



Chapter One

God, he hated the beach on the weekends during the summer.

Cody Carruthers glanced down at the throngs of tourists that lay below him and grimaced. He hoped they were wearing sunscreen; the California sun was strongest during the month of August. A few red backs and chests told him that some of them were being careless.

Cody looked over again at the pretty, redheaded girl that had been lurking near the tower for the past thirty minutes. She was good-looking enough, he guessed. Nice rack, slim thighs. Cute face. He tried to decide if she was worth flirting with, then realized that not being able to decide was answer enough. He'd always thought of himself as a bisexual sort of guy, having slept his way through both sorority and fraternity houses during college, but it seemed like women were holding less and less appeal these days.

So was this job, if he was taking stock of his life. Twenty-four was getting a little old to be lifeguarding, but the pay during the summer was decent. He needed it to pay off some college loans, and his other job of waiting tables paid the rent. It was either hold down two jobs or move back in with his parents, and there really wasn't a choice to make there. At least he wasn't the oldest one on the lifeguarding crew; there were at least two guys nearing their thirties. Cody figured he had some time before he should probably quit.

He sighed and sat back under his umbrella, doing an automatic scan of the ocean without even being aware of it. His shoulder-length hair was tickling his neck and he wished he'd brought a hair band. A check of his watch showed another hour before his relief showed up, and he wondered vaguely if he'd have time to hop down and run to the snack bar for a soda. He was supposed to go right to his next job after this and doubted there'd be time to eat.

Cody was about to make a dash for the snack bar when he heard the faint cry. Leaping immediately to his feet, he tore off his sunglasses and shaded his eyes with his hand. Yup, there – about a hundred feet out, a swimmer thrashing around. Probably had a cramp. There was another head bobbing next to the swimmer, no doubt trying to help and getting yanked under for their trouble.

He grabbed his red life preserver and swung down from the tower, not bothering with the ladder. Cody was aware of beach-goers sitting up on their blankets and watching him as he dashed past, probably because he sprayed them with sand, but oh well. Those were the dangers of depositing yourself directly under the lifeguard stand.

Splashing into the shallows, Cody dove under the first wave he met and started the strong strokes that would bring him to the struggling swimmer as fast as possible. Tide was low so he got there quickly, immediately offering the life preserver to the man that was thrashing about in the water.

His wife or girlfriend or whoever was shrieking at Cody to “Save him! Help him!” and he closed his eyes in frustration.

“Ma’am,” he said as politely as he could while trying to keep the drowning man from dragging him under in a state of panic, “why don’t you start swimming toward shore?”

She ignored him, as they often did, and Cody made another mental note to look into a different second job. Gritting his teeth and ignoring her as best he could, he turned his full attention toward the thrashing man. “Sir!” he shouted. “Grab the life float, please!”

The man grabbed for Cody instead, desperate to hold on to something solid. Cody struggled for a minute before going under, hands pushing at the other man to let go before they both drowned. Cody prided himself on being a strong swimmer, but this guy outweighed him by at least thirty pounds.

Finally managing to surface, he sucked in a good lungful of air and got ready to get dragged under again. The man clutched at his head and the life preserver at the same time, pushing Cody down in an effort to wrap his arms around the red float.

At least it was quiet beneath the surface, the woman’s shrieking muted and the splashing of the water just a low rumbling sound. Cody didn’t usually like to open his eyes in the ocean because the saltwater turned them bloodshot, but when something brushed against his foot, he had to look to make sure there was no one else in the water who needed his help.

He couldn’t possibly have seen what he thought he saw.

A fish – at least, it *had* to be a fish, didn’t it, because they were in the sea – swam about ten feet beneath Cody’s bare feet. But only half of the fish looked like an ocean creature. The other half looked like ... well. He couldn’t really tell, because the deeper the water was, the darker it got, and without his swim goggles everything was blurry anyway.

He surfaced with a gasp in time to see the man finally clutch the life float and start paddling toward shore, the woman in tow. Cody really, really wanted to stay and duck beneath the waves again, because whatever he saw under the water couldn’t be what he thought it was, but his job was more important.

Three long strokes brought him abreast of the man and woman, and with one hand on the preserver, he led the way onto the beach. The man collapsed in the sand with a relieved sigh and the woman knelt next to him, both of them conveniently forgetting about Cody. “Marvin,” the woman wept, “you almost died!”

Cody rolled his eyes because the man had been far from dying, but whatever. He did the usual “don’t swim so far out” speech and accepted the profuse thanks with a half-hearted smile. Trudging back up the sand to the tower, he hefted himself into his chair.

Narrowing his eyes against the glare, he squinted out at the ocean, looking for a sign of the thing he had seen below the aqua-colored water.

No fish in sight.

He shrugged and sat back, and by the time his three o'clock relief climbed up to take his place, Cody had pretty much convinced himself it had been a dolphin.

It was warmer than usual, even for August. He dove into the water and relished the feel against his skin, not finding it unusual at all that the water matched the temperature of a bathtub. He dove and dove and didn't seem to need air, and the water was like silk against him.

A face rose out of the sea on his next dive, a face with eyes that matched the color of the water and hair the same color as the black sand beaches in Hawaii. It smiled at him with white, perfect teeth, and Cody was glad to have someone to swim with. Except when the man ducked back down under the next wave, it wasn't human feet that stuck up out of the water. A fish's tail, gleaming and scaly, slapped the water once and then disappeared.

He woke up with a gasp and looked wildly around his room, as if expecting the creature from his dream to somehow be there.

That was *not* what he'd seen in the ocean today, Cody scolded himself. He'd seen a dolphin that had separated from his pod. They did that all the time. Or even a sea lion, maybe, although it was unusual for them to get so close to humans.

But he had not seen a fucking mystical creature from a childhood picture book.

He checked the clock. Three in the goddamned morning. Cody closed his eyes again and tried to will himself back to sleep, but his mind raced and spun with pictures of dark-haired men that swam like fish.

Throwing off the covers, he sighed in disgust and reached over to the nightstand for the pair of drumsticks that were ever present. They were cool and familiar in his fingers and he beat out a staccato rhythm with them on his thighs, using the soft cadence to lull himself back to sleep.

There was nothing left of his dream in the morning.

Chapter Two

The party was in full swing by the time he got off work at the restaurant and headed down. Cody debated stopping by the apartment first to take a fast shower, but abandoned that idea when his stomach growled and he knew they were barbecuing steaks at the beach.

The smell of food and clinking of bottles reached him as soon as he hit the sand, people lifting their hands in greeting when they saw him. His buddy Spencer waved him over to the small group near the fire.

“Code! C’mere, you have to meet this guy.” Spencer introduced a tall, good-looking brunet. “This is Brett. Brett, my very available friend Cody.”

Cody looked at Spencer wryly. “Subtle. You’re a subtle one.”

Brett shrugged and chuckled. “I’m harmless. You want something to drink?”

“Yeah, why not. See if you can find me a Pacifico in that cooler?” he asked, and watched Brett walk away.

“He totally wants you,” Spencer whispered, in that drunken way people had of thinking they were being quiet when they really weren’t.

Cody rolled his eyes. “Whatever. I have to eat before I can think about anything else.”

So he ate, wolfing down a decent piece of steak and washing it back with a couple of good Mexican beers. Brett kept him company as he sat on the sand with his plate, and Cody discovered that he was a pretty funny guy.

Lying back, not caring about the sand in his hair, he let Brett tell him about his job at a small retail store that sold skateboard equipment and catered pretty exclusively to the under-twenty crowd. Cody found himself laughing when Brett spoke dryly of the teenage skate-rats that came in to fondle the new boards but never bought anything except maybe a couple of ball-bearings, and shared his own woes about being in the food-service industry. Lord knew he had plenty of them to share.

He was feeling pleasantly mellow when Brett suggested they go for a walk.

“Like ... a walk, walk?” Cody asked, wondering if they were on the same page.

“Like, a walk where there’s no people,” Brett said mildly, and Cody grinned. Totally on the same page.

They were only about a hundred yards from his lifeguard tower, so Cody pointed at it. “No people up there.”

“Fine by me,” Brett answered, so they strolled that way.

Climbing up the ladder, Cody ducked his head inside the tiny room where the lifeguards wrote their reports and kept the first-aid kits and floats. He was hoping the towel he kept for emergencies was still in the single locker ... there. Good. He grabbed it and brought it out to the platform where Brett sat with his bare feet dangling off the edge.

“Not real comfortable,” he apologized, but it didn’t seem to matter when Brett leaned over to kiss him, his mouth open and soft against Cody’s.

They lay back, side by side, and the sound of the ocean mingled with the partiers still down on the sand. Cody kissed Brett for a long time, not really in any hurry to go much further, although his cock was showing interest.

“I don’t hang out at parties just to pick up cute guys,” Brett whispered.

Cody shrugged. He didn’t really give a damn one way or the other. “Me neither. But here we are.”

Brett nodded and took his mouth again, pushing a soft tongue in and using the tip to explore Cody’s teeth and lips. Still lying on his side, he lifted a leg and hooked it over Cody’s thigh, bringing their crotches into contact and making Cody arch against him. Maybe he did want to go further.

They rubbed up against each other and then suddenly he was painfully hard, clutching at the back of Brett’s shirt and trying to rub into him through the nylon of his swim trunks. The friction was good and Brett was panting, one hand fisted in Cody’s hair, and Cody knew he’d probably come like this if it went on much longer. He figured he’d better say so.

“Less you want to ruin your shorts, better speed things up,” he gasped, trying to stop thrusting against the pressure but failing.

“Kay,” Brett muttered, but didn’t seem in too much of a hurry to detach himself. In fact, he slid a hand down to Cody’s ass to hold him more tightly, so Cody gave himself a mental shrug and went with it. Nothing wrong with a little dry humping, anyway.

They ground on each other and Cody managed to get a thigh in the right position, giving Brett something to thrust on. It was good, he could feel his balls tighten up, and then suddenly he was coming with a muttered “Damn,” into the hollow of Brett’s throat.

Brett froze in place three seconds later and, through the thin material of his shorts, Cody could feel the faint pulsing and resulting wet warmth. After a minute, Cody felt the rumble of laughter in Brett’s chest. “S’been a while since I did that,” Brett chuckled, detaching himself from Cody and dropping a kiss to his forehead.

Cody rolled to his back and studied the wooden ceiling of the overhang. He grinned up at it and laughed. “Yeah, same. Reminds me of the back seat of my dad’s car.”

They lay for a while longer until Brett lifted his head and looked down at himself with a wrinkled nose. “Ew. I have clean jeans in the car I should go put on.”

Cody thought he might have a spare pair of trunks in the locker, so he nodded. “Go ahead. Bring back a beer.”

Brett agreed and jumped off the tower, leaving Cody alone and blinking drowsily at the roof. He could use a nap, and not just from the orgasm. These long, two-job days got rough. Maybe if he just closed his eyes for a minute ...

He came fully awake in half a second and scrambled to his knees. What the fuck? Had he really heard splashing in the ocean? Cody darted a glance toward where his friends were partying around the fire pit, but none of them seemed interested or inclined to be paying attention to the water.

Another look showed that yes, there was something definitely in the water, and it seemed to be in almost the exact location where he’d saved the drowning man earlier that day. Cody strained his eyes against the darkness, thankful for the light of the almost-full moon, and blinked when he saw what looked like a fish tail slap the water.

Dolphin, maybe?

Except no, dolphin wouldn’t come in this close, even at night. And the ripples of the water were definitely coming closer, heading toward shore. Cody watched as he tried to determine exactly what it was, because Jesus Christ, his brain kept trying to tell him it was a *guy* – like a human – swimming like a fucking fish in the water. Only it couldn’t be that, because there was the tail factor.

“Oh, holy shit,” Cody finally murmured, because the moon came out from behind a cloud, and goddamn if there wasn’t a man walking straight out of the water onto the sand. A man with no clothes on, heading straight for ... the tower?

Cody looked quickly to his left and right, hoping there was someone else within calling distance, but all of his friends had moved further down the beach. And this guy was still coming forward, almost to the bottom of the tower now, and all Cody could do was just look down and stare in awe as he started to climb it.

He sat back on his heels and stared in disbelief as the man’s head appeared over the top of the ladder. Cody was struck by the black of his hair, made even blacker by the damp of the water, and then the man smiled at him, revealing perfect, white teeth. “Hello,” he said pleasantly, and came up the rest of the way.

Cody's back connected with the wall with a thump and he opened his mouth to say something, before realizing he didn't know what to say to someone who'd walked naked out of the ocean. So he shut it again and shook his head.

"Don't be afraid," the man said, and knelt down in front of him.

Cody couldn't help darting a quick glance down at the guy's cock. Thick and uncut, it swayed gently between his legs as he kneeled. Nice. But Christ, what the fuck was he thinking, looking at that?

"I could use your help," the man said, and it was too dark to see his eye color. Cody suddenly wanted to know what it was.

"The fuck," he managed to say, waving a hand in the general direction of the sea.

"I'll tell you what you need to know," the man promised, and Cody had time to wonder what the hell he was actually promising before the guy leaned in very close to Cody's face. Cody had time to see eyes that were so dark they had to be black before the man pressed his mouth to Cody's.

Chapter Three

He woke in his own bed, fully dressed, with the sun streaming in the window.

The crash of the alarm startled him and he slammed a hand down on the snooze button, groaning as his head reminded him he'd had too much beer the night before. Thank fuck he didn't have to work at the restaurant tonight, just the beach job.

His answering machine was blinking and he hit the button before thinking better of it. Spencer's voice came accusingly on the tape, wondering where the hell he'd gone last night, and sprinkled liberally with four-letter words. He ended with something about Brett, and Cody winced. He'd forgotten about the guy. Damn, how many beers had he had, anyway? Christ.

Cody dragged himself out of bed and into the bathroom, taking a piss that felt like an hour long and then starting the shower. He closed the lid of the toilet and sat down with a yawn, scrubbing a hand over his face and wondering vaguely if he'd have time to get together with the guys for a jam session this week. He hadn't sat down behind his drum set for nearly four days and his fingers were itching to play. Maybe tomorrow.

It was the spray of the water that reminded him.

As soon as he stepped into the shower, visions of the night before assaulted him and he had to put out a hand to steady himself on the cool tile. Brett. Beer. A better than average come, and then ... a completely naked, good-looking man had walked out of the goddamned ocean and asked for his help. And then had kissed him.

There was nothing else in his memory after that, no matter how hard he tried.

His whole four-hour shift at the beach was spent in a restless, jittery state. Cody found himself getting up and down from his chair, scanning the beach and then the water and imagining things that weren't really there. He sort of hoped for a swimmer in distress or something that would give him an excuse to get in the ocean; then was thankful he didn't have to go in.

He got flirted with by two girls and one fairly cute guy, which normally would make him prick up his ears and pay closer attention, but he was too restless to put forth the effort. By the time three o'clock rolled around, Cody had made up his mind. He'd probably had it made up before he'd even gotten out of the shower, but whatever. He knew he was coming back to the beach tonight after dark to wait.

The rest of the day alternated between dragging and speeding. He tried sitting down with his set to practice a little, but ended up breaking a stick and not having a spare on hand. With his hands as shaky as they were, he didn't dare try using his favorite sticks, as he

was sure to break one of those, too. Cursing and resisting the impulse to put a foot through the head of the bass drum, Cody flung himself down in front of the television with the remote and a cold beer.

It was summer, so dark took its sweet time in coming. He finally headed down to the beach around eight and climbed up the tower, watching as the last vestiges of the sun sank into the Pacific and turned the waves from blue to orange-red. He leaned his head back against the wall and kept his eyes trained on the water.

A long time later, he didn't know if he was just waking up or if he'd even slept at all, but Cody's eyes burned from staring at nothing. Five more minutes. He'd give it five minutes and then go, and forget all about the weirdness of the last two days. Man, he needed a vacation or something.

"Hello," a voice said, and Cody nearly fell off the tower.

"Christ," he gasped, clutching his chest and looking at the man he'd seen the night before.

"No," the man mused. "But you can call me Tristan."

"I'm not calling you anything until you tell me who the fuck you are."

"Tristan," the man said again, with a hint of impatience. "I told you already."

Cody narrowed his eyes and watched as the guy climbed the rest of the way up the ladder. He was clothed this time, fortunately, in a pair of regular-looking khakis and t-shirt. He deposited himself on the blanket Cody had laid out. "I don't mean your name," Cody said, though he rolled it around in his mind. Tristan. "I mean where in fuck you came from and why you want something from me."

"I came from there," he said, and waved a hand in the direction of the ocean. "And I've watched you for a while, and figured you'd be just what I need during my time on land."

"Your *time on land*?" Cody spat. "Dude. Do you have any idea how that sounds? And what the fuck do you mean, you came from there?" He pointed at the water.

Tristan looked at him steadily. "I live there. Don't raise your voice."

Cody stared, astonished. "Don't – don't raise my voice?"

"You repeat a lot of what I say." He tilted his head and studied Cody.

He opened his mouth to say something, anything, and then shut it again. Who *was* this guy? He propped his chin in his hand and rested his elbow on his knee, staring out at the water.

“I can show you,” Tristan offered, glancing at the ocean. “Then maybe we can talk about things.”

“Show me what?”

“Show you that I come from the sea.”

Cody just snorted and shook his head. Why the fuck not. “Lead the way,” he shrugged, wondering when the weirdness was going to be over.

He followed Tristan down to the shore, kicking off his flip-flops and standing in the ankle-deep water, letting it lick at his feet. He watched as Tristan began to shed his clothes, exposing the same muscled body Cody had hoped he’d imagined.

Cody cleared his throat and looked away when Tristan’s prick came into view, then darted a glance back. Yup, still nice. Christ. The guy might be a nutjob, but he had a pretty cock.

Without a word, Tristan left his clothes on the sand and strode into the water. Cody looked around to see if anyone else was catching this show, but the beach was deserted. Sort of weird for a warm summer night. When he looked back again, Tristan was already at least fifty feet away, swimming strongly. Wow. Cody knew he himself couldn’t swim that fast, even with all the practice he got.

And then he saw it. Tristan dove under the surface and kicked his feet up in the air behind him – only they weren’t feet. Cody blinked and strained to see it again. There was no way in hell that he had seen a tail, shimmering in the moonlight with blue scales.

Except he had. Because Tristan came up and grinned at him before diving back down, flipping his tail again and splashing the surface.

Cody sat down in the sand with a thud, not caring about the waves licking at his shorts. He stared at the water as if seeing it for the first time, wondering about the feeling of betrayal in his chest. This was his *ocean*. Things like mer-people were not supposed to walk out of it and introduce themselves, no matter how good-looking they were.

He watched Tristan warily as he swam closer, and then suddenly the tail was gone and he was all human once again, striding out of the water like some god. Tristan shook the water from his arms and legs and slicked back his hair, using his forearm to wipe the remaining drops from his face. “See?” he asked Cody, in a reasonable tone of voice. “From the ocean. Now can we talk about how you can help me?”

“Sure,” Cody heard himself saying, although his voice sounded very far off. “Discuss away.” He knew he was still staring at Tristan while the man dressed, but he couldn’t stop himself.

“Do you want to go back up to your tower?” Tristan asked him, once he was fully clothed.

“Um. I guess so.” At least it was somewhere familiar.

Back up the ladder one more time, and Cody sat warily with his legs crossed. Tristan sat in the same position, although he looked out at the ocean. Cody was glad he wasn’t the focus of those odd-colored eyes.

“I’m a teacher,” Tristan began.

“If you say you teach a school of fish, I’m done.”

Tristan looked momentarily confused before understanding dawned and he smiled. “No. We have children beneath the sea, just like human children. They need schooling; I provide it. But there are times when I find gaps in my own knowledge, and then I usually come ashore and find a willing human who can help.”

“You mean to tell me there are other people who know you? Who have done this before?” Cody had too many questions to even figure out which one was the most important, but Tristan just sat calmly and waited for his sputtering to die down.

“Yes. Although there are precautions made when our time together is up to ensure that the human doesn’t recall all the details of our time together. That would probably be ... sort of ... dangerous to my people, if the humans remembered.” He shrugged and looked back at the water. “I haven’t been ashore for several years. I know some things have changed.”

“I guess,” Cody said slowly. “So what do you need to know? And how long does it take?”

“I stay here for one calendar month. Not with you, don’t worry. During that time, I need to experience regular human activities. My students recently asked me about eating in a restaurant and I didn’t have the answers to all of their questions.” He paused and looked slightly sheepish. “We’ll need to eat dinner in a restaurant.”

“I assume you don’t mean a burger joint.”

“No. I need to eat in one of the more upscale places you have where food is actually brought to the table.” He sounded very matter-of-fact and Cody still couldn’t wrap his mind around what was really happening.

“So ... you couldn’t do this alone? Why do I have to be there?” Although, if he was truthful, dinner with this guy in a nice place wouldn’t be too much of a hardship.

“I usually have questions of my own. That’s where you come in.”

Cody shook his head. “Whatever, dude. If you’re paying, I’ll answer questions.”

“Good. We’re going out tomorrow night. You’re not working at your other job.” Tristan nodded matter-of-factly.

He was about to ask just how the hell Tristan knew that, but figured whatever the answer was would only cause more questions. The bottom line was that this guy was hot, he wanted to go out to dinner someplace where they didn’t have paper napkins, and what the fuck else did Cody have to do? Like Tristan said, he wasn’t working or anything.

“Yeah, fine,” Cody said. “Tomorrow.”

Chapter Four

Tristan hadn't said anything about where he was staying on land, or even if he *was* staying on land. As far as Cody knew, Tristan dove back into the ocean every night to go sleep with his mermaid wife. Or merman husband. Whatever.

Cody gave himself one last look in the mirror and straightened his collar. Pale green shirt, black slacks. Didn't look too bad. He had his hair back in a low ponytail and he thought it sort of made his eyes look the same color as his shirt. That's what his last girlfriend had said, anyway.

A knock came at the door and Cody checked his watch. Well, the guy was punctual. He left his bedroom and crossed the living room, opening the door to his apartment and grabbing his car keys from the small table. "I can drive ..." he started to say, but trailed off and ended up staring in silence.

Gray slacks. Navy shirt with French cuffs. Button open at the collar to expose a tanned throat. And at the ends of his sleeves, he wore small aquamarine cufflinks that winked in the last light of evening. Cody let his eyes travel up to Tristan's face. His cheeks were smooth, as if they'd just been freshly shaved, but that was crazy. Mermen didn't shave, did they?

Tristan's eyes glimmered at him and Cody was struck with the realization that they were a different color than yesterday. "Your eyes," was the only thing he could think of to say.

"Yes?"

"Nothing. Let's go."

It was a short drive, and Cody's stomach growled when he handed over the keys to the valet. Money didn't really allow him to eat at these kinds of places that often; he usually stuck with the discount he got at the casual Mexican place where he worked.

Tristan followed him silently to their table, and Cody could see him looking around with interest. He felt Tristan's eyes on him as Cody took his napkin and dropped it to his lap. The pretty hostess handed both of them menus and Cody had to hide a grin when she smiled flirtatiously at Tristan. Either the guy was too enthralled with his surroundings or he didn't swing that way, because Tristan failed to notice the attention. Maybe mer-people had no sexual preference whatsoever.

Pity.

Wait, what? Cody scrubbed that thought from his brain and listened to their waiter ingratiate himself to them with a too-wide smile. Sure, Tristan was hot, but not really

Cody's type. Not that he had a type, but he was pretty sure if he did, it wasn't a guy with a fish tail.

"So what do I do?" Tristan asked curiously, when their waiter had taken a drink order and sidled away. Cody had ordered them a bottle of red wine, although he would have preferred a Corona or something.

"You pick what you want to eat, and tell the guy. Then he brings it to you, and then we pay too much money for it." Oooh, they had fresh red snapper. That's what he was having.

Tristan was silent for long enough to make Cody look up from his menu. Perhaps it was the dim light, but Cody could swear his skin had taken on a faint greenish cast. "What if I don't want anything," Tristan said in a strangled voice.

"Why? What's the matter?"

Tristan glanced down at the menu again and then looked away. "Halibut," he choked out. "Salmon. Sea bass."

Oh, whoops. "Yeah," Cody said, biting his lip. "Most nice places around here are seafood restaurants."

"Meaning ... they serve fish as food?"

"Mostly. But there's other stuff, too. Like, here. You can get pasta with vegetables, see? No fish." Cody didn't really care what Tristan ate, he just wanted him to stop looking like he was about to puke.

"Order for me," Tristan swallowed, and dropped his menu on his plate with a grimace.

The waiter reappeared and Cody ordered for both of them, passing up red snapper reluctantly in favor of the filet mignon. He refrained from mentioning that eating beef wasn't any different than eating fish, but Tristan seemed relieved.

"So ... what do you eat down there, if you don't eat fish?" Cody asked. Maybe they didn't eat. Maybe they were like plants and got their sustenance from the water and sunshine or something.

"We grow our own food. We have what you call a vegetarian society. Eating other fish is like an indirect form of cannibalism." He started looking green again and Cody hastily poured them more wine.

They took a swallow from their respective glasses and Cody could see Tristan rolling it around on his tongue. "Good," Tristan declared. "Wine doesn't change."

“You had it before?”

“Sure,” he grinned, his eyes twinkling. “Many times. It’s one of the things I like about coming ashore.”

“So ... what else do you like?” he asked cautiously, realizing that asking the question was almost like admitting that this was real.

“I like the movies,” he stated. “And the theater. I like riding bicycles. And I like driving.”

“How the hell do you know how to drive a car?” Cody almost didn’t notice the food being set in front of them; he was too interested in what Tristan was saying.

Tristan smiled at him and picked up his fork. “I know how to do lots of things humans do.”

They ate for a while in companionable silence. Cody’s filet wasn’t bad, but it wasn’t a substitute for the snapper he’d wanted. However, the garlic mashed potatoes and creamed spinach went a long way in making up for it, and he tried not to wolf everything down like he was starving.

Tristan ate steadily too, using his knife and fork perfectly and eating at least three of the rolls in the bread basket. When he was finished, he wiped his mouth with his napkin and cleared his throat. “Why do people pay extra money for food to be brought to them instead of eating what they have at home?”

“Because cooking is work, and not everyone likes to do it. I sure as hell don’t.”

“So what do you eat when you are not eating in a restaurant?”

“Anything easy,” Cody laughed. “The microwave was an awesome invention. And I eat at the restaurant I work at, too.”

“Oh, yes. The microwave gives you a hot meal in under a minute, is that right?”

“Yeah,” Cody said, confused. “How do you know shit like what a microwave is and you don’t know why people eat in restaurants?”

Tristan looked around at the other diners. “I know lots of things about humans,” he said again. “But often I find that I don’t know why they do things. That tends to be more interesting to me.”

“You talk like you’re from here,” he said without thinking, then winced. It wouldn’t kill him to at least be a little more polite, since the guy was buying dinner.

“I talk like you,” Tristan corrected. “Because you speak like someone who lives on the west coast. If I go ashore from the Atlantic instead of the Pacific, the accent and slang changes. And same as if I surfaced in another country. I would speak whatever language was appropriate.”

Cody studied him. “Cool, I guess. Helps you to blend in.”

Tristan smiled at him. “That’s the idea. When I first started coming ashore, my speech was stilted and obvious. It drew more attention to me than anything else, so using the natural speech patterns of humans was something my students and I both studied together.”

“So, anything else?” Cody finally asked, when their plates had been cleared. “What else do you like?”

“Sex with humans is entertaining,” he replied, and Cody choked on his last swallow of wine.

“Say what?” he coughed, wiping his mouth.

“Sex. Copulation. Intercourse. Fu – ”

“Okay, okay,” Cody said hurriedly, cutting him off. “I heard. So, you fu – um. I mean, do you have sex a lot when you’re on land?”

Tristan shrugged gracefully. “It depends. Sometimes yes; sometimes no. If the human is willing, then I do. Sometimes they aren’t, and that’s fine too.”

Cody blinked at him. “How do you find out?”

“I ask.” He grinned again, his perfect teeth flashing whitely in the light from the candle on their table. “Are you willing?”

He dropped the fork he was playing with. “Are you kidding?”

“Like, telling a joke? No.” And he didn’t look like he was kidding, since Cody was staring at him.

“So ... mer-people or whatever can be gay?” Hell, Cody wasn’t even sure *he* would classify himself as gay, but he sure knew he liked cock a lot of the time.

“We don’t have homosexual or heterosexual where I live. We just enjoy each other. I like humans; I think they’re funny and interesting and attractive. When I come ashore, I’m attracted randomly to whatever sex appeals to me. Sometimes that’s male, sometimes female. This time it happens to be male, and it happens to be you.” He arched a fine black brow.

Cody's cock twitched in his pants, startling him. "We're leaving."

Cody guessed there hadn't really been a decision to make. He was being offered sex – from someone who looked like a catalogue model, no less – with no other strings attached. What was there to decide on?

Tristan had him against the wall as soon as the door to the apartment closed behind them and Cody was pleasantly surprised by the aggressiveness. He'd been exceedingly calm until Cody had agreed to sleep with him, but the smooth façade was gone.

They kissed as they stumbled through the dark rooms into Cody's bedroom, mouths opening for the other's tongue. Cody tasted wine and something else heady in Tristan's mouth; something he didn't think he could describe if asked. It was darker and deeper than what he was used to, something that spoke of things Cody had never even imagined.

He shoved that thought to the background, however, when the backs of his thighs hit the bed and he toppled over, pulling Tristan with him and groaning at the full-body contact. Cody could feel Tristan, hard and long and thick beneath the layers of their pants, and it occurred to Cody that he was about to have sex with someone who wasn't quite human. He wondered if they'd need a condom.

Too much fabric in their way was frustrating, and Tristan soothed with bites to the throat while he worked Cody's buttons. Clothes fell away and they were able to press against each other, legs tangling and tongues still exploring the depths of the other's mouth.

"I like the way you taste," Tristan said, and it could have come off as cheesy or lame, but it didn't. Cody blushed and moved back on the bed and Tristan straddled his thighs, bending low to brush light and soft kisses over his stomach, kisses that were too airy to be more than little puffs of sensation. Then there was a hand over his groin, smooth fingers curling around him and squeezing gently enough to make Cody arch and murmur.

"Shh," Tristan breathed, in response to the noises Cody found himself making. "Let me."

Cody was about to say he wasn't stopping him when he felt hard, sucking pressure on his cock and he jerked halfway off the bed. Tristan's hands held him as still as he could stand it, until with one reflexive movement, Cody was buried in his mouth and couldn't stop himself from crying out.

Tristan's hands at his hips urged him to move, encouraged it with low humming noises that crawled right up Cody's balls into the base of his spine, and Cody grabbed the edges of the bedspread with a whimpered moan.

He was coming before he could gather his stamina, and there was nothing at all to ground him. So fast, he was shocked at how fast, and the rush came shooting up and out. His back arched as he shot down Tristan's throat, and felt the reflexive movements of Tristan swallowing him.

Then there were strong hands urging him over, giving him a pillow to clutch and Cody felt slutty and wanton with his ass in the air. Until something cool and lubed nudged at his entrance, however, and then he just felt empty and wanting. The finger that slid inside was different than others he'd felt, but familiar at the same time, and he pushed back a little bit on it. He heard Tristan make a soft sigh and then there were two fingers, stretching and prepping.

He arched into it just as Tristan pulled away, and couldn't help the sound of distress he made at the loss, but then there was a warm body covering him and soft kisses pressed to his shoulders. "All right?" he murmured against Cody's skin, and Jesus, yes, it was all right, it was more than all right; it was fucking fantastic.

There was a blunt nudge that was different from fingers and Cody arched back to receive it, allowing Tristan to slide the head of his cock inside with very little effort. Cody shuddered at it, his dick half-hard again already, and with a shift of his body Tristan buried himself.

Both of them sighed into the darkness and then there was a steady rocking rhythm that built and built until Cody cried out for the second time. He came again without ever touching his dick, and while he was trembling, there was only another minute of the sweet thrusting before Tristan went utterly still against him. Cody felt the faint pulsing and clenched his ass around it, eliciting a gasp from an otherwise silent Tristan.

Cody slept, and in the morning, he found one aqua cufflink on the floor.

Chapter Five

After another week of Tristan appearing at odd moments, either on the beach while Cody was working or sometimes at his apartment door, Cody decided to quit being skeptical and just roll with it. The skepticism was making his brain hurt, anyway.

Tristan usually showed up just to ask some random, odd question, such as “When did people start wearing their jeans low enough to show their underwear?” or, “Why are people still willing to pay a lot of money for coffee with chocolate in it?” Cody would shrug and give his opinion and Tristan would muse over it before nodding and thanking him.

Cody wondered a couple of times if they were going to discuss the fact that they’d had sex, but Tristan didn’t seem inclined to talk about it, so Cody guessed it wasn’t a big deal. Hey, if it happened again, no reason why he couldn’t just go with it, and if it didn’t, well. That was a shame. Because the guy sure as hell knew what he was doing with his cock, human or not.

He didn’t ask Cody to go on any more outings until the end of the second week. Tristan showed up at the beach just as Cody was hopping down from the tower at the end of his shift and handed him a flyer with bold printing on it. “I want to go to this,” he announced, and Cody read the paper.

It was just a small concert for one of the local bands. A cover band, actually, and Cody grimaced. He and the guys he played with worked hard at their own original sound and thought the bands that covered other people’s music were cop-outs. But whatever, the concert was in one of the bars along the boardwalk, and enough beer could make anything bearable. “Sure,” he shrugged. “Meet me at eight.”

Tristan was already there by the time Cody pushed his way through the semi-crowded bar. He nodded in acknowledgement to a couple of guys he knew as he sat down and lifted a hand for the cocktail server.

“There are a lot of people here,” Tristan observed. “They all come for the music?”

“Some,” Cody said, glancing around to see if anyone was watching them. Not like it mattered; the beach town he lived in was small and everyone knew everyone else’s business anyway. “Some are here to drink, and some are here to see who they can pick up.” He gestured with his chin toward a guy at the bar who was unsuccessfully trying to wrangle the female bartender’s number. “See? Like him. He probably doesn’t give a shit who’s playing tonight.”

“But the ones who are here for the music,” Tristan asked, “why do they come to listen? Why don’t they stay at home and listen to the radio or to the compact discs you all have?”

“Live music is different,” Cody tried to explain. Huh. He’d never really thought about it himself. In fact, seemed there was a lot of shit he’d never really thought about before Tristan came along and asked the questions. “It’s ... involving. It makes you feel like you’re part of what’s happening on the stage.” The drummer sat down behind his kit and Cody nodded toward him. “Watch and listen, you’ll see.”

The band wasn’t bad, for a cover band. The lead girl had a nice voice and her backup vocalists knew what to do. Cody snuck a look over to see what Tristan was making of it, and found him with his head cocked and an intent expression on his face. Cody couldn’t tell whether that was good or bad, since that was usually the norm for him when he was trying to figure something out.

Three beers and ninety minutes later, the band was done and the crowd had thickened. He was about to raise his hand for another drink when a girl he’d seen on the beach several times sidled over. “Hey, Code,” she said, and smiled at Cody.

“Jill. How’ve you been?” He congratulated himself on remembering her name.

“Been good. Who’s your friend?”

Cody looked over to see if Tristan was inclined to introduce himself, but he just looked at Jill with interest. “His name’s Tristan. He’s, uh. Visiting.”

“You gonna bring him down to the beach tomorrow?” She was giving him the once-over, and Cody nearly laughed.

“He doesn’t like the water,” he said seriously, and he could feel Tristan’s eyes on him.

“Yeah? Too bad,” Jill mused, and wandered off.

“She liked me,” Tristan said, and his tone was matter-of-fact enough to make Cody snort.

“Yeah, she did. She’s not bad looking, you want me to set something up?” He grinned.

A corner of Tristan’s mouth lifted. “No, thanks.”

Cody did laugh then. “Good to know. You want to stay and listen to the next band?”

“I’ve seen enough. I wouldn’t mind walking for a while, though.”

“Could go down by the water,” Cody agreed, and threw some bills on the table.

There wasn't a moon but the night was warm due to the presence of the thick clouds that gathered over the sea. Cody and Tristan walked in silence down the boardwalk and then turned toward the ocean, both of them automatically heading towards the water.

"I liked the music," Tristan said, as they picked their way over the tide pools. "And I understand better now why people like to listen to it that way. You can feel it inside you."

Cody murmured his agreement and noticed they were near one of his favorite coves, one that was nearly surrounded on all sides by rocky cliff and protected from high tide by a small breakwater. "Want to sit?"

Tristan nodded his assent and they sat in the cool, dry sand, watching the foam chase itself back and forth on the shore. "Music is important to people," he continued, watching Cody draw designs with a stick. "It seems to change with their moods. Why?"

Cody considered the question. He loved music, but hadn't ever really delved into the reasons behind it. "Music means different things to different people. Not everyone in the world's good with words, you know? So music and lyrics help with that. People can express themselves through songs."

"Our music is different," Tristan said, gazing out at the ocean. "It's beautiful, but meant just for happiness. Your music is meant for all moods."

"That's why I like it," Cody said, lying back on the sand and lifting his eyes to the sky. No stars, just cloud cover.

Tristan lay back as well. "What else do you like?"

Cody turned to look at him, startled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I've spent my entire time here asking you questions about other humans and never asked you about yourself. I understand it's not really acceptable practice to have sex with someone and not know what they like to eat, or do, or watch on television." His eyes showed amusement.

Cody laughed. "You'd be surprised how many people do exactly that. Don't need to know a person's favorite food in order to fuck 'em."

The corners of Tristan's eyes crinkled, and even though it was dark, Cody could see that his eye color had changed yet again. "What color are your eyes?" Cody asked suddenly, not even knowing why he cared.

"That color," Tristan pointed, and Cody lifted his head to look. He was pointing out at the ocean.

“But they’re not the same,” he mused. “The first time I saw you, they were dark. Then they were light the next day.”

“The ocean changes too, doesn’t it?” Tristan grinned at him. “They’re whatever color the ocean is. What color is your favorite?”

Cody had a feeling Tristan knew that answer, but he said it anyway. “Blue. But not like navy blue. Like sort of that aqua blue of the waves during midday.”

Tristan nodded and Cody could see he had sand in his hair. Without thinking, he reached over to brush out the grains and Tristan caught his hand, studying it. “Your hands show the hard work you do,” he said, and brought Cody’s palm to his mouth. Cody didn’t breathe when Tristan darted out his tongue to touch the callused skin.

“Yeah, well. I’m a working stiff, what can I say?” he finally mumbled, mesmerized by Tristan’s tongue.

Tristan tugged a little and that was all it took for Cody to roll over on top of him, straddling his waist and lowering his head to kiss him.

Sex on the beach was the worst idea in the world. Sand in tender areas, no thanks. But no matter how hard he tried to break away, Cody couldn’t stop kissing Tristan or bringing a hand down to cup his erection through his pants. And when Tristan made a muffled groan that Cody hadn’t heard from him before, it was *really* hard to stop. “We can’t do it here,” Cody whispered a little desperately, his cock protesting that oh hell yes they could.

“Cody,” Tristan murmured, and the sound of his name from Tristan’s mouth wiped out all thoughts of stopping whatever the hell they were doing. He’d just be careful, is all.

Unzipping Tristan’s fly, Cody reached down and drew out his cock while trying to fit himself against something solid to grind on. A barely audible hiss from Tristan urged him on, and with nothing slicker available than a lick to his palm, Cody began to stroke him.

He was beautifully responsive. Planting both feet in the sand and thrusting up into Cody’s palm, Tristan was silent except for the occasional indrawn breath when Cody would pass a thumb over the soft head of his prick and sweep away the moisture that had gathered.

“What do *you* like?” Cody murmured to him, rolling his hips into Tristan’s hard thigh as he increased the speed of his strokes.

“I like that,” Tristan whispered back, one hand coming up to splay across Cody’s ass and hold him more firmly. “Whatever you want to do to me, I like.”

Well, that was sort of encouraging. With one hand grasping at the sand next to Tristan’s head and the other one pumping Tristan’s dick, Cody put his head down to suckle at

Tristan's throat. He knew there'd be a mark there come morning, a nice purple one at least one inch across, and liked the idea.

Tristan did too, apparently, since he let out a small moan and arched his neck to give Cody more access, and when Cody looked up again, Tristan was watching him with fathomless eyes and an undefinable expression. "What?" Cody asked hoarsely, about three seconds away from coming in the new shorts he'd just bought yesterday, but Tristan just shook his head once and bit down on his lower lip.

Cody felt the shudder in Tristan's chest before he felt it lower down, and he held off his own orgasm long enough to watch Tristan come.

Tristan's eyes fluttered closed and a furrow appeared between his brows, and Cody thought if he bit down any harder on his lip that he'd draw blood. Then there was a groan from the back of Tristan's throat and the resulting warmth spilled over Cody's hand.

Cody let him ride out the wave of climax before spreading his own legs slightly and rubbing hard up against Tristan's thigh, and that was all it took before he gasped out, "Oh, fuck," and came all over the inside of his good shorts. Damn, he knew he should have worn a pair of boxers tonight.

The moon came out from behind a cloud.

Chapter Six

He really hadn't thought much about when it was time for Tristan to leave. The guy had just sort of insinuated himself so neatly into Cody's life that Cody had forgotten he hadn't always been there.

So when Tristan appeared at the restaurant nearly three weeks after he'd first walked – or swam, really – into Cody's life and announced he was leaving, Cody was taken off guard.

"You're huh?" he asked, a pitcher of iced tea in one hand and a tray of entrees in the other.

Tristan looked curiously at the plates of enchiladas and quesadillas before repeating himself. "I said I need to leave. Something happened at home and I need to be there."

"Oh," Cody said, forgetting about the table that was patiently waiting for their lunch. "So, like ... when? Now?"

"Tonight, after dark. But first I want to go here." He handed Cody another flyer, this time one from the Griffith Observatory. "I want to see the planets."

"Okay," Cody said slowly, still trying to absorb the fact that Tristan was leaving. "But I can't answer a whole bunch of scientific questions or anything. Don't know much about astronomy."

"I promise not to ask you scientific questions. I already know scientific facts. What I want to know can't be found in books."

"Whatever," he shrugged. "Come by around seven."

The sun was still above the horizon when Tristan knocked on the door, but by the time they had made the twenty-minute drive up into the Hollywood hills, it was sinking low enough to turn the wispy clouds a soft shade of orange.

They got out and Cody watched as Tristan strolled the grounds slowly, stopping in front of the Astronomer's Monument. "These are great scientists of yours," he said, circling the monument to see all six of them.

"I guess so," Cody said. "But they studied space, and that's not my thing."

"What's your thing?"

"The ocean," he grinned, and Tristan smiled back.

“That’s my thing too.”

“Clearly,” Cody replied, and Tristan slanted him a sideways glance.

“You’re making fun of me?”

“No, man. I’m teasing you. There’s a difference.” He grinned again to show the humor in it and was rewarded with a smile.

“People tease to be affectionate,” Tristan said thoughtfully.

“Um, yeah. We do.” Cody thought he might be blushing under the scrutiny and was glad when Tristan looked away again to study the monument.

“Space is a wide frontier,” Tristan murmured. “But the oceans are just as endless. Your people could learn a lot more if they looked for intelligent life beneath the waves rather than among the stars.”

“I’ll be sure to pass that along,” Cody said.

They climbed the stairs to the roof of the observatory and Cody pointed at the large telescope to the side, so Tristan put his eye to the lens. He looked for a long time, long enough to make Cody wander over to one of the benches and sit down facing the ocean. The sun was gone by now, the sky turning indigo and the stars winking on.

Tristan sat down next to him and they were both silent, watching the sea. “The lights of your city are too bright,” Tristan finally said. “It’s nearly impossible to see galaxies and nebulae.”

“Most people aren’t looking for other galaxies,” Cody replied. “They just want to see the stars.”

“But why? Why don’t you look for distant galaxies? Why do you settle for the first thing you can see when you look up?” He sounded confused, as if he really wanted to know and wasn’t just searching for information to take back to his students.

Cody half-laughed, half-sighed. “Dude, you ask hard questions. I can’t speak for everyone; I have no idea what *I’m* even thinking half the time, much less other people on the planet.”

“I’m not asking other people on the planet,” Tristan said reasonably. “I’m asking you.”

Well, that much was true. “Okay,” Cody said, thinking hard. “Okay. Well. If you go to some of the unincorporated areas of the city, the places where there are no lights? If you go there and then look up, you’re sort of overwhelmed by space and stars. Like there’s no

end to it, which I guess there kind of isn't. And it makes you feel really, really small. It's beautiful, but big. And lots of people don't like feeling small like that. They spend their lives trying to prove their importance. They don't want that important feeling all fucked up just by looking into space. Get it?"

Tristan looked like he was trying to get it, in any case. He looked at Cody and then back out at the sea, and Cody could practically hear the wheels turning in his head. "Humans don't like feeling small," he repeated. "But ... they are. They are small, in comparison to everything else." He scratched the back of his neck thoughtfully.

"Yeah, we pretty much are. But a lot of people don't like being reminded of it, so they don't really make a habit of looking for, like, nebulae and shit."

Tristan turned back to him before taking one last glance upward at the night sky. "You're intelligent," he said simply.

Cody snorted. "Too bad you weren't one of my teachers."

The beach was, once again, empty of people. Cody had a feeling that Tristan knew more about that than he himself did, but Cody guessed it didn't matter.

They sat on the edge of the lifeguard tower, feet dangling off. Cody wasn't sure what the feeling in his chest was, only that there was an odd tightness that was starting to hurt. "So," he started, and then stopped. What was there to say? See ya, I'll be sure and look for you the next time I do some deep-sea diving?

"Thank you for your help," Tristan said quietly. "I've liked this time with you. I'm sorry it ended sooner than it was supposed to. I like spending time on shore."

"You could come back," Cody offered, not sure where it came from.

"When I need to come back, I will. But you probably won't see me. I don't make a point of asking for help from the same human." There was a faint note of regret in his tone. Or Cody could have imagined it, he wasn't sure.

"Um, okay. Well. You know where to find me if you need me." He looked down at his nails and noticed how ragged they were. He should really stop biting them. "And also ... y'know, it's cool if I remember you being here. I wouldn't tell anyone about it or anything."

Tristan turned to him then, and when Cody looked, he was startled by Tristan's eye color. A deep, aqua blue, they glinted in the moonlight.

“That’s not the color of the ocean right now,” he blurted out, then bit his lip. Why the fuck had he said that?

“I know,” Tristan answered, in a barely-audible voice, “but it’s your favorite color.” And he leaned in to brush the softest of kisses across Cody’s mouth, a mere whisper.

Cody blinked open his eyes in time to see Tristan hop easily off the tower and stride across the sand to the water. Shedding clothes along the way, he did not stop at the edge of the shore but continued straight on into the ocean, barely a ripple in his wake.

Cody watched for as long as he could before his eyes started to burn and play tricks on him. Tristan’s head was still visible over the waves for another minute before he ducked underneath, and then finally, Cody saw what he had been straining to see all along.

A silvery tail splashed once above the surface and was gone.

He sat for a long time; long enough for the moon to move in the sky and the stars to change places and the ocean to become calm once again. He didn’t think much about anything, but he did lift his eyes to the sky once or twice and thought about galaxies.

Later, at home, the small lamp by his bed was glowing when Cody returned. He didn’t remember leaving it on. On the nightstand, next to his clock-radio and favorite pair of drumsticks, two aquamarine cufflinks gleamed.

Summer faded into fall and his lifeguarding job ended for another season. Every once in a while, Cody found an excuse to climb up the ladder and sit on the edge of the tower at night, watching the sea.

- Fin

Birthstones: Still Waters

Copyright © 2006 by Tory Temple

All rights reserved. No part of this eBook may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information address Torquere Press, PO Box 4351, Grand Junction, CO 81502.

Printed in the United States of America.

Torquere Press electronic edition / March 2006

Torquere Press eBooks are published by Torquere Press, PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78685.

www.torquerepress.com