part of the production, even though I was just a stagehand. Sitting there with the rest of the cast and crew made me feel as if I’d fulfilled the purpose of the call that had brought me to Valleywood in the first place.

Well, almost.

When I spotted Lucas entering the auditorium looking perfectly sheepish for being a little late, my heart throbbed in my chest and every omega sense I had pinged to alertness. I might even have gotten a little wet in the seat, too. My sense that I was in the right place at the right time warmed to a perfect buzz of contentment, especially when Lucas easily picked me out of the crowd filling the seats and smiled.

Although he might have noticed me so quickly because I was on the aisle near the back of the room where he’d entered, watching for him.

“We have a rigorous production schedule ahead of us,” Betty was saying on the stage as I gave most of my attention to Lucas walking toward me. “This isn’t some community theater production. This is a professional enterprise. You will treat it as your job. We have vocal and dance rehearsals every day, and we’ll start running the

entire show, either here on the stage during the day until the show currently playing closes in two weeks, or in the rehearsal space.”

I barely registered what she was saying as Lucas reached my row and bent slightly to whisper, “Can I sit there?” pointing to the seat next to me.

“Yeah, yeah, sure,” I whispered back, heart pounding.

I stood awkwardly and pressed against my folding seat so Lucas could shimmy past me. Our bodies rubbed in all sorts of ways and his glorious ass was almost in my face the way I was scrunched over. He was a lot bigger than me in any case. I breathed in his salty scent which held hints of aged driftwood and what I could only describe as water, though I didn’t think water had a scent, until he shifted to sit in the seat beside mine.

I just stood there grinning at him for a moment before Ben’s voice from the stage reminded me that we were in a meeting, not a meet-up.

“Be prepared for some rewrites as we go along,” Ben said. “While the script is finished, some things have come to light that have prompted us to make a few adjustments.” He glanced to his sister.

“The stage crew has nothing to worry about,” she said, inching forward a bit. I blinked, noticing that Betty and Ben had come significantly closer to the front of the stage. It was like they were trying to one-up each other by moving in front of the other any time someone spoke. They were going to fall off the stage at the rate they were going. “The basic scenic design and lighting plan haven’t changed. As soon as we’re done here, I’ll give you each your assignments.”

“There are a few final things we need to cover,” Ben said, staring pointedly at Betty.

Lucas leaned close and whispered in my ear, “I’m sorry I got held up the other day. I wanted to talk to you more at auditions.”

Whatever final things Ben had to say could wait.

“I wanted to spend more time with you, too,” I said, gazing up at Lucas with stars in my eyes. I blinked and flushed, then blurted, “It’s okay to say that, right? It’s not weird of me to throw myself at you when I hardly know you?”

Lucas laughed. It was the most beautiful sound I’d ever heard. “Not when I feel the same way,” he whispered. “That’s how people get to know each other, after all. You meet casually?—”

“By being thrown off a bridge,” I added.

“And you hit it off,” Lucas went on without missing a beat.

“You meet again by chance,” I filled in.

“And hang out so you can get to know each other better?” Lucas asked, his eyebrows going up.

We had swayed closer to each other and our lips were less than a foot apart. I was loving it and said, “Who knows what might happen from?—”

“No relationships!” Ben snapped on the stage, shattering the moment.

Lucas and I both whipped to face the stage, our eyes wide in surprise and embarrassment, as if we’d specifically been caught breaking the rules.

Ben was still looking at Betty, though he cast a gaze out over the auditorium as well.

“No relationships during the run of the production,” he said. “I’ve been down this path too many times before and I’ve seen it ruin everything. If you’re already dating someone in the cast or crew, then fine. But I don’t want to see or hear about any of you getting involved. Showmances are the death of any good production, as far as I’m concerned, and I will fire you if I find out you’re diddling behind the scenes. No showmances !”

I swallowed hard and was pretty sure Lucas did, too. We even leaned away from each other to be on the safe side. I needed my part in the production, as lowly as it was, to fulfill whatever pull had brought me to Valleywood, and I would have felt terrible if Lucas was fired from his role as one of the leads because of me.

Funnily, Betty had her arms crossed and rolled her eyes at her brother’s pronouncements. She didn’t say anything about it directly when she loosened her arms, clapped her hands together, and said, “Right. Stage crew will meet with me in the rehearsal room and cast will meet with Ben on the stage to get your scripts and start learning songs.”

Everyone started to move, then, and the relative calm of the theater ramped up into noise and activity.

Lucas and I both stood. “I wasn’t expecting the rule about no showmances,” Lucas said, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly and wincing.

“Yeah, that’s a new one to me, too,” I said, my heart sinking even as my womb pulsed. Evidently, it hadn’t gotten the no showmances memo, no matter how loudly Ben had shouted it. “But he kind of has a point. Every show I’ve ever been involved in has had some sort of romantic drama behind the scenes.”

“Oh,” Lucas said, like he was disappointed. “I’m sorry if I came on too strong, then. I didn’t realize you didn’t like those things either.”

“No!” I said, raising my voice loud enough that a few people noticed and stared at me, including Eric, the guy playing the prince, and his buddy, Greg, who was Lucas’s understudy. “That’s not what I meant at all. I definitely like relationships and wouldn’t mind having one with you. I mean, I like you and would want to be friends regardless of the rules. I’d break all the rules for you. Oh, gosh, that sounds corny. I mean, I think it’s a silly rule and?—”

“It’s okay,” Lucas laughed. “I get it. And I feel the same way.”

The two of us stood there for a moment, staring at each other with googly eyes, until Eric snapped, “Hey, Loverboy. Ben wants us all on the stage.”

I didn’t like the sly, calculating look in the man’s eyes. He was the sort who would rat me and Lucas out for the sake of spite if given half a chance.

“Well, um, okay,” I said, stepping into the aisle and away from Lucas. Every cell in my body sighed with disappointment. “I’ll catch you later, then.”

“Oh, er—” Lucas held up a hand as I started to join the stream of stage crew heading to the rehearsal room. He let out a breath and dropped his hand, then said, “I’ll catch you later.”

“Not if I catch you first,” I said, and like a dope, I mimed casting a fishing line then reeling him in.

Lucas laughed, but he also winced a little, like the gesture meant something more to him.

“Come on, you,” Betty said, gesturing for me to go with her as she walked up the aisle past us. “I have a very special job for you.”



“You do?” I asked, giving Lucas one final wave over my shoulder before allowing Betty to march me along, out of the auditorium.

“Yep,” she said, handing me one of several clipboards she carried. “I’m designating you as official stage custodian.”

“Stage custodian. Right, right,” I said, nodding and looking at the clipboard. I blinked, frowned, and glanced up at her as we crossed through the lobby and headed down a hall to the rehearsal space. “What does a stage custodian do?”

Betty smiled. “You keep the stage swept, the trashcans emptied, and all the backstage surfaces clear of junk and debris.”

I was the production janitor.

Great.

“Great!” I said, feigning enthusiasm. “I can’t wait to get started.”

I didn’t have to wait to get started. As soon as we entered the rehearsal space, Betty pointed out where the trashcans were and the fact that they already needed emptying. Someone had spilled a soda in the corner as well, and even from a distance I could tell the sticky liquid would be a pain to clean up.

“Here’s the key to the broom closet in the hall,” Betty said as everyone settled into the room. “I’m entrusting you with this because I think you can handle the responsibility. You seem like a good kid.”

“I’m twenty-seven, actually,” I said.

Betty’s eyes went wide. “Are you sure?”

“I’m pretty sure,” I answered. “I mean, those first four or five years were a bit of a blur, but my grandma assures me that I was born twenty-seven years ago, even though my birth certificate was lost in a fire.”

Betty laughed, though I didn’t think it was all that funny, then slapped me on the back. “Well, you don’t look a day over eighteen to me.”

“I get that a lot,” I said.

That was the end of that conversation. Betty moved to stand where she could address everyone and I shifted to the back of the room to assess how bad the soda spill was.

It wasn’t a terrible beginning to a production, as far as things went. Sure, I was the janitor and I’d been forbidden to fraternize with Lucas, at least the way I wanted to, on pain of death or firing, but I was a part of something now. The urge within me had settled and was calm and content just being where I was and taking part.

Betty’s orientation was quick and informative. Most of the other techies already knew which jobs they were there to do. For them, the orientation was more of a meet-and-greet and a starting place before the sound people went off to do sound things and the lighting people to do lighting things.

I ended up going with Betty and the other stagehands back to the auditorium. After I cleaned up the rehearsal space, of course. Once there, we got a brief tour of the facilities, which were so far beyond anything I’d ever worked with before that it was staggering. After that was done, Betty thrust the broom that was leaning against the wall into my hands and gave me a big smile.

“Have at,” she said. “The production that’s running right now involves a lot of glitter, so you’ll probably spend a lot of time over the next few weeks sweeping it up.”

“Right. Glitter. No problem,” I said.

Glitter was the devil and sweeping it was a full-time job.

I didn’t mind, in the end, because Ben was working with the lead actors at the front of the stage as I got started with the swish-swish.

“We’ve already made one big change,” he was in the middle of saying as I pushed the broom to clear up the glitter. “After Lucas’s amazing audition the other day, we’ve decided to make the part of King Triton much bigger.”

Lucas smiled bashfully, which had my hole fluttering and getting slicky again, but not everyone was happy.

“What?” Eric demanded, lowering the script he’d been looking over with a jerk. “You can’t do that. The prince is supposed to be the main male lead.”

“The prince is still a major role,” Ben said, pinching the top of his nose. “But we want to showcase Lucas’s amazing voice. So now, not only will Triton be in the beginning of Act One and the end of Act Two, we’ve decided to add a bit where he goes up on land to search for his daughter. Are you okay with that?” Ben asked Lucas.

“Sure,” Lucas said, smiling and shrugging. “Whatever I can do to help the production.”

I paused to lean on my broom and just smile at him dreamily. Lucas really was a hero.

“This is outrageous!” Eric shouted so loudly that I startled, hit my face with the end of the broom handle, and dropped the broom entirely.

Everyone turned and looked at me. Lucas's face flushed as our eyes met, and I thought I might melt.

“What sort of cracker-jack production is this?” Eric demanded. “You change the show to make a nobody into the lead and you’ve hired clumsy, incompetent stagehands.”

“Hey!” Lucas defended me. “Zack isn’t incompetent.”

“Of course you’d defend him,” Eric said. He turned to Ben and said, “I think there’s something going on between those two.”

I gulped and scrambled to pick up my broom, loath to get Lucas in trouble.

As I bent over, I accidentally kicked the broom, sending it skidding across the floor toward the piano, which was still there from auditions. I chased after it and grabbed it, but as I stood, the broom unbalanced in my hands and swung around, knocking a large pile of sheet music from the piano bench.

I tried to reach for the pages to stop the inevitable catastrophe, but as I did, I turned with the broom held horizontally and brushed even more off. When I grabbed for those pages, I dropped the broom. It clattered to the floor, and when I reached for it and some of the sheet music, I stood too fast and knocked the piano bench over entirely.

The entire cast, except for Eric, and Ben were all laughing by the time I managed to straighten and breathe for a second to regain my equilibrium.

“Here, I’ll help you,” Lindsey, the woman playing Pearl, the little mermaid, said, rushing over to pick up sheet music with me.

“I’ll help, too,” Lucas said, getting up as well.

“Alright. While they help stop the chaos, I want the rest of you to divide into vocal ranges for warm-ups,” Ben told everyone else.

“This is totally unfair,” Eric continued to grumble as he stayed right where he was and flipped through the pages of the script. “I’m the lead, not him.”

“You think I should tell him that the play is called The Little Mermaid and not The Asshole Prince ?” Lindsey said to me and Lucas with a friendly smirk.

Despite my clumsiness, I felt good. Lindsey was cool, and I felt like she could be a friend.

But more than that, Lucas kept smiling at me as we gathered up the last of the sheet music. Cal, the accompanist who had played for auditions, came over and shooed us away from the piano so he could play for warm-ups, but that was the perfect excuse for Lucas and I to step aside, where people wouldn’t pay attention to us.

“Sorry about the mess,” I said once we were standing behind the group of actors warming up. “Things like that happen to me all the time.”

“It was funny,” Lucas said. His smile immediately vanished. “Is it okay if I say that? I don’t mean to offend you.”

“No, I like making people laugh,” I said. Then for some reason, I just had to add, “I have dreams of being a stand-up comedian someday.”

“That would be really cool!” Lucas said, smiling again.

“Lucas, would you care to join us?” Ben asked when he noticed Lucas wasn’t with

the others.

“Yep,” Lucas said, turning away from me.

I gripped my broom and prepared to go back to sweeping, but Lucas quickly turned back and leaned closer to me.

“Do you want to go out Friday night?” he whispered.

My heart caught in my chest and I could barely breathe. All I could do was nod.

“Great,” Lucas said, smiling. “I’ll catch you outside the theater and we can iron out the details. But now, I’ve got to sing.”

For a second, I could have sworn he was going to kiss me before he peeled away and jogged over to join the others.

I just stood there, my inner omega giddy with joy. I had a date with the hottest, most wonderful, most heroic alpha I’d ever met. Go me!

### CHAPTER FOUR

Lucas

Things moved faster on land than they did underwater. Not literally, of course. I could clock about fifty miles per hour when I was finning it flat-out in shallow water and the fastest recorded speed for a man on land was a little over twenty-seven miles per hour. When it came to relationship progression, though, landies moved so much faster than merpeople that it made my head spin.

“I’ve told you that I think this is a terrible idea, haven’t I?” my mom said as I talked to her on the phone while getting dressed on Friday night.

“Yes, Mom,” I sighed. “You’ve mentioned it about five times in the last ten minutes.”

I’d been so thrilled when we’d set up our underwater house to accommodate one of the special, magic-operated phones that allowed us to call people on land. It had seemed like such a great way to keep in touch with cousins and friends who were spending some dry time. Now, however, I was beginning to regret it.

“You’ve only just met this boy,” Mom said, impatience in her voice. “He’s practically a fetus.”

“Zack is twenty-seven, Mom,” I said, shrugging into the nice suit jacket I’d picked out especially for this date. It was tailor-made for alphas with broad shoulders and a long torso, and I thought I looked great in it. I especially liked that even though the jacket was grey, the lining was a pretty sea-green.

“All landies are babies,” Mom complained. “They only live for about three days anyhow. I don’t want you to get your hopes up or your heart broken.”

“Dad is only a little bit older than I am and he started out as a landie,” I reminded her. “There are ways to make humans last more than the blink of an eye.”

“Your father is a special case,” Mom said. “He’s my fated mate.”

Dad must have been standing right there with her, listening in to the call, because I heard a sort of humming, cutesy sound that happened when the two of them kissed.

“Maybe Zack is my fated mate,” I said, a spark of inspiration hitting me. “Did you ever think about that? Maybe he’s the whole reason I felt compelled to spend some time up here.”

In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I believed it was a distinct possibility.

“There’s something special about Zack,” I went on, leaning against the bureau in my bedroom and staring dreamily at the painting of the lakeshore on the opposite wall. The sky was the color of Zack’s eyes. “He’s twenty-seven, but he only looks about eighteen.”

“Leucosius!” Mom scolded. “Are you cradle-robbing?”

“No, Mom,” I huffed impatiently. “I’m just saying that I get a certain vibe from Zack, and sometimes immortals or people who are long-lived look way younger than they are for a long time. Heck, I’m six-hundred-and-twelve and I look like I’m maybe thirty.”

“All I’m saying is that you should be careful of your heart around landies,” Mom said. “Yes, your father and I have made things work?—”



“Have we ever,” I heard Dad’s frisky voice with it’s antique, Scandinavian accent interrupt.

“—but we’re outliers,” Mom continued. “There are far more stories of disaster when one of us tries to be with one of them than there are success stories.”

“It’ll be fine, Mom,” I said, pushing off from the bureau and checking my watch. I had to meet Zack downstairs in three minutes. “Oh,” I added with a grin. “Did I mention Zack is an omega and that he smells ripe?”

I ended the call with a laugh, deliberately teasing my mom and giving her something else to worry about.

Sure enough, before I could even leave my apartment, my phone was ringing again.

“I know, Mom,” I answered it. “I’m just teasing you. I’ll be careful.”

“You’d better be,” Mom said, probably boiling the water around her, she sounded so mad. “The last thing we need is another baby in this family.”

I laughed as I left my apartment. “Now I know you’re lying,” I said. “You’ve wanted more grandkids ever since Kelpie turned a hundred.”

Mom sighed. “Fine,” she said. “Go enjoy your date with the landie. But don’t get yourself or anyone else in trouble.”

“I won’t, Mom, I swear.”

I said those last words as I descended the stairs into the lobby of my apartment building. I’d taken a furnished apartment in the same building near the VPAC where Zack lived, half by accident, but half because I remembered him saying something

about living nearby. It was incredibly convenient for meeting up, and for pretending we just happened to run into each other, in case anyone from the production, like, say, Eric, decided they wanted to tell on us for having a relationship.

“What does your mom not want you to do?” Zack asked as he bounced his way over to me, his expression bright with promise. “She doesn’t want you to date me,” he answered his own question right away. “She doesn’t think I’m good enough for you or that I’ll be a bad influence.”

I laughed, even though he was mostly right. “My mom doesn’t even know you,” I said, stopping in front of him.

I wanted to greet him with a kiss or hold his hand as we walked out the door at the very least. It was uncanny. We’d only met a week before, but I already felt like we’d known each other a lifetime. I felt like more than that, but I wasn’t about to freak Zack out by telling him so soon.

“Once she gets to know you, she’ll love you,” I went on.

Zack blinked then blushed. “You’re already planning to introduce me to your parents?”

I flushed hotter. “I guess I did sort of imply that, didn’t I,” I said, deliberately not answering the question. “Are you ready to step out?”

Take things slow, Leucosius , I scolded myself. You don’t actually know that he’s your fated mate. He might just be cute .

I totally knew.

“So is there anyplace special you’d like to go for dinner?” I asked as we left the

building and started randomly walking.

Zack shrugged. "I don't know. I just moved here myself."

"I don't really know the area either," I said, swaying subtly closer to him. The urge to take his hand was almost overpowering. "I bet we'll find something if we keep walking this way."

"Yeah, I'm sure we will," Zack said, gazing soporily up at me.

It didn't bother me at all that he was clearly so smitten. I was, too. It didn't matter what my mom or anyone else said, sometimes you just saw someone and knew the two of you were meant to be together forever. That's how things had been with Mom and Dad. Especially after the shipwreck.

"So you're from Philadelphia?" I asked as we made a turn onto one of the nicer streets filled with restaurants and shops.

"Yep," Zack said. "I live with my grandma, which I know sounds weak for someone my age. But Grandma and I have a ton of fun."

"I don't think it's odd for you to live with family at all," I said, moving close enough to him to brush the back of his wrist with my knuckles. "Wanna know a secret?"

"Yes!" Zack answered enthusiastically.

I smiled and said, "I still live at home, too, and I'm way older than you."

"You can't be that much older than me," Zack said.

Wanna bet?

“Where is home anyhow?” Zack asked, scanning the nearby restaurants for one that looked right.

I tensed for a second. How was I supposed to answer that?

I opted for as close to the truth as I could get without freaking the landie out.

“Oh, that way.” I gestured toward the lake.

“Near the lake?” Zack asked.

“Very near the lake.”

“Cool,” Zack said. “I love the water. I always have. We used to go down the shore when I was a kid. Not to Atlantic City, mind you. Grandma always said it was too commercial there and she despises the guy who owns so much property there. We used to go to Cape May. I can’t tell you how many times Grandma told me that it used to be a happening place in her heyday.”

“I’m glad that you love the water,” I said, meaning it more than Zack would know. “I love the ocean. Lake Erie is nice, but it’s a little provincial. I’d love to move out into the Atlantic someday.”

“That sounds amazing,” Zack sighed happily, totally missing my implication that there were cities out there. “Hey, how about we eat at that seafood place across the street to celebrate our mutual love of all things beyond the sea.”

I couldn’t stop myself from beaming from ear to ear. I loved Zack. I mean, I was head over heels for him already, despite the fact that it made zero sense, and I was ready to do whatever he wanted me to.

“I’m all for it,” I said.

I was all for it right up until we crossed the street and entered the tastefully decorated seafood restaurant and saw an old family portrait that had been painted in the eighteen-nineties hanging on the wall. And if that wasn’t enough, the hostess who came forward to greet us was my cousin Frisia.

“Well hello there,” Frisia said, smiling at me like she hadn’t seen me in ages. It wasn’t really ages. She’d been there for the family reunion in nineteen-seventy-three. “Fancy seeing you up here.”

I panicked a little and waved my hand, then touched my finger to my lips.

Frisia froze with her mouth open for a second, then said, “Right. Welcome to Fathoms Below. Table for two?”

“Yes,” I said.

“We’re on a first date,” Zack said, looking beyond thrilled.

“A first date?” Frisia looked at me as if she was both impressed and knew I was in a heap of trouble. I winced a little, but she laughed and said, “I have just the table for you. Right this way.”

I was happy to move away from the family portrait, just in case Zack noticed it. At least, I was happy until she took us to a shell-shaped table on a small dais with raised seat backs. It was very cozy and romantic and would have been wonderful...if not for the eighteenth-century painting of my mom flirting with my dad, who was dressed as a pirate, as he leaned over the edge of his ship’s railing. Worse still, the little boy mermaid clinging to one of her fins in the painting was me.

“Can I get you anything to start?” Frisia asked. “Water? Wine? Seaweed juice?”

“Seaweed juice? Bleh!” Zack said, making a face.

“Trust me, it’s not as bad as it sounds,” I said. I turned to Frisia with a frown and said, “Just water to start.”

“Fresh or salt?”

“Excuse me?” Zack asked.

“She’s kidding,” I laughed nervously, then told her, “Fresh.”

“Gotcha,” Frisia said, then winked and walked off.

“I’ve never heard of anyone serving seaweed juice before. Or salt water,” Zack said as he scanned the first page of the menu. “It must be a Valleywood specialty.”

“Must be,” I said, looking quickly at the menu myself.

Clearly, the restaurant catered to merfolk who were up from the bottom for a night out, or who lived on land and missed home-cooking. Obviously, we did all our cooking underwater with magic and we had an entirely different cuisine, but it looked as though whoever had established the restaurant had the necessary facilities to make whatever one of us could order.

“I think I’m going to be boring and just get the Caesar salad,” Zack said, laying his menu down. “With chicken, of course.”

“Of course,” I said.

I peeked at his menu and noticed it was different than mine. Frisia had given me a menu that must have been for merpeople and one to Zack that was clearly for landies. I wondered if she was trying to send me a message.

“I’ll probably get a salmon burger,” I said, closing my menu and putting it down, logo page up.

“Not a thick, juicy cheeseburger?” Zack asked, a teasing twinkle in his eyes. “I would think that a big, sexy alpha like you would want to wrap his hands around some buns and meat.”

He blinked suddenly, then went bright pink and slipped down, like he would slide under the table.

“Oh, god! That came out all wrong,” he said, hoarse with embarrassment. “I was not trying to hit on you, I swear.”

I laughed. “Please hit on me,” I said. “I love it.”

My gaze drifted up to the painting of my parents. Dad always liked it when Mom hit on him, too. I guess I was just as much like his side of the family as Mom’s.

“I don’t eat land meat,” I said before the moment could get too embarrassing.

“You don’t eat what?” Zack said, straightening again and looking at me curiously.

“I mean, I’m a pescatarian. I don’t eat red meat or chicken.”

“Oh. Gotcha,” Zack said. “Yeah, I keep hearing all these things about red meat being bad for your heart. I wouldn’t want anything to go wrong with my heart.”

He leaned one elbow on the table and looked at me with a moon-eyed expression.

He was so adorable that I could have eaten him for dinner. His scent was amazing, too. It was like sea spray and waterlilies, which was another, telling sign that we might be fated mates. Why else would he smell like my favorite things?

Frisia came back to take our orders, which meant Zack and I had to behave.

“So you’ve never lived anywhere other than Philadelphia?” I asked once she was gone.

Zack shook his head. “Nope. I don’t mind, though. I’ve traveled a little, mostly to Greece and the Mediterranean. That’s where Grandma’s family is from.”

“Oh,” I said, more curious by the second. “My mom’s family is from the Mediterranean, too. I used to spend holidays there back in the fifteen—er, um, back when I was around fifteen.”

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Zack said, completely missing my slip. “I wonder if we were ever there at the same time.”

“Probably not,” I said, grinning and reaching for some of the seaweed bread Frisia had brought to the table. “I haven’t been back in a long time. I’d love to go again someday soon.”

“Maybe we could go together,” Zack suggested, reaching for a piece of bread as well.

Our fingers touched, and Zack blushed. It was the most gorgeous thing I’d ever seen.

“I’d like that,” I said, reluctantly pulling my hand away from his. “Especially since we both have roots there.”



“I’d love to discover more about my family,” Zack said, a little more seriously. “I don’t really know much, to be honest. My mom left when I was almost too young to remember her. My grandma always said she was a free spirit who needed to travel the world, bringing inspiration to artists in every land. I assume that means she’s an artist’s model or something.”

“You don’t know?” I asked.

Zack shrugged as he chewed on his bread, making a curious face at its unique taste. “I haven’t heard from her since I was a kid.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?” I asked. I might have had an unconventional family, but we were all pretty close. Even cousins, like Frisia, who brought our supper out just at that moment.

I was impatient to get through the whole, “Here you go, I hope you enjoy it, can I get you anything else” routine that Frisia seemed to drag out so she could grin at the two of us a little longer. Things about Zack weren’t exactly adding up. I needed to know more, but I was starting to form a theory about all the things that Zack didn’t appear to question about himself.

“What about you?” Zack asked once we were settled, Frisia was gone, and we’d started eating. “Are you close with your parents?”

I wondered if he was deliberately not answering my question or if he didn’t remember I’d asked it. He did seem a little nervous now, even though he hadn’t been before. His flush hadn’t gone away and he was squirming as if he was subconsciously uncomfortable. His scent had increased, too, like he was sweating a lot.

“I am close to my family, actually,” I said with what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “Mom is the matriarch of the family, of course. We all pretty much do what she

says.”

“Is she an alpha?” Zack asked, sitting straighter with interest.

“No, she’s just, er, Mom.”

I had no idea how to explain to Zack that merpeople biology worked a little differently than landies, or that I got my alpha genes from my dad’s side of the family. That was a can of anemones I wasn’t ready to open.

“What did she say when you told her you’d gotten one of the leads in The Little Mermaid ?” Zack asked, tugging at his collar.

“She wasn’t really happy,” I confessed.

“What?” Zack blurted, reaching for his ice water. “How could she not be happy that you scored a lead role in a major musical?”

“She didn’t want me to come up here to audition,” I said. “I don’t think she approves of, um, theater.”

“Come up here?” Zack asked. “But I thought you said you lived by Lake Erie. You didn’t come up from the South?”

I reached for my water, too. I needed to buy some time to think about whether I wanted to confess everything to Zack straight away or let the truth come out in time.

“It’s a bit of a long story,” I said once I’d finished swallowing. I decided to try a little truth and see where that got me. “When I say I live in Lake Erie, I mean in the lake.”

“What, like on a houseboat?” Zack asked breathlessly.

I frowned. Something wasn't right, and it had nothing to do with the conversation. Zack had gone as pink as coral and a fine sheen of sweat had broken out on his forehead.

"Zack, are you alright?" I asked, reaching across the table to take his hand, which twitched as he rested it on the table.

As soon as I touched it, I knew exactly what the problem was. I reacted so strongly to him that I was surprised the zipper on my trousers didn't pop.

"Oh, god," Zack gasped. "I didn't think it was possible. I thought they just had the heating up too high or something. I'm not due for another two months."

I sucked in a breath and Zack's delicious, rich heat scent with it. I turned and searched desperately for Frisia, but she was busy with other customers.

"I think we need to get out of here and go home right now," I said.

"No!" Zack wailed, sinking in on himself a little. "This is so embarrassing. This can't be happening to me. I can't put all this on you. I still have months to go."

"No you don't, guppy," I said, ignoring the fact that he would find the term of endearment strange. "You're going into heat right now."

### CHAPTER FIVE

Zack

Q uestion. What is the single most embarrassing thing that could happen to you on your first date with the gorgeous, talented, hunky, heroic alpha of your dreams?

Never mind, because that's not even a question. Going into a super-intense heat in the middle of a nice restaurant when it isn't anywhere close to your time is the answer.

"Come on. Let's get you out of here," Lucas said in the kindest and also sexiest voice I'd ever heard. He stood, glanced around for our server, then shifted so he could slip an arm around me to help me out of the booth.

Because I suddenly felt so hot and weak and rubbery, not to mention wet, that I couldn't make my legs work to stand on my own.

"This is humiliating," I moaned as Lucas got me to my feet. At least my body started to work again once I was standing and had started moving. It was working a little too well, as the bulge in my jeans as Lucas whisked me to the front of the restaurant showed. "I'm so sorry. This has never happened to me. Usually, I'm as regular as clockwork. I don't just randomly go into heat around complete strangers like this."

Lucas laughed gently, like he felt my pain and didn't hold it against me. I loved the sound of his laughter, no matter what had caused it. "Don't worry about anything," he said. "These things happen. It just means that you're a normal, functioning adult."

I groaned, because that sounded both embarrassing as hell and completely sexy.

“Uh-oh. Looks like someone’s had a reaction to...something,” our server said, catching up with us at the door. She glanced up at Lucas with a teasing sparkle in her eyes that had me almost offended.

“Sorry to eat and run,” Lucas replied to her cheeky comment with a sheepish grin. “Sometimes the current changes unexpectedly.”

I blinked. Was that some sort of reference to how wet I was getting? Because the flow was rushing strongly in one direction, and if we didn’t get back to my apartment quickly, I would leave a snail-trail of slick on the streets of Valleywood.

“I can come back later and pay for our dinner,” Lucas said as our server rushed forward to hold the door for us.

The server waved the idea away. “Don’t worry about it. The meal is on us. That’s what family is for, after all.”

It took my heat-addled brain until we were out on the cool, dim street to wrap itself around what the woman had said.

“Family?” I asked as we walked along, fast enough to compete in some sort of walking marathon. “Are you related to our server?”

“Um,” Lucas answered. Even in the muted streetlight, I could tell he was blushing.

Or maybe that was the almost irresistible heat I could feel wafting from him. I was going to get my poor, heat-loosened ass pounded so hard by Lucas, I just knew it. And I didn’t mind one bit. In fact, the thought that my hormones had sent Lucas into rut made me pick up my pace so Lucas was chasing after me.

“Yeah, that was my cousin, Frisia,” he said, slightly breathless, as we turned onto the street that would take us back to the apartment.

I glanced quickly to him, then nearly ran straight into a lamppost. Once I was in better control of my sense of direction, I asked, “Did you know your cousin worked at the restaurant when we decided on it?”

“No,” Lucas answered. “I haven’t seen Frisia or her branch of the family in decades.” When I glanced at him, he bumbled on with, “I mean, it feels like decades.”

I had the weirdest sense that he’d meant it literally. But that didn’t make any sense. Decades ago, Lucas would have been a baby, or nonexistent.

We reached the entrance to our apartment building, and who Lucas’s cousins were and how long it had been since he’d last seen them didn’t matter. I was hit by an intense heat wave as we started up the stairs. It was so strong that I wobbled and had to grab the railing as slick pooled and started to soak through the seat of my jeans.

“Whoa, whoa, it’s okay,” Lucas said, holding his arms out and moving close, like he was spotting me in some big gymnastics move. I wanted to do some big gymnastic moves with him as soon as possible. Naked gymnastics. “I’ve got you.”

“It’s never been this strong before,” I panted as he practically pushed me up the stairs, his arm around my shoulders. “Maybe something happened and because it’s so early it’s extra strong?”

“Yeah, it might be something like that,” Lucas said, his voice strained and breathless.

He was feeling it too, I could tell. I kind of felt like he knew why we were both reacting so strongly, but he wasn’t sharing.

Not that I wanted him to share. Not his thoughts and feelings, at least. As soon as we reached my apartment door, I fumbled with the key, threw open the door, then pulled him inside. Once I'd slammed the door shut behind us and dropped the keys on the floor, I flung myself at Lucas, actually leaping into his arms and wrapping my legs around him like a particularly horny octopus, and smacked my mouth into his.

And bless him, instead of freaking out and trying to push me away so he could run, Lucas gripped me tightly, kissing me back, and gripping my butt so he could balance me against him.

His hand was probably soaked in seconds from the sheer volume of slick it felt like my body was producing. It wanted him bad. I'd been through years' worth of heats already and I'd had a good time with the friends or professionals I'd hired to take me through. Grandma wasn't a strong believer in heat suppressants, so I'd always just gone with it and had a good time.

This was next level.

"I have to get these clothes off," I panted, though I made no effort to slip out of Lucas's arms and stand on my own two feet so that I could actually take them off. "I need you inside me. I need you to pump me full of your alpha cum."

Lucas made a sound of agreement, but held me closer and devoured my mouth instead of making a move to get us naked. It was nice, but I needed so much more than nice.

I finally found the energy to let my legs drop and to push away from Lucas so that I could fumble with my clothes. I managed to get my jacket and shirt off and to unzip my jeans to free my erection, but after that, my interest switched elsewhere.

Lucas had taken off his jacket and was just pulling his shirt off over his head,

revealing his broad, smooth, incredibly muscular chest. The power in those muscles had me weak in the knees and filled my head with all sorts of erotic images of him using me however he wanted to fulfill his alpha urges.

And in the middle of that, my imagination conjured up a flash of fantasy about the two of us bobbing around in the ocean somewhere with two little mermaid kids and my belly round with another one.

Okay, maybe I should have ordered something other than the Caesar salad. The anchovies in the dressing must have been bad, because as hot and appealing as the image was, it was fantastical.

I immediately forgot it all when Lucas tossed his shirt aside and undid the fastenings of his trousers. That was all I needed to send my heat wave flaring into an inferno. I was so desperate that I groaned and dropped to my knees.

I didn't pause or think or ask if Lucas minded that I eat his cum as dessert to go with our truncated dinner. I tugged his trousers down to his thighs, scooped my hand under his full, alpha balls to give everything more room for us both to work with, then I gripped the base of his cock and licked my way from its root to its tip.

"Neptune's balls!" Lucas gasped as I closed my mouth around his tip and slathered my tongue over it. He gripped a handful of my hair and I swallowed him as deeply as I could without a warm-up. And then he went and said, "Your apartment is a mess, Zack."

I stopped with his cockhead almost touching the back of my throat, then pulled back quickly and looked up at him. "I'm fresh into the most intense heat wave of my life, on my knees with your cock in my mouth, desperate to have you coat my insides with the one thing I need more than air, and you're telling me I'm a slob?"



Lucas laughed, which caused another gush of slick to dampen the loose seat of my jeans. “No, sorry, I didn’t mean it like that,” he said, brushing his fingers through my hair. “I’ve just never seen an apartment so cluttered with stuff when someone’s lived in it for such a short time.”

I glanced over my shoulder, looking around at the mess. It was true, I’d had to buy a bunch of necessities in a hurry, and with the rehearsal schedule the way it was, I hadn’t had much time to put everything away. There were empty grocery bags tossed over the sofa, cans and boxes of food out on the counters in the kitchen, and Lucas hadn’t even seen my thrift store haul that was spread out over my bed and across the dresser in the bedroom yet.

Actually, I wanted him to see the stuff in the bedroom. That would mean we were in the bedroom and Lucas could scratch the fiery itch inside me that desperately needed scratching.

“If you think this is messy, you should see my bed,” I said, scrambling to stand with the intent on heading straight there.

I made the mistake of trying to take my jeans off as I stood, which turned into me tripping myself while standing more or less still. The wet denim got tangled around my knees, and when I bent slightly to push my jeans off entirely, I pitched forward and lost my balance.

Lucas caught me, but with my momentum the way it was, I ended up bent forward over his arm, my soaking ass in the air and my jeans tangled around my ankles.

I had absolutely no problem with that position whatsoever.

Lucas breathed in deeply. I could practically feel the intensity of his reaction to my hormones. “Okay,” he said in a rough voice. “Cleaning up can wait. We’ve got more

important things to do.”

“Yes!” I gasped, still draped over his arm as he lifted me and carried me to the bedroom. “Me! I’m important things! Do me!”

Lucas laughed, then made a growling, almost bubbling sound as we crossed into my bedroom.

“Come on, Zack,” he said as he flicked on the lights with one hand while still holding me in his other arm. “Look at all this. You do know what a closet is, don’t you?”

“Would it get you all hot and bothered to watch me fold my clothes and put them away?” I asked, wiggling out of his hold long enough to finally kick my jeans off all the way. I bent to pick them up with the intention of folding them sexily, but they were way too destroyed for me to try.

“Am I going to have to teach you how to put your things away?” Lucas asked, walking over to my bed and picking up one of the shirts laying there. He folded it quickly, then folded two more. “It’s not that hard.”

“Yes, it’s definitely that hard,” I said, my gaze dropping to his massive, erect, alpha cock as it stuck out over the fly of his trousers.

Lucas laughed again, carrying the pile of folded shirts over to the bureau and putting them in one of the drawers. “You know what I mean.”

“I do,” I said with slightly more seriousness, which was the limit of what I could manage just then. “But I also know that I’m dripping and desperate, and if I don’t have you buried deep in my hole, knocking on the door of my womb, like, right now , I think I might lose my mind.”

Lucas turned back from the bureau, looking sympathetic. And blazing hot. And just as hungry for wicked, dirty, heat sex as I was. “I guess this could wait,” he said, his voice hoarse, as he went back to the bed.

He gathered the rest of the clothes there into his arms and carried them all over to dump on top of the bureau. As he did that, I gripped the top of the bedcovers and pulled them down so vigorously that pillows went flying. We weren’t going to need those pillows anyhow.

I stretched out over the bed to push one of them out of the way, and while I was in that vulnerable position, Lucas came up behind me and grabbed me around the waist, yanking me back to him. The gesture pushed the length of his cock right up through the soaking crease of my ass.

I let out a helpless cry and went limp in his arms as Lucas growled with alpha possessiveness. “Mmm,” he hummed, breathing in my scent as I quivered in his arms. “You sure you’re ready for this? I can get a little aggressive when I’m with an omega in heat.”

I felt jealous and possessive of him and immediately hated every other omega he’d ever been with for about point-two milliseconds before inching my legs farther apart and tilting my hips up to him.

“I don’t mind,” I panted. “I like a little aggression. Fill me up and make me yours.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have issued such a broad and raw invitation to someone I barely knew, but I couldn’t help myself. And it didn’t feel like I barely knew Lucas. It felt as though I’d been searching for him my entire life, and now that I had him, my body couldn’t wait to be utterly ravished by him.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Lucas rumbled, reaching down to stroke his hands

along my thighs.

I was teetering on the verge of a witty comeback as he gripped the backs of my thighs and used his incredible strength to lift my legs up and spread them wide. He maneuvered me on the edge of the bed like a frog, stroked a hand down my back, then positioned himself perfectly to thrust in hard.

I cried out loud enough to alarm whoever was living in the next apartment. I loved every thick, demanding inch of Lucas as he rocked deeper and deeper into me. It was amazing that he hadn't taken his time or soothed and prepped me before charging in to get what he wanted. I wanted all of that and then some. I wanted to feel like his vessel, like his property to do whatever he wanted with.

I whimpered with pleasure as he adjusted his position and flung one arm around my torso to clamp me close, like I might slip away from him otherwise. It was so possessive and restrained me to the point where all I could do was allow him to take me. It was so good that I started to come almost right away.

Lucas hissed some sort of wordless expletive against the side of my face as he continued to pound into me. "So good," he gasped. "I can feel you. So good, my mate."

"Yes, yes!" I shouted in reply as my first burst of orgasm shifted into a second round. I adored the fact that omegas more or less turned into orgasm machines during heat and that alphas could keep up with their pace for the duration.

"You want my seed in you?" Lucas asked, his voice dark and demanding and...in my head? "You want me to fill your womb with my babies?"

"Gods, yes!" I gasped. Not that he could actually impregnate me. Grandma might not have been a fan of heat suppressants, but I was a big fan of birth control pills. "Fuck a

baby into me!”

Lucas growled and picked up his pace, and then he bit my shoulder as he started to come.

I couldn't describe exactly what it was, but his seed felt different in me. It was...sparklier? I knew that in some cultures, alphas bit their mates to mark and claim them during heat sex, but that was a tiny detail at the back of my head. The only thing I really cared about in the moment was the pulsing bliss of being filled and knotted by my dream alpha as my body turned into one long, screaming orgasm.

I think it lasted forever. Maybe. It lasted a long time. I was completely consumed by pleasure and excitement and a deep sense that everything in the entire world would be right now. Lucas was that good.

When I regained some semblance of thought, the two of us were snuggled together the right way around in my bed. Lucas still had me knotted as he spooned me with his big, hot, sweaty, body.

“That was incredible,” he panted, stroking his hands over my body. “I’ve never done it like that before, but it was awesome.”

I opened one eye and peeked up at him over my shoulder. “Never done it like that?”

“With legs,” Lucas said sleepily.

He then tensed and stammered, “Um, er, I mean with your legs positioned like that before.”

It was a weird answer, but I was too tired and blissed out to give it much thought.

“Well, that was only one heat wave,” I said, snuggling into him and squeezing around his cock, which was still knotted inside me. “I usually go for the full three days, so you’ve got all the time in the world to do it with my legs however you want them.”

“Good to know,” Lucas said with a slightly nervous laugh.

He must have been concerned about the two of us missing rehearsals. That had to be where his nerves came from. We’d be fine, though. Since it was a professional production and we were at the beginning of rehearsals, we had the weekend off. Timing wise, there was a good chance we could just fuck all weekend and be back at rehearsal on Monday and no one would be the wiser.

I would be the wiser, though. I would be so much wiser. Because the prospect of spending the weekend in heat with my alpha hero was pure and utter bliss, and I intended to milk it, and him, for all it was worth.

### CHAPTER SIX

Lucas

Following my instinct to spend some time on land was the best thing I'd ever done in my six hundred-plus years of life. If I hadn't been brave enough to take that leap, I never would have met Zack. And the way things were going, Zack was far and away the most amazing person on the planet, land or water.

"More, more!" he panted as I pistoned in his sloppy, wet hole. "Oh, gods, more!"

He was on his back under me, his ankles up around his ears as he held himself open for me. I loved that position. I'd almost let slip to Zack the night before that I'd never had sex in land form before, and frankly, I was starting to question why I hadn't.

Land sex was steaming hot. With Zack on his back under me, I was able to see everything, watch everything. I loved Zack's contorted sex face. I loved the way his mouth stayed open, his lips red and puffy from sucking my cock earlier, like a fish who wanted to be a bird so badly that he was flopping and gasping on the shore.

That shouldn't have turned me on so much but it absolutely did. The other thing that did it for me so deeply that I tipped my head back and let out a subsonic shout of ecstasy as I spewed jet after thick jet of cum straight up against the closed mouth of his womb were Zack's naked legs. They were pink and shapely, and just about the sexiest thing in existence all splayed for me.

Seeing someone's naked legs as a merperson was like getting a quick glance of nipple

underwater. It wasn't technically obscene and people wore revealing clothing down there all the time, but it was still a major turn-on.

As my knot formed and the last of my load emptied, I slipped a hand along Zack's straining cock to give him the relief he needed. He cried out and bucked into my knot, sending me into another quick orgasm as his own cum painted his already crusty belly and chest.

"So good...I can't...never like this...with anyone else," Zack panted as I relaxed and lowered myself so we could cuddle together on the messy sheets. We would definitely need to do laundry before too long. I was glad all the units in our building came with washers and dryers.

"It's never been like this for me either," I panted, then scattered light kisses over Zack's sweaty face.

"It shouldn't be this good," Zack said, still trying to catch his breath as he lazily stroked his hands up and down my much bigger body. "I never dreamed it could be this good."

"It's because we're fated mates," I threw out there off-handedly, even though I now believed it with every fiber of my being.

"What?" Zack opened his eyes wide and stared at me.

Uh-oh. I'd messed up.

Or maybe not.

"We're fated mates, guppy," I told him stroking the side of his face gently. "Can't you feel it? I think we were made for each other."



“Yeah, but fated mates is just a fairy tale, right?” The look of longing in Zack’s eyes, like he wanted me to tell him that of course fated mates were real, why would he ever doubt it, squeezed my heart.

So of course I said, “Of course fated mates are real. Why would you ever doubt it?”

Zack broke into a smile, like he’d heard both my thoughts and the actual words. “If ever I was going to believe in something so pure and beautiful, I would believe it with you,” he said, resting his hand on the side of my face.

A moment passed and we just lay there, grinning at each other. I swore I could feel every part of him within me. I could feel his heart beating with mine and his thoughts aligning to the point where I might just be able to hear them, like he was a merperson.

“Okay, I believe it,” Zack said when the silent gazing had us both so relaxed and my knot started to go down. “We’re fated mates.”

“It makes sense,” I said, pulling all the way out and adjusting so we could lie together more comfortably. “You felt a call to come to Valleywood, I felt a need to come up?—”

I froze. With everything that had passed between us, I still hadn’t confessed everything to Zack. He still thought I was an ordinary landie, like him.

“To come into town to audition for the play,” I finished, feeling myself grow hot.

Zack sucked in a breath, his body tensing. I started to panic that he’d put two and two together somehow until he said, “We’re in a relationship!”

I cocked my head slightly and said, “Yes we are?”

Zack pushed himself to sit up and gathered the sheets modestly around his chest, which was as adorable as it was ridiculous. “Ben has forbidden showmances! We’re going to get fired. I don’t want you to be fired, not when they’ve rewritten the part of Triton just for you.”

“Hey, don’t worry, guppy,” I said, sitting with him and stroking my hand over his back. “We’ll be fine. We’ll just try to avoid each other during the run of the show.”

Zack smiled. “I like it when you call me ‘guppy’.”

“Do you?” I said, keeping my voice low and sultry.

“Yeah,” he said, twisting to fling one leg over my thigh and to pull himself into my embrace. “It’s unique, but I still get what you’re going for. I think I have some very guppy-like tendencies.” He made fishy shapes with his mouth.

I laughed, my heart thrilling at the beauty and charm of the omega in my arms, my omega. “I’m glad you like it,” I said. “I like you.”

I kissed him long and hard, which felt like a bit of a cop-out, actually. What I really wanted was to tell Zack I loved him and that it didn’t matter if we’d just met the week before. He’d fallen out of the sky and into my arms, and if that wasn’t a gift from the gods, I didn’t know what was.

I’d made up my mind to tell him I loved him as soon as we stopped kissing, but Zack sucked in a sudden breath, then moaned while our mouths were still together. “I can already feel another heat wave coming on,” he said, a touch of pain in his voice. “It’s gonna be a doozy.”

“The bed’s already a mess,” I said, shifting as an idea came to me. “Do you want to have sex in the shower?”

Zack's eyes popped wide. "Yes!" he said, bubbling with enthusiasm.

"Then let's go."

I picked him up and carried him through the bedroom to the tiny en suite. It was barely big enough for the two of us to turn around in, but the tub was surprisingly spacious. I turned on the water, then carefully stepped into the warm spray with my guppy in my arms.

"This feels so good," Zack moaned as he stood in the spray with me, rubbing himself over my body like he was a sponge trying to soap me up. "I love the water."

"I'm so glad," I said, voice husky as my needy erection returned. "I love seeing you like this, all wet and willing."

"I'm definitely both of those things," Zack purred, looking up at me with a sexy, inviting sparkle in his eyes.

I hummed and lifted him slightly, pinning him to the tiled wall at the side of the tub. Zack's body was a dream. He was small but still masculine, just the way I liked my omegas. He was in good shape, and while omegas could never be as beefy as alphas, he was certainly fit. I wanted to kiss him everywhere, all over his pink, pretty skin, and especially his legs.

We were in the shower, though, so there was only so much I could do without the two of us slipping and falling. Even in our landie form, merpeople had excellent balance and a good grip on wet surfaces, but I didn't want to risk disaster by trying to twist Zack like a pretzel so I could kiss and nibble his legs.

"I want you so much," Zack gasped, tilting his head back as I held him up and kissed his shoulders and chest. He cried out as I licked one of his nipples, and because he

was in heat, his already hard cock shot pearly liquid between us as the gesture sent him into a sharp orgasm. “I need you, Lucas! It’s a big one. I need you in me! I need you to breed me!”

I wasn’t going to say no to an invitation like that. With a low, hungry grunt, I lifted Zack and then lowered him slowly onto my straining erection. Zack cried out with pleasure and started to buck and thrash as I sank into his encompassing wetness, inch by inch. When he was fully seated, the head of my cock was pressed tightly against the opening of his womb, and when I began to move, that opening softened.

That was the only warning I had before everything happened.

First, my cock plowed straight through the entry to Zack’s womb, my tip lodging tightly into its warmth. Zack cried out with a sound of pleasure like nothing I’d ever heard before. His eyes rolled back as he humped me like there was no tomorrow. I’d never given an omega a breeding orgasm before, but I was certain that was what I’d just done.

That wasn’t the only thing, though. Instead of my knot forming to lock us together as my balls emptied everything they had and then some directly into Zack’s ripe womb, my legs went incredibly itchy as scales began to form. More than just that, within seconds, they’d fused together, changing my biology, and my tail stretched its way out to fill the entire bathtub.

Shifting back into mer-form was one thing, but I was in the middle of breeding Zack at the same time. My cock was still lodged deep within him and I knew from past experience that the shape wouldn’t change, only the color and some of the ridges. Instead of a fleshy knot, though, I ended up with a scaley one. It did the job just as well, though, and for those blissful, carnal, unbelievable moments, Zack and I were locked together, our bodies and minds melded in pure ecstasy, as we moved together and my seed filled him.

“I can feel it!” Zack panted desperately, his eyes still closed as we rocked fast and hard. “Holy hell, I can actually feel it! You’re making me pregnant!”

I wasn’t sure it was possible to actually feel yourself getting pregnant, but I was an alpha, so what did I know. I replied by groaning and shooting the last of my seed from balls that were now encased inside my scaly lower body and slamming my mouth over Zack’s to kiss him as the last moments of our union swirled around us.

We stayed there, me knotted inside Zack, Zack’s legs wrapped tightly around my waist, until the water ran cold. I would have stayed there forever, soaking in bliss, impervious to the temperature of the water, forever, except that Zack started shaking.

“You okay?” I asked, leaning back a bit so I could visually check him.

“Yeah, yeah,” Zack panted, head still tipped back, eyes still closed. “That was just the single most intense and pleasurable moment of my life, and I’m a hundred percent not kidding when I say that, despite me being on birth control, you just got me pregnant.”

I flinched, but I didn’t think I was nervous or afraid. More like I was thrilled but cautious, because there were still things?—

“Holy fucking shit, Lucas!”

Like those things.

Zack had opened his eyes and looked down at our joined bodies, but instead of seeing what he expected would be there, he saw his legs wrapped around the top of my sturdy, long, iridescent green and blue tail with the root of my blue-green cock just barely visible as the rest of it was still lodged inside him.

“Holy shit!” he repeated, an octave higher.

He started to scramble to get away from me, but his movements only caused him pain as my knot was still tight inside him.

“Easy, easy,” I told him, pinning him to the wall with my still-muscular upper body. “Breathe. You’re not going anywhere until my knot goes down.”

“What the hell is going on, Lucas?” he asked, not even a little bit calmer. “You’re a fish!”

“It’s okay, guppy,” I said, trying to stay calm myself and stroke him to settle him. “I’m not a fish.”

“You’re not human,” he said, dragging his eyes up from my fin to stare, panicked, into my eyes.

“Technically, no, I’m not,” I confessed, feeling sheepish and muddled. I really should have told Zack everything earlier. Letting someone know you were a merman while still knotted in them after giving them a breeding orgasm and possibly getting them pregnant wasn’t the best way to reveal things like that.

“What’s going on? What just happened? Why am I—” Zack’s last question was cut short as his body tremored with an aftershock orgasm.

The way his body squeezed my cock felt so good, but everything else felt tenuous at best. I grumbled, then caught my breath, breathing through the pleasure, and said, “We can discuss this calmly. Let me just turn off the water, shift back again, and we’ll dry off and have a chat.”

“Dry off and have a chat?” Zack’s voice was still high and alarmed. “Shift back? Am

I dreaming? Was that orgasm so good that I somehow lost my mind?”

“No, guppy, you’re not dreaming,” I said, stroking the side of his face.

He pulled away from me, which hurt. A lot. I’d messed up by keeping secrets, but Zack was overreacting.

It was enough to start the process of my knot going down. As soon as I was able to pull out, I eased Zack down until he could stand in the bathtub. Once I was certain he wasn’t going to keel over, either from shock or because his legs were still rubbery after all the sex, I twisted to turn off the shower.

Zack’s eyes went wide and he made a choking sound that I really hoped was surprise and not disgust as I shifted my tail back into legs. Once I felt stable, I stepped out of the bathtub, then offered Zack a hand so he could get out, too.

It was not a good sign at all when Zack shook his head and scrambled out of the tub as well. He reached for the towel on the railing near the tub, fumbled it, then knocked a bottle of shampoo on the edge of the tub over as he bent to pick it up. The way he clutched the towel to his body like a fainting maiden would have made me laugh if it wasn’t for the wariness in his eyes.

“I know I should have told you everything earlier,” I said, holding up my hands as I dripped on the bathmat. Unlike landies, I didn’t mind being wet. “But you have to admit, there hasn’t really been a good time for us to sit down so I could explain that I’m a merman and a siren.”

“A siren?” Zack gaped. “I thought that was just your last name.”

“Well, yeah,” I said with a loose nod. “It’s my last name the same way that someone who worked the land ended up with the last name Farmer, someone who made barrels

ended up with the name Cooper, and someone who crafted items ended up being called Smith.”

“Oh, I see, I see,” Zack said in a thin voice, nodding. “No, I do not see!” he shouted a second later. “You’re a merman and you didn’t tell me!”

“Again, there wasn’t really time for a deep conversation about it,” I started.

“Did you use magic to get the part in the play?” Zack asked, his eyes even wider, like he was putting pieces together. “Did you use some sort of fishy siren charm to mesmerize Ben and Betty into giving you the part and making it one of the leads?”

“No, not really,” I said, my face heating. Because I kind of had. “I didn’t try to,” I clarified. “Sirens can’t really help but lure people in and get what they want. It comes with the DNA.”

“Did you lure me in and make me go into heat early to get what you wanted?” Zack demanded.

Ouch. But it was a legitimate question. One I didn’t have a good answer for.

“I don’t think so, no,” I said, heating even more. “Maybe. I didn’t deliberately try to seduce you against your will or anything. I genuinely like you, Zack. I...I love you. I wanted to say that before, but it didn’t seem appropriate.”

“You love me?” Zack wheezed, beyond surprised and floating around in something more like utter disbelief.

“I do,” I said, shrugging hopelessly and flailing my arms a little. “I’m dead serious when I say I believe we’re fated mates. I have never felt so drawn to anyone in my life. I know we’re made for each other. That’s why I knew to catch you in the lake.



That's why we were so drawn to each other when we met again at auditions. That's why it feels like we're two halves of the same soul that need each other desperately."

"That's why this heat was amazing," Zack whispered, glancing away as his thoughts caught up with his shock.

His mouth continued to hang open for a few seconds and I could see his mind whirring, but he wasn't sharing his thoughts.

At least, he wasn't until he snapped to look at me again and said, "I've just been fucked and bred by a merman. A merman got me pregnant."

The way he said it felt like some sordid tabloid story. I didn't like it at all. Nothing about the moment between us, a moment which should have been filled with excitement and closeness, was going the way it should.

"I think I should leave," I said with a sigh. "This has been too much of a shock for you, and I think I'm only making it worse by being here."

I walked past Zack, grabbing one of the extra towels as I went. Once I was in the bedroom, I dried off as quickly as I could and set to work finding my clothes from the day before and putting them back on.

Zack walked out of the bathroom with the towel wrapped around his body and just watched me. I could tell from the hazy look in his eyes, not to mention the whisper of a bond that was forming between us, because of course that would happen, too, that he was too overcome to say or do much of anything.

"You know where to find me," I said, trying not to sound as sad and disappointed as I felt. "When you're ready to talk about this, I'm just a phone call away. Or maybe you could come up to my place. Whatever you want to do."

“Okay,” he squeaked.

It wasn't the worst answer he could have given, but it certainly sounded like he wasn't going to stop me from leaving and tell me it was all an overreaction and, really, he loved me, too.

He didn't try to stop me as I left the bedroom and headed to the front door. I turned once my hand was on the doorknob in the hope that he would stop me then, but he didn't. I headed into the hall with a deep sigh. This was going to take a lot more work to make right than I could ever have anticipated.

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### CHAPTER SEVEN

Zack

In retrospect, maybe I hadn't reacted as well as I could have to the revelation that the man who had rescued me and taken me through heat in spectacular style was, in fact, a fish.

Alright, not technically a fish, but close enough to make me feel like I'd done something incredibly kinky by riding his cock like it was a seaside amusement park attraction. And yeah, it had been absolutely spectacular and I'd convinced myself I was deeply in love with Lucas and wanted to be his fated mate.

But one fish taco did not make for a lifetime of bonding-level commitment.

Or did it?

After spending the rest of the weekend stunned and in denial, and wondering if I could ever eat the fish sticks in my freezer after having eaten actual fish stick, I headed over to the VPAC on Monday and tried to pretend that everything was business as usual. Fortunately for me, it was pretty much balls to the wall as soon as I walked through the door.

"There you are, Zack," Betty said, catching me about three steps into the building. "I've got a big job for you. The set painters were here over the weekend and not only did they leave the paint closet in complete disarray, they spilled half a can of Cerulean Blue in the hallway and Dion wants it cleaned up yesterday."

“Oh. Right. Okay,” I said, letting her steer me off toward the side hall that would take us down to the workshop.

“Great,” Betty said, like she’d checked something off a long list. “I’m glad I can count on you. By the way, are you feeling alright? You look a bit piqued.”

I swallowed, eyes going round, and wondered if she could see right through me. A day and a half of raw heat sex with a merman aside, if she had even the smallest hint that Lucas and I were together, Lucas might be fired and whatever dreams of being a star of the musical stage that he had would be crushed.

If he even had dreams of being a star of the musical stage.

If we even were together.

Oh gods. I was in a relationship with a merman.

“No, no, I’m fine,” I said, acting like everything was perfectly okay in the most unconvincing voice possible. “I just didn’t get enough sleep this weekend. I was out exploring Valleywood, painting the town red and all. Alone!” I added in a shout, which echoed in the concrete and steel stairway we’d just started to descend. “I was out there alone. I wasn’t on a date or anything.”

“Okay, great, sure,” Betty said. When we came out in the workshop corridor at the bottom of the stairs, she pointed at the paint spill and said, “There you go. Dion offered to have the VPAC’s staff clean it up, but I told him that since we’re guests here in his house, I’d find one of ours to do it. You might have to get out some turpentine if the paint is already set in the concrete.”

“Sure, sure,” I said, staring at the huge swath of blue on the floor, utterly forlorn. “You can count on me.”

The paint had dried ages ago. Fortunately, it wasn't the kind that needed masses of chemical solvents to clean up. It just needed good, old-fashioned elbow grease, which meant me on my hands and knees for most of the morning, scrubbing until my shoulders ached.

Ironically, it was one of the best things that could have happened to me. Cleaning up the paint, as much of a literal pain as it was, meant that I was downstairs all day, which meant I was nowhere near Lucas. I didn't see him when one of the other stage crew came by to invite me to go out to lunch with them.

I didn't talk to Lucas that afternoon, although I did spot him on stage, running lines at one point when I crossed through the auditorium with a couple of the other stagehands while bringing rehearsal props backstage.

Our eyes met, literally across a semi-crowded room, and my heart felt like it wanted to leap out of my chest and run to him. Lucas stared back at me as if I were the thick, juicy steak he wanted to devour but couldn't eat because he was pescatarian.

Ohhh! He was pescatarian . He didn't eat land meat . That whole thing made sense now. I wondered if it was a digestive thing or just a preference.

"Zack. Hey. Come on."

I blinked and shook myself out of what had apparently been a moment of Lucas and I gazing longingly at each other with unrequited love and scrambled to catch up to Karl and Jen.

As we used the small stairs to sneak onto the stage with our boxes of props, I noticed that Eric was up on the stage, too. His eyes were narrowed as he looked back and forth between me and Lucas. That was an even better excuse to ignore Lucas entirely as I went about my stagehandly duties.

The rest of the afternoon was as busy as the morning, and the stage crew was asked to stay a little late to help clear away everything from our show so the crew in charge of the currently running production could set the stage for their performance. The perils of sharing a performance space with another company meant I didn't see Lucas at all for the rest of the day.

The next day proceeded in much the same way, except I happened to run into Lucas while sweeping out one of the smaller rehearsal rooms after lunch. Lucas was already in the room, going over his lines.

"Hey," he said, glancing up at me with surprise and hope as I marched into the room with my big push broom.

"Hey," I replied, like I was some sort of smitten schoolboy instead of the most confused omega on the planet. "I was told to sweep in here."

"Yeah," Lucas said, glancing to the side. "Someone must have eaten their lunch in here and sat on a bag of potato chips or something."

Sure enough, one corner of the room was littered with smashed potato chips. I sighed.

"Are you okay?" Lucas asked stepping closer to me.

I wanted to drop my broom and run into his arms. That felt like the only right thing to do under the circumstances. Every cell in my body, including a particular cluster of cells deep inside me that were growing larger by the minute, wanted to fling myself at him and have Lucas wrap his big, fishy body around me forever.

I shrugged. "I dunno. I'm still processing."

Lucas lowered his head slightly, looking sheepish and confused. "I don't want to

push or rush you in any way,” he said.

I felt what his words meant in my soul. It was totally a fledgling bond. I knew that he wanted me, that he cared for me, but that he also wanted to respect my boundaries. I also knew that he was as clueless about what was happening between us as I was.

Bonding was weird.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m just really confused right now. This is not what I expected to happen when I left home for the big city.”

“I thought you lived in Philadelphia,” Lucas said. “That’s a much bigger city than Valleywood.”

“I know, it was a metaphor,” I said. And then, like an idiot, I added, “Do they not have metaphors under the sea? How do you guys even talk to each other if you’re underwater?”

I felt a pinch from Lucas that was totally a bond thing. “I’m so sorry,” he said. “I should have told you sooner.” He paused, mostly because I didn’t have anything to say, then added, “We do have metaphors. I get what you mean now. And telepathy. Sort of.”

He shoved a hand through his hair nervously.

“Telepathy, eh?” I asked, taking a step closer to him.

“Sort of,” Lucas replied. “There are different sorts of places in and around Blue Haven City, some completely water and some contained within a magic bubble, where people breathe air and speak like they do up here.”

“Blue Haven City?” I wanted to know more. I knew an opening when I saw it, and I wanted to grab hold of it and use that little exchange of knowledge to create a whole new understanding between us.

But it was just my luck that Lindsey came bouncing into the room with a cheerful, “Hey! Sorry I’m late. Are we still running our scenes in here?” before I could take things further.

Lucas and I turned to her in eerie unison.

Lindsey stopped where she was and said, “Oh. Am I interrupting something?” Her eyes sparkled and a smile spread across her face.

“No, no, you’re not interrupting anything,” I insisted, gripping my broom tighter and heading over to the potato chip corner. “I was asked to clean up in here.”

Lucas gazed longingly at me as I left him. I mean, I had my back to him so I couldn’t actually see it, but I could totally feel it.

“Okay, as long as I’m not getting in the way,” Lindsey said. There was a pause and then she added, “You know I wouldn’t rat you out to Ben if the two of you were, you know.” She whispered the last two words.

“Thanks,” Lucas said. “Let’s run lines.”

I noted that he didn’t deny that the two of us had something going on. That made me smile and relax as I went to work cleaning up the mess. The two of us might have been in a really weird situation, but I still felt good knowing he wasn’t the type of alpha to pretend he didn’t even know the omega who he’d knocked up.

By the end of the week, I was a hundred percent certain I was very, very knocked up.



“You say your heat ended after a day and a half?” the doctor at the free clinic I went to on Friday morning to have an official pregnancy test done asked as I sat on his exam table.

I squirmed in my ill-fitting hospital gown and scrunched my hands on the waxy paper covering the faded vinyl of the table. “Um, yeah. And I’m usually three days, regular as clockwork.”

“And you say you were on birth control?”

“That’s the weird thing,” I said, throwing my arms out with the intensity of my confusion. “I’ve been taking them for years, just in case. There’s no way this should have happened.”

“Birth control isn’t a hundred percent effective,” the doctor said. “Especially during heat with a fated mate.”

It felt like he’d punched me in the gut. “How do you know we’re fated mates? I didn’t say anything about fated mates.”

“Well, that’s the most likely explanation for why pregnancies happen when an omega is on the pill.” The doctor hummed and nodded as he tapped on his tablet. “Have you shared your suspicions about pregnancy with your alpha?” He glanced up at me over the top of his glasses.

“He’s not exactly my alpha,” I said.

The doctor frowned in confusion. “Was it a hired heat?”

“No!” I sat straighter, causing the paper to crunch. “We’re friends. We’re definitely friends. Maybe more than friends. Definitely more than friends.”

“But he’s not your alpha?”

I winced and hunched again. “Maybe he is. It’s just that there are...extenuating circumstances.”

The doctor smiled knowingly, tucking his tablet under his arm. “I noticed that you’re new to Valleywood.”

“I am,” I said suspiciously, wondering where he was going with that.

His smile widened to a knowing look. “He’s a shifter, isn’t he. Or maybe a demigod? Something you weren’t expecting, surely.”

I sat suddenly straight. “How did you know?”

“I get a lot of new arrivals who are surprised they’ve mated with a shifter,” he said with a chuckle. “And to answer the question you’re about to ask me, yes, it’s highly likely that mongrels will develop the ability to shift like their parent who is a shifter, but not until they’re older.”

“Mongrel?” I asked, my voice going high with offense as I put a protective hand over my stomach. “Don’t call my baby a mongrel . That’s my baby you’re talking about.” My guppy , my brain filled in.

“Sorry. I meant no offense,” the doctor said, growing serious again. “But yes, I can confirm that you are pregnant. Congratulations, Mr. deMuse. You’re going to be a papa.”

I might have groaned a little. When I left the doctor’s office, I might have cried. What was Grandma going to say? What was Lucas going to say, for that matter?

“Oh gods, he’ll think I’m trapping him,” I said as I walked, dazed, back to the VPAC to finish out my work day. “Oh gods!” I said, louder. “He’ll think I’ve hooked him with a slippery little worm for bait!”

By the time I made it to one of the backstage entrances of the VPAC, I didn’t know whether I was laughing or crying. My emotions were all over the place as the surrealness of the situation fully hit me. What were the little tadpole and I going to do if Lucas didn’t want us?

No, tadpoles were amphibians. I was carrying something entirely different inside me.

It was just my luck that Lucas was only a few yards away from the stage door, leaning against the wall in the quiet corridor, holding some sheet music and singing under his breath as I entered the building. As soon as I stepped into his view, before he turned his head to look at me, he snapped straight, like he knew I was there.

“Hey,” he said, smiling at me, music forgotten. As soon as he saw the state I was in, his hopeful expression dropped. “Oh, no. Is something wrong?”

I didn’t care how weird everything was or how suddenly things had happened. It didn’t matter that I was still so confused that I barely knew my own name anymore. I broke down into tears all over again and walked toward him, slamming myself against his body.

“I’m pregnant,” I wailed into his broad, delicious-smelling chest. I recognized his scent now. He smelled like the ocean, and I loved it.

“Aww, guppy,” Lucas said, closing me in his embrace and kissing the top of my head. “It’s going to be okay. We’re going to be okay.”

“No, we’re not,” I wept, way over-dramatic. I couldn’t help myself. It had to be the

pregnancy hormones scrambling my brain. Or maybe the completely bizarre situation I found myself in. “I’m not ready to have a baby.”

“I’m sorry,” Lucas said, rubbing my back. “If there was any way I could have stopped it, I would have.”

I gasped and pulled back. “Are you saying you don’t want the baby?” My voice rose to a screech.

“No!” Lucas blurted. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. Of course I want the baby.”

I nearly burst into tears again. “I’m pregnant with a fish!”

Lucas laughed. It wasn’t funny...but it sort of was. He pulled me into his arms again and rested his cheek against my head. “It’s going to be okay,” he said, hugging me. “I’ll take care of you. And you’re not pregnant with a fish. You’re pregnant with a merperson.”

That only made me wail more.

But I also wanted to laugh. I had a sudden flash of me swimming around in the waves with an adorable baby boy who had reddish hair and a blue-green tail, like his daddy.

I pulled myself together enough to stand on my own two feet. I had so many questions for Lucas, but before I could ask any of them, Eric’s waspish voice snapped, “What’s going on here?”

Lucas and I jumped away from each other.

“Hey, Eric,” Lucas said with a long-suffering sigh. “Does Ben want us on stage?”

Eric didn't answer his question. Instead, he stalked his way forward, eyes narrowed. "It looked like the two of you were hugging."

I was all set to deny everything in order to save Lucas, but Lucas shrugged and said, "Yeah, we were." Before Eric could look too victorious, Lucas said, "Zack here has just had some, er, startling news. I was comforting him."

I swallowed hard. "Yeah, he was comforting me," I said. "That's what friends do."

"Oh really," Eric said, stopping and crossing his arms when he was close to us. He jerked his chin at me and said, "What happened? What startling news?"

Lucas and I exchanged a worried look. I could almost hear him speaking to me through whatever merman bond we'd started to form, but it was like he was at the end of a long, foggy corridor.

"Um, my grandma is sick," I blurted out the first thing I could think of that would make me cry.

"Who's your grandma?" Eric fired at me.

"Thalia deMuse," I said.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She has, um, Sowers Syndrome."

"Never heard of it," Eric said.

Neither had I. I'd just made it up. "It's very serious," I said, standing a little taller and putting on a brave face. "She needs special treatment."

“Oh yeah? Where?”

“In Philly, where we’re from.”

Eric looked suddenly delighted. “Does this mean you’re leaving the production?”

“Come on, Eric,” Lucas sighed. “There’s no reason to give him the splash down.”

“The what?” Eric and I asked at the same time.

Lucas colored a little. “You know, the fifth degree?”

“Oh,” I said, then smiled at what must have been a merman term.

Eric still looked highly suspicious. “You know what’ll happen if Ben finds out the two of you are dating.”

“Who says we’re dating?” I fired back. Technically, we were doing so much more than dating at this point.

“Greg is waiting in the wings to take over the part of King Triton at any second,” Eric said with a seriously gloaty face. “Granted, they’ll probably have to go back to the original script if he takes over the part because, gods love him, Greg isn’t up to the role the way they bastardized it for you.”

Lucas stood straighter and crossed his arms, daring Eric to say more.

Eric was intimidated enough to take a step back. “I’ll be watching you,” he said, then did the thing where he pointed his fingers at his eyes then at the two of us before turning and marching away.

I let out a breath once he was gone, but I wasn't relieved.

"We can't let anyone find out about any of this," I said.

"Zack, I really don't care about a part in some play," Lucas said.

"Well I do," I said, turning to him. "Whatever happens after the show closes, this is your chance to shine. You came up to land to be in this play, and I don't want you to miss out on that."

"I think I came up onto land to find you," he said with the soppiest smile I'd ever seen.

It almost made me cry yet again.

I shook my head. "No. I would hate myself if anything happened to get in the way of you being a smashing success in this show. I don't want us to let on to anybody that anything is going on between us until after the show closes. It'll be our little secret." I put my hand on my stomach, like the tadpole was a part of that secret.

Lucas rubbed the back of his neck. "If that's what you want. I'm a little uncomfortable pretending nothing is going on, though. Especially seeing as you're pregnant with a fish."

There was a beat of silence, then Lucas smiled.

I was so in love with him that it hurt.

"Stop it!" I hissed, then laughed, grabbing him and turning him toward the stage, then pushing. "Go rehearse or something. Stop making me fall head over heels in love with you!"

Lucas laughed. “Okay, okay. I’ll go. But promise me you’ll call on me if you need anything. And once the show is over, I don’t care what happens, I’m claiming you as my mate.”

Those words sent a serious shiver through me. They were everything I wanted to hear and more, but they were also the most dangerous words anyone had ever said to me.

What did it mean to be claimed by a merman? How were the two of us supposed to have this baby together if he was a water person and I was a land guy? What would Grandma think? And how were we supposed to keep everything a secret until the end of the show?



### CHAPTER EIGHT

Lucas

Coming up to spend some time on land was supposed to be a fun way to literally stretch my legs and see how the other half of the world lived. I figured I'd take in the sights, be in a show, and have a little fun, and when it was all over, I'd swim back down to my Mom and Dad's house to figure out what the next chapter of my life would bring.

I did not expect to find my fated mate, to have a day and a half of wild, seahorse sex with him, and to bond with him. Oh, and to get him pregnant. But sometimes life did whatever it wanted to do when you were least expecting it.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I called to Zack through the bathroom stall door a week and a half after he'd been to the doctor and told me for certain that he was pregnant.

Zack answered with a horrific retching sound and a splash in the toilet. "Yeah, I'm fine," he called back weakly.

I could feel his morning sickness through the bond. It made me feel awful on more than one level. Not only did I have some residual nausea myself, I knew I was responsible for how horrible Zack felt. If I'd had any idea that I'd be able to impregnate him, even when he was taking birth control, I would have done something, like wearing a condom.

Except I didn't hate the idea that Zack was carrying my child. I didn't hate it at all.

We were still keeping our distance and Zack was still coming to terms with the massive change in his life, but already, I was imagining getting a pretty little house with Zack inside the bubble of Blue Haven City, or maybe out in the 'burbs, near my parents, or maybe even one on land, I wasn't picky, caring for him as he grew round with my baby, and then raising the little guppy along with him.

Zack retched again, but that one was weaker, and instead of staying bent over the toilet, I saw his butt hit the tiles as he sat. I still hadn't explained to Zack that, as the mate of a merman, he could become a merman, too. Something told me that now wouldn't be the best time to hit him with that.

"All done?" I asked, reaching under the stall door to take his hand.

"Yeah," he said weakly. He squeezed my hand for a second, then let go of it, saying, "Eew, Lucas. Why are you sitting on the floor of a public men's room?"

I laughed. "Because you are."

"Yeah, but I'm not here by choice," Zack said.

"I guess it's time to get up, then."

I stood and pulled open the door that I'd left shut to give my mate some semblance of privacy. Zack looked feebly up at me, so I smiled back reassuringly and leaned over to flush the toilet.

"Come on," I said, scooping him up under his arms and carrying him over to the sinks. "You'll feel better once you're cleaned up a little."

I turned on the taps and pumped some liquid soap into my hands, then stood behind Zack, my body encompassing his, as I washed our hands together.

“You’re not going to turn into a merman right here in the VPAC men’s room because your hands are wet, are you?” Zack asked.

I laughed. “No, it doesn’t work like that. I have complete control over when I shift. I could shift back into my tail whenever I wanted, whether I was wet or dry.”

“Doesn’t it hurt to shift into a water creature on dry land?” he asked as I pulled some paper towels and wet them so I could wash his face.

I hummed and pinched my face. “I wouldn’t say it hurts . It’s like getting severely dry skin. It’s tight and it pulls, and if I’m in the air with my tail for too long it loses its shimmer, but I wouldn’t say it hurts .”

“That sounds like it would hurt to me,” Zack sighed.

As soon as I was satisfied that Zack was in good shape, I spun him to face me and took more time than I needed to wet another paper towel and brush it over his lips. Zack looked up at me with the sweetest, mooniest look I’d ever seen. He was completely irresistible when he was vulnerable and needy like that. So much that I couldn’t resist leaning in, eyes trained on his lips, for a?—

The bathroom door banged open and Ben stomped in, his face like a thundercloud, when my lips were millimeters from Zack’s.

“Of all the absolute nerve!” Ben shouted, stomping toward one of the stalls as I leapt back from Zack.

My stomach plummeted to my feet and my heart slammed hard against my ribs. I could feel Zack’s pulse racing as well, even though we weren’t touching. We’d moved apart so fast that Zack nearly tripped over his own feet and had to catch himself on the sink.

“Is something wrong?” I asked. The words came out tight and awkward.

“Yes, something is wrong!” Ben growled back amidst the sound of a stream hitting the water in front of him. “I just had to fire my best lighting tech and one of the chorus members for canoodling in the breakroom.”

I caught my breath and stared at Zack, eyes wide. So Ben hadn’t been joking when he’d said he’d fire anyone who got involved in a showmance.

“Can you afford to lose them?” I asked.

Ben continued peeing, then there was a pause, a zip, and a flush. He stormed out of the stall and over to the sink, looking ready to murder someone.

“Betty asked me the same thing,” he said, slamming on the water and nearly cracking the soap dispenser, he hit it so hard. “She said I was being ridiculous and that of course people were going to get involved during the show. Do you think I’m being ridiculous?”

There was only one answer, with the way he turned to glare at both me and Zack.

“No, no, not at all,” Zack and I both mumbled, shifting awkwardly and turning red.

“See?” Ben said, as if our panic was proof that his policy was the right one. “I’m sick and tired of being second-guessed,” he went on. “Betty knows full well that the rule is for her own good. The way that Greg loser has been sniffing around her?—”

He stopped himself with a quick intake of breath and turned the sink off. As he reached for the towel dispenser, he frowned at me and Zack and said, “What are the two of you doing in here? You were looking awfully cozy when I came in.”

“Oh, I?—”

“We were just?—”

“It wasn’t what it looked?—”

“I must have eaten something that disagreed?—”

“Zack was telling me about his dreams of being a stand-up comic and I was trying to encourage him to give it a try,” I blurted.

Zack looked at me with round, disbelieving eyes.

“A stand-up comic, eh?” Ben said, wiping his hands then throwing the paper towel into the trash. “Why would you want to go into something as risky and unstable as stand-up comedy?”

“I don’t know,” Zack said, glancing desperately to me for help.

“Zack is really funny, in case you hadn’t noticed,” I said.

Ben hummed. “He is funny. Have you ever tried it before?”

Zack gulped. “Sort of? Only on a small scale. But, uh, yeah, it was the reason I came from Philly to Valleywood. I can’t explain it, but I feel drawn to be up on a stage, making people laugh.”

“Interesting,” Ben said. “Well, if we ever have a lull in rehearsal and need someone to entertain us, I’ll let you get up there and give it a try.”

Zack’s mouth dropped open, but before he could say anything, Ben nodded, then

marched out of the room, looking like slightly less of a thunderstorm. More like a hard rain beating on the surface of the water.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Zack let out a wheezing breath and leaned against the sink. “I thought we were dead meat.”

“Yeah, that was close,” I said, shoving a hand through my hair. “Although I keep thinking that we should really just tell him that we’re together.”

“No!” Zack pushed himself upright again. “You’ll be fired! I’ll be fired. That’s not as important, but I’ve got a baby on the way, I need a job.”

I thought about telling him that my family had more than enough money to support him and the baby, although I fully intended to get a job so we could set out on our own without being dependent on anyone. Before I could say anything, a warm, urgent, tingly feeling formed in my gut.

“Oh, crap. I’ve got to go,” I said.

Zack nodded to the stalls. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

“No, I mean my mom’s about to call me,” I said.

Zack frowned at me. “You’re mom’s about to call you?”

“It’s the telepathy-slash-magic thing,” I said.

Immediately, my phone rang and I pulled it out of my back pocket.

“Hi, Mom,” I answered. Without words, of course. To Zack, it probably looked like I just answered the call then held the phone to my face in silence.

“Leucosius!” Mom snapped at me. It wasn’t the best way to start the call. “What are you still doing up on land? I told you I wanted you to come home.”

“You said you didn’t mind if I came up to be in this play,” I told her, leaning against the sink with a frown. “We’re still in rehearsals.”

“I was cautious about this whole thing from the start, but ever since Frisia told Caliban that you’ve been spending almost all your free time with that omega you had dinner with at their restaurant?—”

“Uncle Caliban can stick to his own business,” I cut her off. “I’m a grown man. I was going to have a life of my own eventually.”

“Oh, that’s so weird!” Zack said, sinking back against the wall and staring at me, one hand pressed to his head. “It’s like I can hear you talking, but you’re in another room and I can’t make out the words.”

I smiled at him. “It will get clearer with time, you’ll see,” I told him.

“Who is that?” Mom asked. “Are you with someone? Are you with that omega?”

“His name is Zack,” I told Mom with a sigh, “and you’re really going to like him, I swear.”

“Maybe I should just leave so the two of you can have your conversation,” Zack said, pushing away from the wall. “It’s all just a little much to sort of half hear you, like you’re—” He stopped, stunned. “Oh my gods, it’s like you’re underwater! That’s what it sounds like. Like when someone says something and you’re underwater.”

“That’s exactly what it’s like,” I said.

“Exactly what what’s like?” Mom asked.

I sighed impatiently. “Let me just sort everything with my mom and I’ll come find you later,” I told Zack.

“You’re talking to your mom?” Zack blinked. “Yeah, I really need to leave you two alone, then. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Zack left so fast I didn’t have a chance to give him a proper goodbye. I wasn’t happy about it either.

“Did he leave?” Mom asked, her voice a little calmer, almost self-satisfied. “They all leave eventually.”

“Dad didn’t,” I reminded her.

“What your father did or didn’t do is beside the point,” Mom said. “I’m not happy with you being up there, involved with a landie, and parading yourself around on stage in that insult of a show.”

I headed out of the bathroom myself, since being there was a little much, and walked across the hall to one of the green rooms. There were several couches in there, so I sunk into one of them, body aching, to deal with the rest of my mom’s call.

“What bothers you more?” I asked. “Your baby finally leaving the nest, me finding an omega I adore and want to spend the rest of my life with, or The Little Mermaid ?”

“You never said you wanted to spend the rest of your life with that omega?” Mom’s voice boomed in my head.

“So I guess that’s the answer to that,” I said.



Mom sighed and made the bubbly noise she made when she was frustrated. “I love you, Lucas,” she said, much calmer, but more emotional. “You are my baby. You’re my only child with the love of my life. I love your siblings with everything I have, too, but they’re the children of gods or demigods, and bless them, they can be so fickle sometimes.”

“I think that’s a compliment?” I said.

“I worry about you constantly,” she said. “I only want the best for you, and I haven’t trusted anything about the world after eighteen-twenty-one. It’s become such a mean, selfish place. Those humans pollute the water like they think the lake is their own personal toilet. They’re making our entire planet unlivable, for us and for themselves.”

I rubbed my forehead. My mom was adamant about the environment. Honestly, she had a point.

“There are people working on ideas to fix things,” I said, knowing it wouldn’t do any good. “There are good people up here as well as crappy ones.”

“But it’s the nasty ones who always seem to be in charge,” Mom said. “That’s why I worry about you. That’s why I question your choice to get involved in that asinine, insulting, ridiculous play.”

“Ah, so it is The Little Mermaid after all,” I said, smiling.

“That Hans Christian Andersen fellow should have been dragged out into Copenhagen Harbor and drown.”

“Mom.”

“Imagine, insisting that merpeople don’t have a soul and that when they die they become the foam on the ocean. Hmph !”

“This production isn’t like that,” I insisted. “It has a happy ending. You and Dad really need to come up in a few weeks to see one of the performances.”

No sooner had the words crossed my lips than I was hit with inspiration.

“That’s the perfect idea,” I went on. “You and Dad need to come see the show. You can also meet Zack. The two of us have something very important to tell you.”

“You’d better not be saying the two of you are getting married and living on land for the rest of your life,” Mom said in a warning tone.

“No, no, that’s not it at all,” I said, my face heating.

We hadn’t discussed where we were going to live. Given the fact that merpeople and sirens were so long-lived and humans got a little tetchy when they noticed people not aging over the course of decades, it was always a good idea to go live underwater for a generation or two before settling on land again.

“Just promise me you’ll come up here, see the show, and meet Zack and I will promise you that you won’t be disappointed.”

Mom made a frustrated sound again, then said, “I’ll think about it.”

We said our goodbyes and ended the call. I sat there for a moment, eyes pinched closed, wondering how my life had become so complicated.

I only gave myself a minute to wallow in frustration before pushing myself to stand. I had rehearsals to get to and a show to see through to the end. More importantly, I had

an omega I needed to take care of and a baby to bring into the world.

That last bit put a smile on my face. I was going to be a father. I'd always liked kids, but I was only just over six hundred and hadn't really thought about starting a family yet. I could see Zack and I having dozens of children, though. It would be great. It would be?—

“I heard your conversation in there.”

As soon as I stepped into the hall, I nearly ran headlong into Eric.

“What? What are you talking about?”

I had a bad feeling I'd started answering Mom verbally instead of just telepathically. That happened sometimes, especially since I'd been up on land for a month now.

“You and Zack,” Eric said. “You can't keep it a secret forever, you know. I've been suspicious about the two of you from the start.”

“Come on, Eric,” I sighed, walking past him. “You need to get a life. I was just talking to my mom. She's worried about me and keeps insisting I go home. This obsession you have with my potential love life is a little weird.”

“I couldn't care less about who you're dating,” Eric said, following me as I headed back toward the stage. “You waltzed in here out of nowhere, stole the part that my friend should have had, and manipulated Ben and Betty into changing the show to make you the star. I'm not going to let you get away with that.”

I stopped a few yards from the stage door and turned to face him. “As I understand it, the parts in this show didn't belong to anyone until we all auditioned for them. I would have been happy with the chorus. Ben and Betty can do whatever they want,

it's their show. And if you're such a hot shot talent who should be a big star, why aren't you one already? Have you ever even auditioned for a show outside of Valleywood?"

"I spent two years in New York," Eric said, looking sullen and flushed.

"And?" I asked.

Eric's face pinched and contorted, like he was trying to think up a really good insult.

He didn't come up with anything, though. All he ended up saying was, "I've got my eye on you. If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to make sure that you're either cut from this show or that you're humiliated in front of everyone."

"Okay, Eric," I said with a smirk, then turned and headed on toward the stage.

Eric jumped into motion, racing in front of me so he could pull open the door and dash into the backstage area first.

I shook my head and took my time going where I needed to go. Zack was emotional and dramatic, but he had pregnancy hormones to blame. Eric was just a drama queen with too much time on his hands. I didn't care what he did to me.

I did care if he tried to hurt Zack, or anyone else, though. I wouldn't have put it past him to try something underhanded before the show was done. I would have to be on my guard to keep my mate and everyone else safe from one man's petty jealousy.

### CHAPTER NINE

Zack

The show had a really short rehearsal period, which meant that before we all knew it, it was opening night.

“I didn’t think I’d be this nervous,” Lucas said as the two of us walked from our building to the VPAC in the middle of the afternoon. “I mean, we had previews all through the week and an audience for those, but this feels different. This is...this is big.”

I actually managed to smile at him as we crossed the street and headed around to the cast and crew entrance. “That’s what I say when we’re horizontal.”

Lucas puffed a laugh, but I could feel it didn’t relieve his anxiety.

“You’re going to do great,” I told him. “You smashed previews. Everyone loves what they’ve done to the part of Triton?—”

“Everyone except Eric and Greg,” Lucas cut in quietly.

“Yeah, well they were never going to like it anyhow,” I said with a shrug. “And Greg’s been acting really strange these last few days, running around and jumping into broom closets and things.”

Lucas laughed, though the sound was tight and tense. “Yeah, he’s been acting really

fishy lately.”

“I thought being fishy was your job.”

We’d reached the door, and Lucas looked at me with a startled grin for my joke as he reached over my head to hold the door for me. I loved the appreciation he seemed to have for my sometimes weird humor. He still tried to encourage me not to give up on my dream of stand-up comedy, especially in those moments when it was just the two of us, cuddling behind closed doors.

I knew that particular dream of mine wasn’t going to happen now, though. Omega papas were supposed to stay home with their babies and keep popping more out. At least, that’s what I always assumed for some reason. But where were Lucas and I going to make a home? That whole thing about the fish and the bird falling in love hit home hard right now.

“Lucas! There you are,” Betty greeted us as soon as we started down the corridor, heading toward the dressing rooms.

“Here I am,” Lucas said with an excited, nervous smile. I could feel those nerves and that excitement through the bond between us that had been growing over the last couple of weeks. I’d been able to feel a lot of other things, too. Bonds were intense like that.

Betty didn’t look at all happy to see him or relaxed. “We’ve got a serious problem in wardrobe,” she said, marching up and wedging between us in a way that forced us to pick up our pace. “Several of the Act Two costumes didn’t make it back from the dry cleaner this morning.”

“Didn’t make it back from the dry cleaner?” Lucas frowned and gave her a startled look. “I thought the VPAC had its own laundry facilities.”

“It does,” Betty said, turning the corner and putting herself between me and Lucas even more as we entered the star dressing room. “But someone sliced through the power cord, and now the machine is useless.”

“Sliced through the power cord?” I asked, suspicion pooling in my already slightly queasy gut.

“I thought there was more than one machine,” Lucas said.

Betty let out a humorless laugh. “There are three, and all three have cut cords. It looks like someone pulled them away from the wall to try to reach something that fell back there and when they dragged whatever it was out, it sliced across all the cords.”

“Or someone sabotaged the machines,” I said, eyes wide.

Lucas looked at me like he agreed, but Betty was too flustered to join us on a little trip down Conspiracy Theory Lane. “Whatever happened,” she said, shaking her head, “it’s a massive inconvenience. The chorus costumes all stink to high heaven and your Act Two costumes are missing entirely.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Lucas said with a smile.

“I hope so,” Betty said. Her phone rang as she turned to face me, likely to give me a custodial order, and she snatched it from her pocket and answered. “Hello?”

I exchanged a glance with Lucas as Betty’s eyes got wider and wider.

“You’re kidding,” Betty said. “How does something like that even happen? Okay, I’ll take care of it.”

She ended the call then looked at me. “There was a short in the lighting board and all

of the lighting cues have to be reprogrammed.”

“Reprogrammed completely?” Lucas asked. “In—” he looked at his watch, “four hours?”

“Yep,” Betty said. She turned to me and said, “Zack, there’s been a spill on stage right. That big box of glitter that I told you to take back to the closet was tipped over, and now the stage is covered in the crap.”

“But I took it back three days ago,” I said, my heart beating rapidly.

My little tadpole didn’t like it when I got upset, and even though he or she was only a month and a half old in there, they made their displeasure known through the wave of nausea that hit me.

I gripped my stomach with one hand and Lucas’s arm with the other and bent forward, trying not to puke.

“You okay?” Lucas asked me, shifting to hold me.

I immediately glanced up to see if Betty noticed the intimacy between us. She looked more frustrated than determined to ruin our lives.

It felt like an order was coming from her, but when Greg popped his head around the doorway and said, “Hey, Bets, can I see you out here for a second?” she ignored me and moved toward the door.

“Clean up the glitter as soon as you can,” she called over her shoulder to me.

I took a few seconds to breathe when it was just me and Lucas in the dressing room. Tadpole liked that, and my nausea quickly subsided. I wasn’t in a hurry to leave



Lucas's arms, though.

"Take as long as you need," Lucas said, rubbing a hand over my back. I could still feel strain and worry radiating from him, though. "The glitter can wait."

I shook my head. "Glitter waits for no one."

Lucas smiled. His eyes zeroed in on mine, and for a second, I was certain he would kiss me.

Instead, his phone rang, and he sighed heavily before reaching to get it in his pocket. He tapped to answer, then held it to his face and said absolutely nothing. That meant it was his Mom calling.

The feeling that I could hear him talking underwater filled me again. His mom was still giving him a hard time, it seemed. She'd been calling him almost daily, apparently yelling at him and telling him he needed to leave his pathetic, landie omega behind to go home and get a real job, though Lucas swore that wasn't it. He wouldn't tell me specifics about what she usually said to him, though. He told me he didn't want to worry me.

Whatever the case, I didn't want to stand there in silence while Lucas had it out with his Mom. I waved at him and pointed to the door, inching farther that way. Lucas nodded, then half turned away from me, sighed, and ran a hand through his hair.

He felt a little defeated, so I wasn't super keen on leaving him. Just because I was knocked up and had no idea what my future held, other than a mermaid baby, didn't mean Lucas didn't deserve some TLC and support, too. I'd have to give it some other time, though. Glitter beckoned.

The glitter was every bit as much of a pain in the ass to clean up as ever, and it took

me way longer than it should have. I had to sweep as much of it as I could, but slowly so I didn't spread it around, then suck the rest of it up with a handheld vacuum.

The curtains were still open on the stage as the rest of the stage crew prepped the set. As usual, the sight of all those rows of seats and the lure of the spotlights as the lighting crew reset all the cues beckoned me. Things had turned out way different than I thought they would when I'd come to town, but the same impulses still burned in me.

As soon as the glitter was taken care of, I peeked around to make sure Betty wasn't about to charge at me with some new order, then I tip-toed out to the front of the stage.

It was there, deep within me, almost as deep as my growing bond with Lucas. The urge to tell jokes and make people laugh burned like an eternal flame. It felt like it existed in every cell of my body, all the way down to my DNA.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, wishing I had the courage to speak louder. "A funny thing happened to me on my way to the theater tonight."

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

I jumped and tensed so much that I felt a jolt of indignant protest from Tadpole as I turned to find Eric walking out to confront me.

"I was just cleaning up glitter," I said, torn between making up a thousand excuses for my bad behavior and protesting that it wasn't bad at all and I had as much right as anyone else to be in the spotlight for a second.

Eric came almost all the way out to me then paused, crossing his arms. He seemed anxious, but like he was trying to cover it with bravado. "You're just a stagehand. A

janitor at that. You have no right to be on this stage or to address the audience.”

“Says who?” I said, tilting my chin up a little in defiance.

“Says me,” Eric said. “I’ll still be a star here long after you and your illegal, secret boyfriend are gone.”

I flushed with embarrassment, wariness, but also fondness for Lucas all rolled up together. “Lucas and I will move on to better things, but yeah, you’ll probably be here forever.”

Eric didn’t like that. He snarled and stalked closer to me. Unnerved as I was, I stood my ground, which meant he came to within a few inches of me.

“You think Lucas is going to stick with you? A nobody?” he asked, seething.

“Um, yes, actually,” I answered, fighting not to put a hand on my belly and give everything away.

“Well, you’re wrong,” he said. “I happen to know for a fact that he’s planning to ditch this place and go back home to his mommy as soon as the show is over.”

I froze. He was lying. He had to be lying. Eric was exactly the sort to say something like that just to worry me. I should in no way take anything the man said at face value.

Except for the fact that Eric seemed to know Lucas was under pressure from his mom to go home.

“Yeah, I heard him on the phone the other day,” Eric said. “I heard him telling his mom he planned to ditch Valleywood and everyone in it as soon as the show closes.”

I relaxed a little and laughed. “Well, now I know you’re lying,” I said. When Lucas talked on the phone with his mom, he didn’t talk . Eric wouldn’t have overheard him.

“Oh yeah? You think so?” Eric glowered, like he didn’t like me calling his bluff.

And actually, sometimes Lucas did slip up and speak out loud, even though he was on the phone with his mom.

“Um, yeah?” I answered, deeply uncertain.

Eric snorted. “You know that showmances never last, right?” he asked. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen people hook up during a production only to ghost each other the day after set strike. You think you’re hot stuff now, but the second that curtain falls for the last time, Lucas won’t even remember your name.”

He was full of shit. Lucas loved me. The two of us had formed a bond. We’d made a child. There was no way he was going to abandon me.

But omegas ended up abandoned all the time. And that was without the added complication of me being a normal person and Lucas being a merman. The logistics of our relationship were already a nightmare. What if he decided it really couldn’t work? What if Eric was right?

“Eric! Get your butt up to make-up!” Betty called from the back of the stage. “And Zack, the chorus bathroom needs toilet paper!”

“You’re nobody,” Eric whispered to me again before turning to march off.

I stood there stunned and anxious for a moment, my heart racing. Eric had every reason in the world to lie to me just to mess with me and Lucas. But what if Lucas did leave me at the end of the show? Why would he want someone like me when he

literally had all the other fish in the sea to date and make a family with?

I shook my head and charged off the stage, hoping work would take my mind off everything and settle me.

It did not. By the time I refilled all the TP and helped the rest of the stagehands set the props for the show, my nerves were frayed. Someone spilled hand soap in the ladies' bathroom, so I had to go clean that up, too.

That was when I overheard the very last conversation I needed to hear just then.

"He ditched her for a Hollywood agent?" one of the chorus members, Anna, asked in shock as she checked her make-up in one of the bathroom mirrors.

"Yep," Penny, another chorus member replied. "Two weeks after she told him she was pregnant. And you know what he said?"

"I don't know if I want to know."

"He said that it probably wasn't his baby and that she just wanted to be with him because he was about to be a big star."

"No!" Anna gasped. "That's horrible!"

"Oh, it gets worse," Penny said. "Because she ended up losing her job because she had to miss so much work because of the baby. Last I heard, she'd gone back to her tiny hometown and was forced to marry her old high school sweetheart."

"It could have been worse," Anna said.

"He's a used car salesman."

The two of them made disgusted noises.

I couldn't take it anymore. I slammed the soap dispenser closed after I'd reloaded it and ran out of the room, trying not to burst into tears.

I didn't know where I was going, only that I needed a few seconds to hide. And to call Grandma. It was probably silly, but I really just needed to hear Grandma's voice telling me everything would be okay.

I found an empty office, but when I whipped out my phone and called Grandma's number, she didn't answer and I didn't have the heart to leave a voicemail. She didn't know how to listen to her messages anyhow.

That was the final straw. I burst into tears and sunk into the chair behind the desk, wailing, "I'm going to be abandoned by a fish and end up married to a used car salesman!"

"What's this now?"

I gasped and jerked straighter as Dion stepped forward from the door to what was probably a private bathroom. I glanced around quickly, realizing I'd ducked into his office to make my call.

"I'm sorry," I gulped, fumbling as I tried to push myself out of his chair. "I just needed to make a call. I'll get out of here and stop disturbing you."

Dion walked forward, making a calming gesture with his hands to get me to sit again. "You look like you need a few minutes. Take your time, breathe, and tell me what's going on."

I tried to breathe, but it wasn't easy. Especially since Tadpole wasn't happy about me

being so upset when he was trying to grow and develop in peace.

At the same time, as Dion came over and sat on the edge of his desk, I felt a pull to tell him everything. He had such a jolly, powerful energy. I felt like he might just be able to solve all my problems.

“What’s bothering you?” he asked.

I thought about making something up or telling him a half-truth, but I couldn’t. I didn’t know why, but I trusted him.

“I’m pregnant,” I began.

“Okay,” he said, no judgment at all.

“I’m having a forbidden showmance with Lucas Siren,” I went on.

Dion chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Ben and his stupid rules against showmances.”

“You don’t think it’s a bad thing?” I asked.

Dion shrugged. “Are you having fun?” He immediately answered himself with, “Well, you must be since you got pregnant.”

“Lucas is actually a merman who came from the bottom of Lake Erie,” I blurted. “He saved me when I fell off the bridge, only I didn’t know he was a merman and a siren when I fell in love with him. Then I went into heat and we had an amazing time and I got pregnant.”

“Okay,” Dion said with a nod, like nothing I’d said bothered him at all.

I blinked, startled by his calm. “A merman got me pregnant, and even though we bonded and are falling in love, I don’t know how we’re going to be together. Where do a fish and a bird build their nest?”

“You’re not a bird,” Dion pointed out.

I blew out a breath and let my shoulders drop. “No, I guess not.” I glanced up at Dion again. “But I’m not really anything. I’m just a guy from Philadelphia who was raised by his grandma and who thought he had dreams of doing stand-up comedy.”

“You thought you had dreams?” Dion asked.

“Well, yeah, now I’m pregnant. How am I supposed to make people laugh when I’ll be raising a fish baby gods only know where?”

“Well, I’m a god, and I might not know where you’ll raise your baby, but I can tell you you’re doing a fine job of making me laugh,” Dion said, smiling.

“Come again?” I blinked at him.

Dion shook his head like it didn’t matter. “You’re making more of this than you need to, er...sorry, I didn’t ask your name.”

It was a little depressing that the director of the VPAC didn’t know my name after all these weeks.

“It’s Zack,” I said. “Short for Zakai deMuse.”

Dion blinked at me like I’d said something significant. Then his smile grew tenfold and he said, “No! Zakai deMuse? By any chance is your grandma named Thalia?”



I sat a little straighter. “How did you know?”

Dion tipped his head back and laughed loudly. The sound was so pure and so jolly that it made me laugh with him, even though it was definitely not a moment for laughing.

“You’re Zakai the Muse,” he said. “You’re grandmother is Thalia, the Muse of Comedy.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said, eyes wide.

Dion went back to looking at me in disbelief. “Didn’t you know? Didn’t she ever tell you?”

“That she was an ancient Greek demigod who inspires people with the spirit of?”

It hit me like a ton of bricks. My grandma was the Muse of Comedy. My mom was a muse of something or other, too, she had to be. That’s why she wasn’t raising me. She was off exploring the world, inspiring artists. Literally, not figuratively, like I’d always assumed.

“Ohhh,” I said, sinking back into the chair.

“I knew Thalia from way back,” Dion went on with a chuckle. “She was the perfect guest to invite to a party. The more people drank, the more they loved her.”

“Yeah, Grandma always was the life of the party,” I said in a distant voice. A second later, I frowned and looked up at Dion. “Why wouldn’t she tell me, though? And what does it matter who my grandma is when I’m in love with a merman who will probably leave me after this show ends and I’m having his baby?”

Dion laughed like I'd told a joke. "Well, you have to admit that it explains why your life is a comedy of errors."

I winced. "That's not really helping, thanks."

"But you see, it is helping," Dion said, smiling. "Back in my youth, when theater was new, we always used to say there were two kinds of plays, comedies and tragedies. In tragedies, everyone dies in the end, and in comedies, everyone gets married and lives happily ever after. We invented that concept. Comedies have happy endings, my boy." He reached forward to thump my arm. "You have happy endings in your blood. Everything will be just fine, you'll see."

"It doesn't feel like everything will be fine right now," I said.

"That's because it's not the end of the story," Dion said.

He held his hand out to me, and when I took it, he pulled me to stand. "Now get out there and do your part for this play. I daresay you're only in Act Three right now, when things look to be at their worst before everything is miraculously resolved so that you have your happy ending at the end."

I arched an eyebrow at him. "It's only a two-act play."

That only made Dion laugh harder. "All will be well. You'll see."

I suppose I had to take his word for it. He seemed to know what he was talking about. And he'd given me a lot to think about, too. But whether I was living in a comedy or a tragedy had yet to be determined.

### CHAPTER TEN

Lucas

I should have realized things weren't going to go as planned from the moment I picked up that call from my mom shortly after Zack and I arrived at the theater.

"So there's nothing I can say or do to convince you that this is a bad idea?" Mom finally asked after what felt like half an hour of the same old arguments.

I sighed and rubbed the bridge of my nose. I needed to get up to my dressing room to check out the costume situation, then head down to the rehearsal room for vocal warm-ups with the rest of the cast. "No, Mom. At this point, if I suddenly walked out, the entire show would have to close before it opened."

"That might be a good thing," she said.

"It really wouldn't be," I insisted. "It's a great show, Mom. We've all worked really hard on it. The production values are top-notch, considering how fast the whole thing came together. If you would just come up here and see it, maybe you'd think differently about things."

Mom hummed, but I wasn't sure if that was disapproval or consideration.

"And you really need to meet Zack," I said. "Like, really. You need to meet him. He's going to be a big part of my life."

I hadn't told her about the baby yet. Maybe it was irresponsible of me, but I wanted to give her the news about her impending grandchild in person.

At last, after what felt like too long, Mom sighed and said, "I'll think about it."

We said our goodbyes and ended the call. I stood where I was, staring at my phone for a long time, wondering if I should have said more or if there were a better way to make things right with her.

There wasn't much I could do at that point. Time was ticking, I had to figure out the costume situation, and I could already hear chattering from down the hall that told me the rest of the cast was starting to assemble.

There were more things going on at the theater than met the eye. I was still thinking about my mom as I headed toward the dressing rooms, but when one of the stagehands stopped me with a frantic look and said, "Have you seen Triton's trident anywhere?" I started to suspect something was really off.

"I haven't," I said. "I more or less just got here."

The young beta made a worried, frustrated sound then moved on.

By the time I made it up to my dressing room, I was certain sinister forces were at work.

"We've got all of the chorus costumes and for whatever reason, Greg's understudy costumes are here, but half of Lucas's Triton costumes are either missing or shredded," one of the dressers was in the middle of telling Betty as I entered the room.

"Shredded?" I asked my heart rate kicking up as I stepped into the room.

Betty turned to look at me with the first really worried look I'd seen from her. "We got everything back from the cleaners, but your Act Two costumes are in tatters."

"How did that happen?" I asked.

"I have no idea," Betty said, stepping past me to the rack of clothes against the wall. "We're okay for the first act, but wardrobe is going to have to scramble to come up with something for Act Two. I have no idea how we're going to make another mermaid tail as flashy as the other one for the big finale number in just four hours."

I relaxed and smiled. That was one thing Betty didn't have to worry about.

"I think I know how to take care of the finale tail," I said. "Leave that to me."

Betty stopped her rifling through the rack of costumes and glanced over her shoulder at me. "Wait, you're one of the stars of the show and you're volunteering to fix your own costume?"

"I...I have something handy that I could use," I said. It wasn't a lie, she just didn't have to know exactly how it was the truth.

Betty continued to stare at me for a few seconds before she blinked. "Okay, whatever. I don't have time to worry about it. I have to go sort out the fly backdrops. Someone just told me the pieces for the Act One scene change are jammed or tangled or something."

"Go, go," I told her, dread growing in my gut. "We'll sort things here."

No sooner had I said that, than Greg popped his head around the corner and said, "Hey, Bets baby. Can we talk?"

Betty flushed and sent a sheepish look over her shoulder to me and the dresser before marching for the door and Greg. “I thought I told you not to call me that at the theater. If Ben finds out....”

The conversation quickly faded as Betty and Greg walked away down the hall.

“You know that’s the whole reason Ben forbid anyone from having showmanes during this thing,” the dresser said.

“Because of Betty and Greg?”

“Yeah. It’s probably at least half the reason Ben gave you the role of Triton pretty much on the spot, too,” she said. Although she immediately added, “But you were also amazing at your audition. I didn’t mean to imply you only got the role because Ben doesn’t want that horse’s behind dating his sister. You’re really great, the best thing about this show. I’m going to head down to the costume room and see if I can find a way to fix your ballroom costume.”

Before I could tell her that I wasn’t offended by anything she’d said, the dresser darted out of the room.

I hoped I could have a few moments peace to get dressed and make my way down to the rehearsal room, but as I was midway through putting on my pretty unimpressive Act One tail costume, Eric sauntered into the room.

“Hey, loser,” he said.

I barely glanced up at him, no time at all for his peevish antics. “Hey, Eric.”

“So did you hear about your little friend, Zack, and Dion the VPAC director?” Eric asked.

I didn't even look at him as I said, "Nice try, Eric. I'm not going to believe a word you say about Zack, or anything else for that matter. You're as transparent as bubbles."

"I'm what?" Eric asked, his face pinched in a genuinely confused frown.

I finished tucking in the tunic I wore with my Act One costume and twisted to head for the door. "Are you coming to warm-ups?" I asked as I headed into the hall.

"I'm telling you that your special little omega friend was seen crying in Dion's office with Dion himself sitting by his side, comforting him, and you're not even slightly concerned?"

I stopped just before turning the corner. I could hear the piano going and the chorus singing scales, but suddenly my own heartbeat was louder in my ears.

"Zack was crying?" I mean, of course he was. My adorable omega was sensitive and high-strung sometimes, but that was to be expected with him being pregnant.

I reached out through the bond, finding only strange, conflicted emotions from Zack as Eric answered, "Yeah. He looked really upset. Something about thinking things aren't going to work out between the two of you. I think he was asking Dion's advice about how to break up with you, and Dion was being very attentive in return."

That was a complete load of fish paste, but I was still concerned about Zack.

"Excuse me," I said, turning and heading back down the corridor in search of my omega.

I could have sworn I heard Eric chuckling behind me.

I only got a few steps before I met Ben coming the other way.

“Where are you going?” Ben asked. “I need the entire cast in the rehearsal room at once. There’s been some last-minute changes to the script because of the messed-up lighting cues and we need to go over them.”

I glanced longingly down the hall. My search for Zack would have to wait, although the strange bundle of conflicted feelings inside me hinted it couldn’t wait long.

The changes to the script, songs, and blocking for Act One were minimal. Ben had us all run through some of the scenes in the rehearsal room, and then a second time on the stage itself, with the reprogrammed lighting cues. That was the first glimpse of Zack that I had since my Mom had called me.

Zack was setting up the table of props off to one side. He looked intent in his work, but I could feel a sort of dazed buzz coming off him through the bond. I really wanted to know what that was all about.

I thought I’d have my chance when Ben finally let us go to finish dressing and go to make-up. Zack was helping another of the stagehands untangle some cord at that point, and he looked up as I strolled in his direction. His expression flashed instantly to a smile before dropping to a worried frown.

“Zack, we need to talk,” I said approaching him.

Zack stood, looking and feeling horrifically worried. “It’s true, isn’t it. You’re going back to the lake, er, I mean, home after the show and you’re not taking me.”

“What? No!” I said, my anger at Eric, who had to be behind everything, flaring.

Unfortunately, I could tell Zack felt my anger and misinterpreted it. “I knew it,” he



said. “And even though Dion said?—”

“Dion?” Maybe Zack and Dion had something going on after all.

I rejected that notion as soon as it popped into my mind. It was frustrating how Eric’s douchery could infect my thoughts and make me doubt the things I knew.

I shook my head and was about to tell Zack that when Betty came racing up to me.

“There you are. You’re needed in the make-up room immediately. Xavier just called in sick, and the intern who needs to do your make-up has no idea what he’s doing, so it’s going to take twice as long.”

She grabbed my wrist and started pulling.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I told Zack as she pulled me off.

The residual worry I felt from him did not make leaving him easy.

From that point, nothing was easy. Tony, the new make-up guy, was good at his job, but he took so long to get the fishy accents and fake gems glued to my face. After that, Betty needed me for some more wardrobe problems. Once those were taken care of, we had another round of warm-ups.

All through the buzz and fuss, I tried to find Zack again to tell him everything was okay between us, I loved him, and we were going to figure out a way to get through every challenge being thrown at us. But every time I so much as opened my mouth or raised a hand to wave to him, either he or I were dragged away. It would have been funny if I didn’t feel like we both needed the reassurance of each other or we would crack.

That was stressful enough, but when Betty called out “Fifteen minutes, everyone. Fifteen!” my anxiety kicked up another notch.

This was it. This was the ostensible reason I’d come up onto land. The real reason was Zack, but that didn’t mean that I didn’t care about the play. I absolutely cared about it. I wanted to do a good job, not just for my own sake, but for the sake of the cast and crew. Everyone had put so much into the production, and I owed it to all of them to make it as much of a success as it could be.

“We’ve got this,” Lindsey said as the two of us headed out to the stage to take our places. “The costumes are messed up, the lighting cues might be off, half the set pieces aren’t working?—”

“Half the set pieces aren’t working?” I asked, eyes wide.

Lindsey looked back at me as we reached the wings. “Yeah, didn’t you hear? The mechanical ones all suddenly have blown motors. Stagehands are going to have to push them onto the stage for scene changes.”

I hadn’t heard. I searched around for Zack, worried that he might strain himself and hurt the baby by pushing the heavy set pieces.

“But we’re going to nail this,” Lindsey finished her pep talk. I glanced to her and she finished with, “Really, Lucas, we are.”

“I hope so,” I said, as she headed all the way onto the set, where she started when the curtain went up.

“Don’t screw this up,” Eric whispered, surprising me as he snuck up behind me. “It would be a shame if you forgot your lines or your voice cracked on a high note or you tripped over something on the stage.”

I whipped to face him with narrowed eyes as the orchestra began to tune. “You’re responsible for all of this,” I said. It wasn’t a question. “You’re so sore about not being the sole center of attention for this show that you just had to ruin it for everyone else.”

Eric shrugged. “It won’t be completely ruined. The storm scene is going to look fantastic.”

Before I could say or do anything, he walked off to take his place for his first entrance.

I wanted to strangle the man. His ego was so big that he had to ruin things for everyone else to get his way. He should have been a politician.

“Lucas!”

I immediately dropped those thoughts and turned as Zack hurried up to me, dressed in stagehand blacks.

“Hey, guppy,” I said, pulling him halfway into my arms. “Look, I’m sorry about everything that’s happening. I feel like this is all my fault.”

“It’s not,” Zack said. “Eric is behind everything, I’m sure.”

“Oh, I know he is,” I said. “And he’s a jerk for it. But I’m not going to let his sabotage ruin this show, and I’m not going to let it ruin what we have. We have something special, Zack.” I put my hand on the side of his face. “We’re a couple, a team. I love?—”

“It’s your cue! Go! Go!” Zack hissed, then spun me toward the stage and pushed me.

He was right. Lindsey had finished her opening song and it was my cue. I pulled it together as fast as I could and strode out onto the stage, my first time ever in front of an audience.

I wish I could say that everything went perfectly and nothing Eric did to sabotage the show worked. I wished I could say that, but it didn't go down like that.

First off, something must have been wrong with the follow spots. I tried to keep to my marks, but the light kept swaying, leaving me in darkness. I tried subtly chasing it for that first scene, but that only made the audience laugh.

Then came my first song with Lindsey, a sweet father-daughter number. Or it would have been sweet if something hadn't been wrong with one of the clarinets that accompanied my part. It kept squawking and breaking, especially when I reached a high note. At least the audience was entertained.

The set pieces did, indeed, have trouble as they were moved around the set for scene changes. More than that, because the pieces moved slower, the orchestra got ahead of the change, and I had to begin our first large chorus number before the set was entirely in place.

Completely unsurprisingly, as soon as Eric's storm scene began, everything functioned perfectly. The set piece for the ship worked as it should have, the lighting cues were on point, and the orchestra was fine.

Only after that, after the scene where Lindsey rescued Eric and they had their first duet, when Lindsey returned to the sea for one of the new numbers that had been written especially for me, did things start to go wrong again.

From the sound of things, half the orchestra was missing the sheet music for the new number. Then one of the dancers doing their thing behind us tripped. Thirty seconds

later, another one tripped. When I stole a moment to see why, it looked like someone had spilled a bowl of marbles across the back of the stage.

That was a problem, but just as I was trying to decide whether to stop the show so the marbles could be cleaned up and the dancers' ankles spared, Zack appeared from one side of the stage with his huge broom, wearing half of one of the dancers' merperson costumes.

The audience laughed as he swept the marbles up, Lindsey and I finished the number and the scene, Lindsey had her scene with the Sea Witch, and Act One ended with her swimming up to land to try to win her prince.

I'd never been so relieved to end the first act of a play in my life.

"That was harrowing," I told Zack when the two of us met in the wings as the stage crew ran frantically around, changing the scenery for the land palace scene that needed to be in place for Act Two. "I was three seconds away from stopping the whole thing. I don't know why Betty didn't call a hold when the marbles came out."

"Betty was distracted," Zack informed me with a stunned look. "Greg decided to confess his undying love for her at just that moment. She didn't see the marbles."

"That has Eric written all over it," I growled.

"Yeah, and the other thing that has Eric written all over it is the fact that the palace set just collapsed," Zack said, pointing past me to the stage.

Sure enough, the pillars that suggested the ballroom of the palace had just tumbled as the stagehands tried to move them into place.

"Shit, shit, shit," Betty said, charging out onto the stage to see to the carnage. "What

happened here?”

“They just fell over,” one of the stagehands said.

“Can you get them back up before Act Two?” Betty asked.

“We’ll have to,” the stagehand said. “But there’s another problem. The ball guests’ props are all mixed up with the goblets and ribbons from the finale.”

“Get it sorted,” Betty said. “This show will go on, no matter who or what is trying to stop it.”

She glanced past me and Zack to where Eric was leaning against the stage wall in the wings, looking at his nails with a smug look.

“I have nothing to do with it,” Eric said, completely unconvincingly.

We all knew that wasn’t true.

Betty turned back to me and Zack. “We can fix this, but it’s going to prolong intermission. People are going to get restless and angry.”

“Not unless we entertain them with something else,” I said, feeling like a lightning bolt of inspiration hit me. I turned to Zack with a smile and said, “Zack can go out on stage and do his stand-up routine.”

“I can what now?” Zack said, his face going pale.

I grabbed his shoulders. “This is perfect,” I said. “Your whole purpose in coming to Valleywood was to give stand-up a try.”

“I’m not sure that was really the reason,” he stammered.

“Well, now’s your opportunity,” I went on. “I know you’ll be fantastic. You’re the funniest person I know. All you have to do is go out there and tell people about everything that’s happened for the last few weeks and you’ll have them in stitches.”

“I’m not sure that’s actually a good thing,” Zack said in a slightly sick voice.

“You can do this, guppy,” I said, resting a hand on the side of his face. “I know you can.”

“You have to do this,” Betty said in an entirely different, more terrified voice. “We don’t have any other choice. Hey, Norbert! Give Zack here your jacket!”

Norbert, who was one of the chorus members and happened to be standing nearby, wearing a glittery jacket, veered toward us. Without questioning why, he shrugged out of his jacket and handed it to Betty.

“Here you go, kid,” Betty said, moving behind Zack to throw the glittery jacket over his shoulders and stuff his arms in the sleeves. “It’s your moment to shine. You’re going to buy us some time, keep the audience happy, and give us a chance to save the show.”

“I am?” Zack asked, his voice small and thin.

“Yep. You sure are,” Betty said, then shoved Zack through the gap in the side of the curtain and straight out onto the stage.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Zack

The jacket felt heavy as it settled over my shoulders. Betty's words were a blur in my ears as she gave me what I thought was supposed to be a pep talk. I would have turned and run entirely, but the hope and confidence and love in Lucas's face and that I felt through our bond leaked into me and gave me just enough courage that when Betty pushed me out through the gap in the curtain, I kept going forward instead of turning and running back.

At first, nothing happened. Most of the audience was standing and talking to each other or flipping through their programs or wandering in and out of the auditorium for snacks or a bathroom break. Few people noticed me, and those who did probably assumed I was some stagehand sent to check something. Heaven only knew enough had gone wrong in the first act that it made sense for someone from the crew to wander around troubleshooting.

But then the house lights flashed, the audience headed back to their seats, and people seemed to realize I was there with a purpose. Gradually, the chatter hushed as more people sat, and the house lights slowly dimmed to darkness.

Before they dimmed entirely, someone began to applaud. I searched the front balcony, and lo and behold, there was Grandma. She hooted and clapped some more, then shouted, "That's my grandson!"

The audience laughed...which totally made sense to me now. Muse of Comedy and



all. Why hadn't she told me about all of this? It would have been nice to know before?—

Then the spotlight snapped on, focusing on me with blinding intensity, and all other thoughts were blasted out of my head. Maybe inspired by my grandma, everyone in the audience applauded like I'd already done something special.

It was kind of nice, actually. Kind of encouraging.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I called out, standing a little taller and grasping the lapels of my sparkly jacket...for dear life. "I, er, um, there's going to be a slight delay as we work out a few technical problems backstage, but hey! That just means you get to stare at my pretty face for a few minutes." I flashed a cheesy smile.

They laughed. The audience actually laughed.

I cleared my throat, heart pounding a mile a minute, and let the sense of excitement and purpose carry me instead of running and hiding from it.

"So it's kind of a long story how I ended up as part of this production," I began. Tell the story of the last few weeks, Lucas had said. It was certainly a bizarre story, but I didn't know how funny it was.

"Oh, and yep, that's my grandma alright," I said, gesturing into the crowd where I could just barely make out her face in the light coming from the stage. "Grandma raised me. If you think I'm funny, you should meet her. I mean, the woman actually puts pineapple on her pizza. If that's not funny, I don't know what is."

The audience chuckled and I started to sweat.

"Oh, wait. Comedy not controversy," I said, earning a slightly bigger laugh. I'd better

stick to safer topics, like religion and the fact that no one told Valleywood that the old gods were supposed to stay tucked away in myths and legends.”

That earned me a way bigger laugh than I thought it would, but it also confirmed a few things that had been simmering in the back of my mind since my little chat with Dion earlier.

I flailed for some way to go on and to keep people laughing, but my mind had gone blank. It was handy that someone in the orchestra pit stepped up on the conductor’s block and handed me a microphone. Yeah, that would probably help. I reached for it and nearly fumbled it, which provided a nice bit of physical comedy as I finally caught it and pulled the insanely long cord onto the stage with me.

I glanced into the wings and spotted Lucas. He made a gesture for me to keep going, but just knowing he was watching me gave me the confidence to go on.

“So. How I ended up as a stagehand for The Little Mermaid ,” I said. I shrugged and walked along the stage a little, the spotlight following me. “I suppose it’s all because I tumbled out of the sky and fell into the arms of a merman, really.”

A few people hummed or oohed or made other interested sounds.

“Yeah. One minute I was standing up on the bridge, looking back at the city, and the next, some guy on a bike rides past, and I’m tumbling head over heels down into the water.”

“Loki,” someone called out.

“Bless you,” I replied.

The audience laughed.

“Anyhow, there I was, splashing into the water, certain that was how it all ended, kind of like our own Little Mermaid’s prince, when suddenly, a strong pair of arms wrapped around me and I was pulled in tight against a naked, alpha chest. And I thought to myself, eh, okay, maybe death isn’t so bad.”

I got another laugh for that one. It felt good. More than good. It felt like I was doing exactly what I’d been made for.

“So there I was, bobbing around in the arms of a gorgeous, alpha merman thinking, ‘I love Philly, but this beats a hoagie any day!’”

The audience laughed so much that I wondered if maybe Grandma was helping things along.

“Nice city you have here, by the way,” I went on, my smile brighter and my enthusiasm for what I was doing growing. “Great welcoming committee.”

That also earned me a laugh.

“You’ve got a bunch of great restaurants, too. My merman and I actually went for our first date at one of your seafood restaurants. In hindsight, I wonder why I ordered the Caesar salad. That’s like going to a Mexican restaurant in the middle of the Arizona desert and ordering sushi, you know?”

That one definitely wasn’t funny, but maybe I was?

“My merman ordered the fish, of course,” I went on, wondering how long I could drag this whole thing out. I didn’t have a set prepared, so I was totally winging it, which was ironic for a story about a merman.

Ooh! I’d have to use that one.

“He told me he didn’t eat land meat,” I went on. “And I thought, ‘well, there go my plans for later’.”

The audience ate it up. I worked that into my next joke. Who would have thought I could have come up with an entire stand-up set at the spur of the moment using just food jokes and an increasingly fictionalized version of my date with Lucas as material?

I was still sweating through the whole thing, though. I couldn’t fill an entire evening with fish jokes. As I scrambled for more content, I kept peeking into the wings to see if someone, anyone, would give me a signal that things were a go for Act Two.

Right around the time that I started off on a new track by saying, “I came to audition for the show, but I ended up pushing a broom to clean up glitter from the stage. And if that doesn’t tell you something about why I was the one shoved out here to entertain you during intermission, then I don’t know what does,” Betty appeared in the wings and waved at me.

I’d never felt so relieved in my life.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, it’s been fantastic entertaining you today,” I said, so relieved that my knees nearly buckled. “And now, on with the show!”

The audience applauded and laughed as I handed the mic back to the conductor, then raced for the wings, nearly tripping over my own feet in my haste to get out of the spotlight. It had been fun, it had scratched that itch that had inspired me to leave Philly for Valleywood in the first place, but I wasn’t sure I would be in a hurry to get in front of an audience again. Not without serious preparation.

“You were amazing!” Lucas greeted me in a tight whisper once I flew into his arms in the wings. “That was brilliant.”

“Everything is ready for Act Two,” Betty said, not really paying attention to us, as Ben strode up to our corner of the wings. “Cue the orchestra.”

She spoke into her headset, and moments later, the orchestra started tuning.

“That was terrifying,” I told Lucas with a laugh, clinging to him. “But hey! Grandma is out there in the audience.”

“I heard,” Lucas said with a laugh. “I’m so proud of you.”

My heart was already racing, but my head spun like a waterspout as Lucas leaned in and kissed me. It was one of the best kisses I’d ever had, because it was completely filled with love. It went beyond just our lips and bodies. I could feel his entire soul embracing me through our bond.

“See?” Eric’s voice suddenly shouted only a few feet away from us. “Do you see this? I told you they were involved. I told you they were breaking the rules.”

Eric had rushed over to us along with Ben. Greg was standing by his side, too, although he didn’t look nearly as happy to be there or to be dragged into whatever mess Eric was trying to create.

“We don’t have time for this,” Ben said, scowling at all of us. At least that included Eric. “Lucas, you’re meant to be on stage, like, now. The curtain is going up at any second.”

Ben and Betty had inserted a quick song for Lucas, which he sang from one side of the stage, lamenting his missing daughter, before shifting to the land scene.

“Right,” Lucas said letting go of me. “It’s going to be alright. Everything is going to work out just fine.”

It was hard to tell whether he meant that for me or for Ben and Betty when it came to the show.

“You can’t just let him go out there and finish the show like that,” Eric protested as Lucas walked out to take his place. “According to your rules, he should be fired. Greg is right here, ready to go on as the understudy. Get him off the stage and put Greg on.”

“I really don’t need to go on,” Greg said, raising his hands and backing away.

“You have to go on!” Eric shouted just as the orchestra reached the crescendo of the Act Two overture and the curtains opened. “I went through all this trouble to get rid of him so that you could take the role.”

“Excuse me?” I asked. I was too loud, especially now that the curtain was open and the number had started, so I lowered my voice to a hiss and asked a second time, “Excuse me ?”

“You know something about all the problems the show has been having, don’t you?” Betty said, glaring at Eric.

“I—” Eric suddenly seemed to realize he’d put a foot wrong.

Ben grabbed his arm and dragged him along the wings to the opening of the corridor that connected the stage area to the dressing and rehearsal rooms. “What is going on here?” he snapped.

“Nothing is going on,” Eric said, laughing nervously. “Nothing except Lucas and Zack dating behind everyone’s back, which you explicitly forbid.”

“Uh-uh.” I shook my head. “You’re not getting out of what you said earlier. You

went through trouble to get Greg on as Triton?”

Ben and Betty turned to Greg.

“Don’t look at me,” Greg said, taking a step back from everyone. “I had nothing to do with any of this. I told Eric it was all a bad idea.”

“What was a bad idea?” Ben boomed.

“Nothing,” Eric laughed nervously. “We need to focus on the important things here. Lucas broke your explicit rule, and he should be fired from the production at once.”

“Eric, half a dozen people have broken my no dating rule,” Ben said, exasperated. “I never expected it would hold anyhow. Even Betty is dating Greg, which is the entire reason why I made the rule in the first place.”

“Hey,” Betty snapped back at her brother. “You don’t own me. You have no say in whether I find myself a little boy-toy during productions.”

Yeah, I had a feeling that was as much as I wanted to know about that particular topic.

I needed to steer things back to the important matter at hand, so I asked outright, “Eric, did you deliberately sabotage the show tonight in order to get Lucas fired?”

“What? I...how could...I didn’t mean...how dare you!” Eric stammered.

“Eric?” Ben asked, his brow a dark line and his eyes sharp with anger.

“I didn’t do anything!” Eric gasped.

“I tried to stop him,” Greg said at the same time. “He didn’t want Lucas stealing the focus in the show, and when he couldn’t get those two fired before opening night, he resorted to breaking things and undermining Lucas’s performance so people would think he sucked.”

I knew it! I almost jumped into the air and did a fist-pump. Rats were always outed in the end.

“Is this true?” Ben asked looking like he might strangle Eric personally.

“How could you cast a nobody and then make his part bigger than mine?” Eric shouted. “I had to do something. You can’t treat me like this. It’s not fair.”

Ben turned to Betty and said, “Find Vincent and send him on immediately.”

Vincent was the understudy for the prince. I couldn’t help but grin at the order. Eric was about to get what he deserved.

Ben turned back to Eric and said, “You’re fired.”

“What? No! I didn’t break the rules. I’m not secretly dating anyone,” Eric protested.

“You tried to ruin the show,” I pointed out, giddy with victory. “That seems like a firing offense to me.”

“You can’t do this to me,” Eric said as Betty turned away, speaking into her headset. “I’m the star of this show. I’m the one people came here to see.”

“I apologize for the cliché,” Ben said, grabbing Eric’s arm and marching him away from the stage, “but you’ll never work in this town again.”



“I refuse to let you do this,” Eric continued to shout, maybe trying to be loud enough to be heard by the audience, though I doubted he could be. “The second act will flop anyhow. The set pieces are jammed and that scene-stealing diva doesn’t have his big finale costume.”

“Looks like we’re adding destruction of property and willful sabotage to the charges that will be brought against you,” Ben said as they neared the end of the hall.

Eric made a horrified sound just before they turned the corner. That was the end of that, as far as I was concerned.

I blew out a breath, then smiled as I glanced to Betty.

“Everything is set from our end,” she told me. “We’re going to need all hands on deck out there.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” I said, my energy running at an all-time high.

We headed back into the backstage area just as the opening scene with Triton lamenting the loss of his daughter ended. Lucas and the chorus members playing the merpeople hurried off-stage, and Lindsey, Vincent, and everyone else playing the people in the palace rushed on.

“Where’s Eric?” Lucas whispered as we met in the dark.

“Gone,” I said, laughing. “Caught in his own net.”

“Good,” Lucas said, then pulled me into his arms for another amazing kiss.

The rest of the world disappeared, and for a moment it was only the two of us. Correction, the three of us. Tadpole was as giddy in my belly as if they’d had a part in

the whole thing. We'd beat the real bad guy, and even though we still had a lot of things to work out, I knew things would be okay.

I pulled back as I remembered some of what Eric had said. "We still don't have a good finale costume for you," I told Lucas.

Lucas grinned and wiggled his eyebrows. "You leave that to me."

I knew what he had planned, of course. The very thought of it made me giggly and clumsy for the rest of the second act, as I joined the others in manually moving the set pieces and making sure everyone's props and costume changes were where they needed to be when they needed them. The whole thing was a buzz of activity, so much so that I forgot to take off my glittery jacket. I kind of liked that jacket, though, and I hoped they'd let me keep it.

At last, after ballroom scenes, the prince falling for the wrong woman, and an almost wedding that involved Lindsey getting her voice back and winning her true love, we made it through the show and it was time for the finale. I knew Lucas had something special planned when I spotted one of the stagehands passing out spray bottles to some of the members of the chorus.

Even though it wasn't where I was supposed to be, I snuck my way to the front of the stage so I could watch through the wings and get a good view of the towering set piece that represented Triton's throne as he welcomed his daughter and her prince home to the undersea world. I knew it was going to be good.

Sure enough, when the covering that hid Lucas at first was removed and the throne revealed, instead of sitting there in a costume, Lucas had fully transformed into his merman self. For added effect, the chorus members with spray bottles were subtly keeping his tail wet so it glittered and shone under the stage lights.

The audience gasped and applauded. Lucas had them all captivated as he sang his beautiful welcome to the happy couple. I wasn't sure how he did it, because I really hadn't asked him enough about his tail yet, but he came down off his throne and managed to maneuver around the stage, although it wasn't quite dancing.

It didn't matter that he wasn't able to work through the choreography. I could see from my position that the audience was enthralled by him. So was I.

"That's my alpha!" I whispered to no one in particular.

No, I was telling someone in particular. I put my hand to my belly, right over Tadpole, and said, "That's Daddy!"

The show ended amidst a flurry of applause. The audience loved it. There was so much cheering and cries of "Bravo!" as the cast, particularly Lucas, but Lindsey, too, took their bows that I was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that the whole thing would be a wild success.

Better still, in the chaotic, excited moments just after the end, as the cast and crew was celebrating with hugs and kisses, I spotted Grandma pushing her way through the people trying to stop her from coming backstage through the side of the curtain.

"Grandma!" I called out, letting go of Lucas and running to her. "You came!"

"Of course I did." Grandma opened her arms to me and hugged me tightly when I reached her. "I was driving when you called me earlier. I never take calls while driving. That's not funny."

I laughed anyhow, then gasped and stepped back. "How come you never told me you were the Muse of Comedy?"

“I didn’t?” Grandma said, looking thoroughly confused. “I thought everyone knew that.” She shrugged. “Ah, well. Sometimes the funniest moments come from a complete misunderstanding.”

That made me laugh, too. It was all quickly forgotten as Lucas walked over to join us. I hadn’t seen him shift back to legs, but at least he was wearing sweatpants now.

“Grandma, I’d like you to meet Lucas,” I said, pulling the two of them closer together as Lucas offered his hand. “He’s my alpha, we’re bonded, he really is a merman, and I’m having his baby.”

I finished with a deep breath, relieved that absolutely everything was out in the open.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lucas,” Grandma said. She narrowed her eyes at him and said, “You and I have a lot to discuss, Zakai.”

“We certainly do,” Lucas said, smiling warmly at Grandma.

It was perfect. I could tell the two of them adored each other at first sight, just as it should be. It made everything feel absolutely perfect. I’d found my purpose for traveling to Valleywood, and I was certain that I would get my happily ever after now.

Lucas

It was amazing how the cast and crew of The Little Mermaid pulled together to get everything back on the right track after that first performance. As soon as it came to light that Eric had deliberately sabotaged the show in an attempt to, well, I wasn't even entirely certain what his motives were. Yes, he wanted to get me and Zack both fired so that he could have most of the glory, but honestly, I think his own ambition and his ego shifted from wanting to turn the spotlight on himself to wanting to ruin the whole thing out of spite.

It was weird how people did that sometimes. But as is usually the case, Eric's ambition spiraled so far out of control that it ended up hurting him and bringing the rest of us together.

Everybody showed up bright and early at the VPAC the next day to work on repairing set pieces, remaking costumes, and reprogramming the lights and sound for the show.

"Hey, my grandma made a bunch of cupcakes for everyone," Zack announced as we arrived carrying two big boxes of cupcakes. "But watch out. Grandma has a funny sense of humor. The ones that look like they're chocolate are actually cherry-flavored, and the ones that look vanilla are actually white chocolate."

"Ooh! I don't care as long as they're cake!" Lindsey said, taking the box Zack held.

The cupcakes were a huge success. Zack's Grandma Thalia was amazing. I loved her in an instant, and when she found out that Zack was pregnant with my child, she was

beyond thrilled. She hugged me so tight I thought my tail might pop out, and declared that I was forever her child, too.

“You might be related,” she’d said once the three of us sat down to talk about the future and our plans to get married. “Distant cousins, of course, but you know how things were back in the old days. Gods, demigods, muses, sirens...we’re all only a degree or two away from Zeus anyhow.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to think about that too hard. There was nothing quite so unnerving as finding out you might just be related to your fiancé.

Not that anything was official between me and Zack. Not yet, at least. Marriage was inevitable, seeing as he was carrying my child and we’d definitely bonded. I was waiting for just the right time to actually pop the question. I wanted to make certain everything was perfect and settled so that Zack wouldn’t have any doubts at all about building a life with me, wherever that life might end up.

Because, of course, there was one big issue that still hung over our heads....

“I’m kind of glad they decided to let you transform for the finale every night instead of making you a new costume,” Zack whispered as the final scene leading up to the finale played out on our last night of performances. “I have to admit, you’re incredibly hot with your tail.”

He sprayed me down so I would be extra shiny when the lights hit me and wiggled his eyebrows as he did.

I laughed. “You’re sure you’re okay with it?” I whispered as I maneuvered myself onto Triton’s throne. Transforming on land wasn’t just itchy and uncomfortable, it was awkward and so much harder to move around than when I was in the water.

“I’m more than fine with it,” Zack said in a comically sexy voice. He leaned in and

made a purring sound before kissing my shoulder and my neck.

“Careful,” I giggled, feeling myself heat. “There’s nothing more off-putting than a merman with an erection.”

“Um, no, that’s a total lie,” Zack said, pushing himself back and giving my tail one final squirt. “That’s actually one of my favorite things right now.”

I grinned heatedly. In the last couple of weeks, as our relationship had settled and our bond and feelings for each other grew, we’d spend an awful lot of time in the shower, Zack pinned against the wet tiles while I showed him all the things I could do to make him shout and sigh and come while in merman form. Pregnant omegas were almost as horny as when they were in heat, and I was more than happy to give him everything he needed.

“Zack! Get off the throne!” Betty hissed from somewhere behind us. “Triton is going on in three seconds, two, one?—”

Zack jumped back and skittered off into the darkness of the wings as the scenery opened up and my throne and a few other pieces moved onto the stage for the final number.

Everything went beautifully. It was a little bitter-sweet singing that finale song while the chorus danced around me, Lindsey, and Vincent. All-in-all, we’d had a fantastic time. We’d had amazing reviews in all the local papers and websites, we’d played to packed houses nearly every day, and Lindsey had even had an offer from a big-name agent.

Everything was perfect.

Well, almost perfect.

As I'd done every night of the show, throughout the show, I scanned the audience, searching for any sign of my mom and dad. Mom had been swishy-swashy when I tried to get an answer from her about whether she was coming to see me perform or not. Every night I'd looked for them, and every night I'd been disappointed.

When we sang that final note and struck that final pose as the curtain came down, I couldn't decide whether I felt triumphant or thoroughly defeated.

"Don't worry," Lindsey said as we hurried to the wings to take our order for the curtain call. "You did an amazing job. I know you wanted your family to see you, but you don't need their approval to shine."

I smiled gratefully at her. "You were pretty amazing yourself," I said, giving her a quick hug.

"You really were!" Zack flew up to us and nearly slammed into me with a hug as soon as I let go of Lindsey.

He had the trousers I needed to quickly put on after shifting back to legs, but I was so happy to have him there in that moment that I just kept hugging him, bare-assed, as the chorus went on to take their bow.

"Did you see your parents tonight?" Zack went on, moving back to hold my trousers so I could step quickly into them.

"No," I said, feeling ungrateful for sounding disappointed when I had so very much to be grateful for. "They didn't come."

Zack blinked at me once I had the trousers on and was fastening them. "What do you mean?" he asked. "I ran into Frisia in the hallway, and she said your parents were there with her. I didn't have time to meet them, but?—"



“My parents were here tonight?” My heart swelled and soared so fast that it made my stomach lurch.

“Lucas! Come on, come on!” Betty rushed toward us, grabbed my arm, then pushed me toward the stage.

I didn’t have time to think as I walked out to take my final bow along with Lindsey and Vincent. The crowd swelled with applause and shouts of “Bravo!” Everyone rose to their feet to give us recognition.

It was so wonderful and affirming, but instead of drinking it in, I scanned the audience excitedly, looking for Mom and Dad.

And then I saw them, over on the right in the balcony. They were there with Frisia and Uncle Caliban, and they were applauding just as wildly as anyone else. Mom was dressed up, which, to her, meant she was wearing seaweed and pearls in her long hair and her favorite shell necklace. Dad was dressed like fashions hadn’t changed on land in six hundred years, but in a place like Valleywood, he didn’t look as out of place as he might have.

I couldn’t help myself. It was like I was a kid of one hundred again. I beamed at them and waved to let them know I saw them and I was overjoyed they had come.

The curtain call seemed to go on forever. As soon as they brought the curtain down for the final time and the cast called out, whooping and hollering for the great success we’d just had, I dashed for the wings.

“It’s over!” Zack cried excitedly as he jumped into my arms and wrapped his legs around me. “I can’t believe it’s over! We survived The Little Mermaid !”

We survived this Little Mermaid , I said, sliding a hand between us to the subtle bump of his growing stomach. “We might have to survive another little mermaid

soon, too.”

Zack laughed out loud, then leaned in to kiss me hard. For one beautiful moment, the world seemed to disappear. All there was was Zack and our baby and the entire future.

That moment passed quickly as I leaned back with a gasp and said, “My parents are here! I saw them in the balcony.”

“I have to meet them!” Zack said, joy and fear both lighting up his expression as he loosened his legs and put his feet on the ground.

“You do,” I said. “Let’s go meet them now.”

I grabbed his hand and headed back out onto the stage in front of the curtain through the gap at the side.

“What, right now?” Zack said, letting me pull him along. “Without changing out of your costume?”

“I can’t wait,” I said.

Finding my parents in the sea of people trying to leave the theater was easier said than done. We probably should have gone through the backstage area and out into the lobby like everyone else. I had to wedge my way through far too many people, most of whom wanted to stop me and congratulate me for a job well done.

“You could make a career on the stage, you know,” one middle-aged woman said in particular as she blocked me from heading out into the lobby. She reached into her purse and pulled out a card. “I represent some of the biggest names on Broadway. Give me a call on Monday morning and we’ll talk.”

“Um, thanks,” I said, eyes wide. “I don’t know if I want a career in the theater, really, but?—”

“He’ll call you on Monday,” Zack answered for me, then pulled me along into the lobby.

“You didn’t have to say that,” I said as we dodged more people while looking for my parents.

“You absolutely should have a career on Broadway,” Zack said. “You’re too talented not to.”

“Maybe,” I said, still not sure where I wanted to live next.

I didn’t have time to think about it. With a high-pitched scream that might have shattered one of the bulbs in the light fixture near me, my mom spotted us.

“Lucas, you were incredible!” she said, rushing forward and pulling me into a tight embrace.

With legs, my mom was only around five feet tall. She was a little powerhouse, though, and I felt like putty in her arms as she hugged and kissed me and called me her baby.

“You really were magnificent, son,” Dad said, coming up and taking a turn hugging me, too. Dad was built like me, and he still had a strong Scandinavian accent. “Who knew you had it in you, eh?”

“I always knew my baby was a star,” Mom said, patting my cheek with a wide smile. Her gaze slipped to Zack, who was almost hiding behind me, and she asked, “Is this the omega you’ve told us so much about?”

“Um, hi,” Zack said, peeking out from behind me and waving quickly. “I’m Zack. I’m Lucas’s baby-papa.” He sucked in a breath, his eyes going wide as he looked at me. “Oh, shit. Have you told them yet? Did I just let the cat out of the bag? Or the fish out of the net?”

Mom gasped and clapped a hand to her mouth. “Is your omega pregnant?” she asked.

I couldn’t tell if I was in big trouble or if I was suddenly the hero of the family. The only thing I could do was inch closer to Zack, put my arm around him, and say, “Yes, Mom, Dad. Zack is pregnant. And we’ve bonded. We’re going to be a family.”

I waited, holding my breath, no idea how the whole thing was going to pan out.

But Mom let out another squeal, threw her arms wide, and said, “But this is wonderful! I’m going to be a yiayia!”

She pulled Zack into her arms and hugged him so hard that Zack made a strangled sound and flailed. His eyes bugged as he looked to me for help, but I could only laugh.

It was going to be okay. Everything would work out after all.

The rest of the night was a bit of a blur. My parents wanted to know the whole story of how Zack and I had gotten together, and I wanted to tell them, but Zack and I also had the cast party to go to. We made arrangements to have dinner with my parents in a few days...at home.

Once that was done, Zack and I headed backstage, where I took off my costume and make-up and dressed in street clothes while Zack joined the rest of the crew in essential clean-up backstage. The bulk of strike would happen over the next few days, but a lot of that would be done by the VPAC’s staff, since they had another show loading in just a few days.

The cast party was a ton of fun. I couldn't speak for Zack, but I felt like I'd made friends for life. It was the last time we were all spending time together at the same time, but I knew I'd remain close to a bunch of them.

Zack and I spent most of the next day in bed sleeping. We both needed it so much. Zack more than me, in a lot of ways, since he was growing a baby.

"You sure you're okay if I leave you to run a few errands?" I asked him around mid-afternoon, as he lay wrapped up in a blanket on the sofa.

"Yeah, yeah, I just want to sit here and zone out to the tv," he said.

I leaned over and gave him a big kiss. "Okay. I won't be too long. Take care of yourself."

In fact, I had a very specific errand to run...to a jeweler. Then I headed to one of the transformation points to make arrangements with the guys there. Everything had to be perfect for the night I'd planned for Zack.

That night came two days later.

"You said we're having dinner with your parents, but it doesn't look like there are a lot of restaurants around here," Zack said as we walked up to the transformation point. "I'm not even sure what this place is, but it looks nice."

I couldn't contain my giddiness. The transformation point was decorated in tiny white lights and flowers. The guys I'd looped into helping me set up had lit two rows of candles leading from the front entrance to the tank.

"Whoa! Is this like a hot tub out on a pier?" Zack asked as we approached the pool. "It's got a great view."

As he looked out the window at the bridge, I dropped to one knee and took the ring box out of my pocket.

“Ha! You could almost say this is where we met?”

His mouth dropped open and I felt a jolt of surprise and happiness through our bond as he saw me kneeling with the ring.

“Zakai deMuse,” I said, beaming up at him. “You are hands down the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me. I didn’t know what was missing from my life when I swam up here to audition for the show. I thought I would find a fun experience. Instead, I found the love of my life.”

“Aw, Lucas,” Zack said, pressing a hand over his heart.

“I know in my heart and yours that this is just a formality, but it’s an important formality,” I went on. “I love you, Zack, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, wherever we spend it.”

“I love you, too,” Zack said. “And yes, by the way.”

My mouth twitched. “I haven’t asked the question yet.”

“Well, my answer is yes,” Zack said with a laugh, dropping to his knees so he could throw his arms around me. “Yes, yes, yes!”

“Zack, will you marry me?” I said, pretending to be exasperated, when actually I was the happiest creature on earth.

“Of course I will,” Zack said, then slanted his mouth over mine in a big kiss.

I wanted to kiss him for hours and more, but I only indulged for a few seconds. There

were much more important things to deal with just then.

“Okay, put this on,” I laughed, taking the ring out of the box and sliding it onto his finger. Zack squealed with delight, but that sound turned confused when I added, “Now, take your clothes off.”

“What, here?” he asked, blinking. “Isn’t this a little public for, um, you know. And your parents are coming for dinner.”

“Actually, no,” I said, standing and taking him with me. “We’re going to their house for dinner.”

“Say what now?” Zack asked, his eyes wide.

I laughed. “I’ll show you,” I said. “But you need to get undressed and get in the pool.”

“Um, okay,” Zack said, side-eyeing me like he wasn’t entirely certain whether he trusted me.

I led him over to the storage lockers on one side of the room and undressed myself. He undressed as well, and I showed him how to store his clothes. Once they were all tucked away, I walked with him back to the pool, and we both got in.

“Here’s the thing about being married and mated to a merman,” I said as we sank in the water to our necks. “I have magic in my kiss.” It was a little bit of an exaggeration, but it was close enough.

“I’m all for magical kisses,” Zack said, floating into my arms and wrapping himself around me.

“Wait,” I stopped him. “Keep your legs straight.”

“Okay,” Zack said slowly.

“Are you ready?”

“I have no idea,” he laughed.

I laughed with him, then kissed him soundly.

It wasn't just any kiss, though. It was the way merpeople shared the magic that allowed us to transform our mates so they could survive and thrive with us underwater. As our kiss continued, I sank with Zack until we were both underwater. I felt Zack grow a tail for the very first time, though I wasn't sure he was aware of it.

At least, he wasn't aware of it until I ended our kiss and separated from him slightly.

“That was—whoa!”

Bubbles poured out of Zack's mouth, but I heard his words in my head, the way I communicated with every merperson.

“Holy shit!” Zack went on, noticing his tail at last. “Am I...did you...how is this...cool!”

We'd reached the bottom of the tank, and the attendant on duty opened the door and let us out into the lake. I took Zack's hand and pulled him farther away from land.

“See?” I said. “You don't have to worry about where we're going to live. A fish and a bird can fall in love when they each have the ability to transform into whatever form they need to live together.”

“So I'm a merman now?” Zack asked, testing out his tail as we glided on.



“Yep,” I said. “And our baby, our babies, will be, too,” I went on, happier than I’d ever been. “We can also live on land. And the best perk of all is that we’re both going to live for a very long time. But you might have lived for ages anyhow, since you’re a muse.”

“This is...this is...this is going to take a lot of getting used to,” Zack said, though he grinned at me as he said it.

I squeezed his hand tighter and sent all the love and affection I could through our bond. “We’ve got all the time in the world to get used to it,” I said. “Together.”

I hope you’ve enjoyed Zack and Lucas’s story! I have it on pretty good authority that you’ll be seeing a lot more about Blue Haven City and the world underwater next to Valleywood coming soon! But my lips are sealed about that.

Thank you to Giovanna Reaves and the rest of the Valleywood crew for inviting me to come play in their playground! There are a ton more stories that take place in Valleywood that you can download today here !