



Storm Surge

Jennah Sharpe © 2006

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Storm Surge

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Chapter One

The tattered newspaper article held between her two fingers fluttered in the wind. Mia Craven silently watched the windsurfers fly across the sea from her lotus position outside the tent. She looked down at the headline once more. For days she'd kept it in her back pocket while working on the arrangements to travel to the island in order to research the story.

Three Separate Sightings of Merman-like Creature the headline read. Now here she was, a twenty-seven year old cryptozoologist once again at the far reaches of civilization, searching for something that everyone else knew didn't exist.

For most of her life she'd wondered why she couldn't be normal. Why did she have such an intense, all-encompassing fascination with mythical creatures? She'd studied them all—selkies, niads, sirens and merfolk. One could also draw the conclusion that she was equally fascinated with water as her father when he insisted she learn to swim, knowing she would need the skill.

Strong-willed her mother called her. Sticking to her beliefs like scales to a mermaid's tail.

Mia had few friends who could put up with her various accounts of Nessie or stolen selkie skins. When she thought of it, most of her close friends were male, protective of a misguided little sister.

Who cares, she thought, staring out at the green sea. *Look at all the*

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places I've been. Exotic locales steeped in ancient lore. Scotland was loaded with work, but so was Japan, the Netherlands, and the South Pacific. Mia couldn't imagine a better life for herself. Her articles as a cryptozoologist paid her way, and she loved life.

Despite her deep knowledge of all mythical marine beings, the legends of the mermen held her interest. No, she couldn't admit to a single sighting, but there was something intensely erotic about both the modern portrayals and ancient stories surrounding them.

They were powerful and temperamental, often throwing the seas into a raging surge. Ultimately they had little interest in humans, the exact opposite of their female counterparts who often lured men to the sea through song.

To study a merman specimen would define both her career and her life. Reports of dead specimens kept her hunting, but every time the evidence—if there actually had been any—was eliminated. Mia was an optimist, though. She just needed to get to a specimen before anyone else did.

Three sightings in one week on this rock of a key north of the island of *Hispañiola* had her running to the airport. A windsurfers' mecca, it was also the haunt of reclusive celebrities. However, the local Carib descendants ran the island very much their way.

Mia had a small dome tent set up just under the palms on the edge of the beach. Run by an expatriate from North Dakota, it was called Utopia Camping. Thus far, it had been just that. Although Mia had yet to meet her, the proprietor was a legend in her own right. At sixty-three years of age, she had more piercings than a porcupine could inflict. Mia was in her element.

The fathomless deep blue void of the sky held no clouds. The wind had picked up from the morning, but Mia enjoyed the breezy siesta hour. Her long but stringy sandy hair whipped her face. Frustrated, she attempted to tuck it back into her red bandana. Her sienna broomstick skirt kicked up around her in a gust, and given all the muscle-bound bodies of testosterone walking about, she was glad she'd thought to pull on her bikini bottoms.

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Being somewhat of a free spirit, Mia was used to male attention whether she desired it or not. She had to be careful, though, and she knew it. It was all too easy for her to be drawn into a situation where she felt she belonged, mistakenly or not. She was an outcast and although she embraced that decision, her soul yearned to belong. Defences had to be built.

Pondering her new location, Mia was startled when a cry of alarm went up. People were shouting, *"Where is he? Find him!"* Suddenly, the beach was in an uproar as onlookers gathered to see what the fuss was about. "Was it a shark?" someone asked.

Mia couldn't see over the crowd of tanned shoulders, so she ducked down to look around hips, gasping when she saw a tall, dark-haired man rising from the breaking waves. Mia got down on her knees and crawled through the mass of legs. The small bundle of child held in the man's arms might need her help and being an expert swimmer, she was also highly trained in first aid and resuscitation methods.

Someone cleared a circle around the man, and that's when Mia realized the young boy pulled from the surf was miraculously unharmed. He was crying and obviously wanting his mother, but he was sitting on his own.

Mia focused her attention on the rescuer. People were whispering around her, and she saw then why. The man who was built like an Olympian swimmer was completely and awe-inspiringly naked.

The crowd dissipated when a frantic woman with a second-degree burn and a too-small swimsuit fell to the sand, scooped up the boy and cuddled him against her. She choked out words of thanks to the man without glancing at him.

He stood, ensuring for one last time that the child was safe before he turned and headed back into the surf.

Mia was still crouched in the sand only feet from where the mother was now coaxing her boy to stand, and shouting, "Don't you ever do that to me again!"

Mia froze when she heard the little voice ask, "Mommy, did you see the boy mermaid? He helped me under the water."

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She couldn't keep her eyes off the rescuer's naked form, but he was too far away to call back. The long, sinewy muscles tapered from his chest, through his tight abdomen into his groin. From behind, his shoulders rippled as he leapt into the white crested waves. He took several powerful strokes before disappearing behind a coral outcropping.

Wow! Mia ran for her journal—a small spiral notebook she kept with her at all times. Back at Utopia, she bent, unzipped the tent flap and plopped herself inside. Rifling through her day bag, she found her notebook and scribbled down her account of the incident with a dull pencil.

* * * * *

Later, as she sat at the communal campfire, she listened to the whisperings among her fellow campers as they filled in the rest of the story. They also stirred up more questions that couldn't be answered.

The boy, being young and light, had disappeared beneath a suctioning wave. Frantic commotion ensued when he didn't immediately pop back up. A man then emerged from the water with the boy in his arms. However, no one had seen him dive under.

And then there was her own personal question. Why the hell was he swimming naked at a public beach? Perhaps he'd been swimming by from another location and hadn't anticipated a rescue and emergence on the beach. Mia could only guess, but watching him had provided her more than a moment's pleasure. Then there was the child's statement about the boy mermaid. Children didn't lie in such situations. He'd been afraid. It had not been a time to fantasize about Disney movies. Feeling restless and uneasy, she left the fire to walk around.

Utopia provided the only bar on the island. Actually, as Mia discovered that first warm night on the key, it was more than a bar. Tourists, locals and windsurfers alike gathered under the thatched roof of La Luna Bar and Grill.

She slowly walked through the throng towards the bar constructed from bamboo poles. Where they'd found the poles, Mia could only guess,

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as bamboo didn't grow on the island. She felt somewhat uncomfortable being the only female in sight.

A jovial group of red-faced fisherman clustered with a smaller contingent of what Mia would call beach bums. Dressed in thigh length swim shorts that didn't leave a whole lot to the imagination and light cotton T-shirts, they all sported either short and spiky or shoulder length hair.

Mia sat down on a bar stool close to the group, her sandals falling to the floor. She let them fall, rubbing her soles together. Her notebook at the ready, her wish was to hear the word *merman* in a conversation. Surely talk would eventually turn to the three sightings and the rescue that afternoon. Mia needed to know more about the man in the sea, and gossip would do.

She ordered a screwdriver from the silent, smiling bartender and tuned into her favorite activity; eavesdropping. When two of the fishermen picked up their poles and left, Mia had a better view of their conversation piece. She almost inhaled her orange juice when she realized they were huddled around *him*. Tall, over six feet of bronzed muscle, long tangled black hair that tapered to mid torso. Black was the description that came to mind, but as she watched him laughing with friends, lamplight glinting in his hair and she thought she saw tints of dark green. A lush, tangled jungle of vines or...kelp?

Mia didn't realize she was staring until dark brown, slightly slanted eyes holding no hint of emotion met hers. She blushed, knowing her face was very likely deep red. It was one of her downfalls. She hadn't mastered a method of keeping the rush of heat at bay.

She'd called attention to herself and waited for his move. It didn't take long. He took the empty stool beside her, signalled the bartender for a beer and leaned in to make eye contact.

Mia looked up when he took a strand of her hair and ran it between his fingers. Her breath caught in her throat, but her scalp tingled with alarm.

"Excuse me!" she blurted, moving away from his touch.

He smiled. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." He touched her

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hand. "My name is Tydon, but most people around here call me Ty."

She almost gasped at his touch on her hand. Man, he had nerve!

"You didn't scare me." She raised her eyebrows at him.

"I thought you wanted me to come over, but sometimes I misread."

What was that accent? She could only place it somewhere between Irish and Australian with a bit of Dutch thrown in.

"You didn't misread. I was just curious about today." The words the boy spoke to his mother came back to her once again. *Did you see the boy mermaid?* She wanted to ask him questions and couldn't afford to send him packing.

"The boy was swept out of his depth."

"Yes, but you just happened to be there."

"Thankfully, yes."

"Did you see anything when you were out there?"

He looked at her with questioning in his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Anything out of the ordinary? The boy mentioned a merman."

A strange look passed over Tydon's face. Mia couldn't read what he was thinking, but it obviously wasn't disbelief.

"Who are you?" All semblance of a smile was gone from his face.

Mia pressed on. "I'm a cryptozoologist."

"A what?"

"I study mythical beings. Creatures that were once thought to exist. Their existence is possible, but unproven. I am looking for a cryptid of my own."

"What is a cryptid?"

"It's what we call these mythical beings. I am looking for evidence of a merman. Apparently there have been sightings on this island, and I'm here to substantiate those sightings. It would mean so much to me." He'd hit on her passion and now she was rambling. "Most people think we're crazy to some degree, but they buy our articles. So many creatures that were once thought of as mythical, or even extinct, have come to light. For example, the giant squid and the platypus. A merman would prove me to the scientific community."

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"Ah, I see. So, you want to find a merman. And what would you do with one if you found him?"

Mia was intrigued. Men that she hadn't grown up with went running when she brought up her feelings on her career. This man was asking more questions.

"I hadn't thought that far ahead. Just proving they exist would be heaven for me. I suppose people would come to study him, to take tests, to find out more about his natural environment and if there are more, where they live, how they reproduce, what they eat. There are so many questions."

"What if he didn't want to be studied?"

"I doubt he'd have a say in the matter. They aren't exactly human. More fish, I've always thought."

"Huh..." he grunted, and looked down at the condensation covered beer bottle in his hand. Here was this pretentious female presuming to capture one of his kind, and all he could think of was how stunning she would look without the human trappings of clothing. What was wrong with him?

Ever since his reckless brother had surfaced too close to the fishermen and been speared through the tail, Tydon had been spotted too many times in his true form as he attempted to find out which humans knew what.

By some strange set of circumstances this female knew his kind existed, and anything she discovered could mean extinction for his brothers and sisters. He knew his sisters had a penchant for mortal male flesh, and had been reprimanded for surfacing, but he had a special gift that only the males of his species possessed. He was a shape shifter. He'd heard the term only recently, but knew that the term applied to his abilities. At will, he could turn his form into that of a mortal man. It was exhausting and somewhat painful, but at times it was a very useful talent.

This woman would flip over backwards if she knew what he was, but he was enjoying his chat with her. She was passionate and her wide eyes betrayed her thoughts.

She was attracted to him. More than that perhaps. She lusted after

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him. He could sense it acutely. Every so often when she was speaking, her gaze roamed over his form. She caught herself occasionally, blushed furiously, and continued talking.

She was battling her instincts. He would never understand that about humans. He knew from his sisters that humans had numerous courtship rituals that even *they* couldn't keep track of. Sex was just that; a frenzied, intensely pleasing mating, and this Mia the cryptozoologist would make an interesting mate.

Her hips were nicely rounded; her breasts high and snug on her chest. Her scent betrayed her feelings even more than her luminous, hazel eyes. She was aroused. Highly aroused if his senses were right, which was always. Females of every species gave off pheromones, and hers were highly charged. He longed to breathe her in, but she would no doubt wonder what he was doing. He had to taste her. Would she taste as sweet and heady as she smelled?

Tydon leaned in a little closer. If she noticed, she gave no indication. He felt himself stiffening, his instincts heightening. What would she say if he asked her for a coupling? Most women couldn't resist him but could she...? A slap in the face would most likely end the matter.

He wasn't listening when she told him why she thought mermen inhabited these waters. He was watching her long, slim fingers as she gestured, imagining how they would feel wrapped around him.

Mia stopped talking when she realized his attention was not on her words. He straightened to alertness. The mating rituals of humans were so damn complicated! Bluntness worked when he needed it to. The ache he felt was building. He had to do something. *She has in interest in me that she isn't yet aware of. If it's a cryptid she wants, she can have him.*

Knowing where her fascination lay, Tydon decided to use it to his advantage. He needed to draw her closer. He knew just what to say. He leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"They are most definitely fish, but they are also very human."

He turned to leave then, testing her, but stopped when she grabbed his forearm.

"What would you know about it?" she whispered back.

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“Very likely more than you.” He glanced around. “We need somewhere to talk. I’m not safe here.”

“Come to my tent. All my recording equipment is there. I want to interview you.”

Tydon smiled. Was that satisfaction she saw in his grin? Okay, yes, she’d invited him to her tent and yes, he was brutally erotic, but she had to risk it. It was all too easy for her to sleep with a man, especially one who looked like him. Mia had always had the knack for separating emotion from gratifying, no-strings sex. Besides, she wasn’t sure how long she could go without sex surrounded by all these scantily clad windsurfers. The interest he’d piqued in her barely scratched the surface of what she was capable of with someone who wasn’t setting out to debunk her theories. The thought scared her.

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Chapter Two

He followed her along the dark paths towards her little tent watching her hips sway in rhythm with her skirt. She didn't look behind her, but surely she could hear his heavy footfalls close to hers. She unzipped the tent and ushered him inside.

They sat face-to-face, both on their knees. A vague warning sounded within his psyche—*You will bring us death.*—but his instincts to mate with her were too strong. Was this why he and his brothers had so long been taught to steer clear of humans? His sisters could hold their own; their mating instincts not so finely tuned. Who would believe the alcoholic, exposure-induced prattling of fishermen too long at sea, anyway?

Besides all that, Mia truly believed his kind existed. Perhaps she knew who was hunting them. Once he got hold of the hunters who'd torn his brother's tail to shreds, he would feed them to the sharks. The thought shot adrenaline through his system. He shifted on the floor of the tent feeling restless.

"What do you know of mermen?" Mia asked. She held up a small digital recorder and flicked a switch. He gave her a funny look as if he had no clue what her intentions were. "Just relax and talk, Ty. I'll worry about the electronics."

"A merman was speared last week," he said in a hushed tone.

Mia felt light-headed and the hand that held her recorder began to tremble. Could she really be this close? She felt as if she was on the edge

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of an abyss; the edge of a new life, new respect, yet she couldn't quite picture what that looked like or would mean.

Tydon continued, "Several others, the females in particular, have had close calls. Someone knows we...they are there."

"And how do you fit into this scenario?" Although not a sceptic when it came to their existence, Mia wasn't so sure she could trust this man. She would need solid proof. She needed a merman.

"Good question. I'm trying to find out why we're being hunted."

"We?" The word caught in her throat and came out as a whisper. She waited for his explanation.

He looked her in the eye. "Yeah... I said we."

"You don't look like a merman. Where's your fin?" No, she didn't believe him, but neither did she find it funny. So many people thought she was crazy. Who was she to judge others? His face was solemn, not mocking.

"I had hoped you might be able to help."

"I'm sorry. It was a gut reaction. Of course I believe you." She decided to reserve judgement but remain wary. What could he want?

In the confines of the tent it was difficult to miss the rise in his lap. What's worse, he made no move to conceal the tightening of his shorts. Oh, so that's what he wanted. Mia blushed with an intensity that matched the distant throbbing between her legs as she watched his erection grow. She knew she was becoming slick inside. She adjusted her sitting position to put pressure where she needed it. Right then all her inhibitions fell away. She needed him to touch her, and she knew it wouldn't take any work to make it happen.

Mia moved on her knees closer to him and smiled at his sudden intake of breath. She'd shocked him. Good. She always felt better when she was in control. Seductively, she put her face against his chest and breathed him in. He smelled fresh but like salt more than anything. Not surprising for a surfer...or a merman.

"So," she whispered. "Where do you live...as a merman?"

He still hadn't touched her. Mia continued to slowly caress her cheek against his chest, wondering at his intentions. Tydon cleared his

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throat. He placed broad hands on her upper arms and drew her away. He titled her chin with a finger so that she could see his eyes. With both of them kneeling, he rubbed his erection against her stomach. Mia inhaled slowly.

"We live on the other side of the island. It was quite safe until the tourists began coming."

Mia set the recorder on the ground so she could stroke his whiskery cheek. Her other hand dipped into his shorts, felt for his length, and was welcomed by a swelling heat that hardened in her hand. Ty groaned.

"You'd better let go."

"Are you sure?" Mia relaxed. So, it wasn't just a show so he could get laid. That was encouraging...and strange.

"It's dangerous ground, Mia. I told you, I'm not human."

Mia edged back into her own space and once again held up the recorder. She was somewhat perplexed. Most men would jump at the chance to bed her, but this one...he wanted something else from her. What was it?

She decided to continue the interview.

"You look like a man," she stated as if it wasn't obvious. "You feel like one, too."

"This is not my true form, Mia. You could almost call it an illusion, except that flesh and blood are involved. It is simply playing with matter, changing it into what your minds sees."

"Okay. Why are you here? On land I mean."

"We're being hunted, as I mentioned. So far, it's been subtle. We could have said it was coincidence until they saw my irresponsible brother William when he got too close. Out of respect they never used to fish on our side of the island, but they deliberately speared my brother."

"Is William a mer name?"

"No, it's just one my mother heard and liked."

Mia almost laughed but held it in check. "So, they know you're here?"

"The native people do. They've known for generations. Personally, I've never had much to do with them and their simple ways."

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He spoke with a hostility that showed he'd forgotten he was face-to-face with a human woman who could possibly help the cause. Mia raised her hand to feign a slap. He grinned and caught her wrist.

"Sorry, my little cryptozoologist, that's just the way I've felt for so long. I may be changing my mind, about the females at least."

"So, we need to find out who's doing this."

"That's why I'm here. Someone's bound to slip up at some point. I don't like this form, Mia. It's not who I am. I'd like to get this done and go back."

Mia prickled at the words. *Go back*. He would leave her. Oh, man. No, she had to keep him close. She had so much study to do. It only began with the interview. There was so much he had to show her. She could get enough for a book if he'd only stay around a little while. To be honest, she was enjoying this line of discussion, and he was more than good company. And, if he touched her again, she might consider kidnapping.

"Can you change at will?"

"I can, but I prefer to be in the water when it happens. It's uncomfortable bordering on painful. Not something I enjoy. The water helps to relax me and the transformation occurs faster."

Mia thought of the water births many modern women preferred to other methods of labor and thought his answer made perfect sense.

"Can you show me?"

"Mia, I know you're curious and need proof beyond my word—" He reached out to her, placing the tips of his fingers on the side of her neck. He felt so sweet, cool despite the heat still coursing through them. When he let go, he continued his explanation. "But I need to remain in this form a bit longer. I can't keep changing back and forth. It's too exhausting and I have work to do. I promise I'll show you, Mia, but not yet."

"Ty, I won't dissect you. I won't send you to some aquarium God-knows-where." No, she wouldn't send him away, but neither would she let him go. His touch awakened something inside her that refused to be quieted.

He fit her. They fit both physically and emotionally. She'd found her merman and finally understood the purpose of her relentless quest.

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Through her search and her in-depth knowledge of the merbeing world, Ty felt safe in revealing his secret to her. And for some reason she couldn't help but believe him, as crazy as it sounded even to herself.

Ty gazed at the roof of the tent, deep in thought.

"I'll help you. We'll find out who's doing this."

"Humans must not be allowed to capture one of us. I cannot be your cryptid."

"You aren't. You won't be." How could she convey to him that in the time he'd first told her he was a merman, she'd learned so much more than her years of study and research had taught her? He was more human than he'd ever admit. He felt his emotions stronger than most human men could ever dream. It may have had something to do with his instincts, she thought. He wasn't used to subduing his feelings, as he'd shown her.

They sat together languidly, talking deep into the night, discussing the work of cryptozoology. Ty was enthralled to know there were humans out there who cared about his race, his kind. They lay together in silence, as if finding comfort within each other's arms. A barrier against the harshness of the outside world.

It was thick night when Ty unwrapped himself from her. Mia kept her eyes closed as he left. He had work to do, but she knew in her heart he'd be back. When he was out of hearing distance, she untied her sleeping bag and pulled it out flat. She rolled onto it and flipped the remainder over her now chilly body.

A merman had just been inside her tent! A hot, primal merman! The whole situation was still very surreal. Mia slept hard until a deafening clap of thunder brought her wide-awake.

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Chapter Three

Mia bolted upright. Rain pelted her canvas tent and the material flapped in a gust of wild wind. The stars had been out when she'd brought Tydon to her tent. Wishing Ty were there to hold her, she wrapped the sleeping bag tighter around her body. Attempting to block the searing flashes of lightning from her eyes, she scooted down further beneath her cover.

Then, a strange noise reached her. She strained her ears. Someone was calling. But...what were they yelling? The heavy beat of the rain and the clash of thunder drowned out the voice. It was male. She was sure of that, but who would be out in this storm?

Mia struggled with the urge to run and find out what was going on and the self-preservation that told her to stay put. Her curiosity won, and she climbed from her warm bed.

Rain hit her in the face as soon as the tent opened. Yes, she could hear it better now. It was a call, but she couldn't make out if there were words. It sounded like a body in distress. Realizing the attempt to stay dry would be futile, she left her clothes behind and ran onto the beach. Lightning flashed over the sea, and she ducked. The thunder followed immediately. The storm was coming closer.

She walked slowly out onto the open beach. No one else was visible through the pitch-blackness. No one else would be crazy enough to be out walking the beach. Could it be that she was the only one willing to venture into the storm? The fury of the sky didn't scare her. Storms never

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had. She would be safe as long as she remained somewhat sheltered. Okay, so going onto the beach contradicted this fact, but she felt it was necessary. Someone was in trouble and they were close. Perhaps she could help.

The crash of the waves as they hit the beach kept her going, setting a pace that quickened her movements. The tide was coming in fast and if anyone needed help, she had to move him from the beach. Mia walked a few more feet, trying to squint into the darkness but only able to see in front of her by the blinding flashes of lightning. One particularly lasting flash illuminated the beach in an eerie green glow. She saw the outline of the form on the sand as it thrashed about, calling out in an incoherent voice. A man.

She rushed up to the injured person but froze when she realized what was before her. She bent down, keeping well out of reach.

It was Tydon, but...somehow he was different. His face was smoother, more streamlined, soft and translucent. His body, hairless. And just below his hipbones there was a gradual change in skin composition from human-like flesh to smooth, silky tail not unlike that of a dolphin. Grey in color with streaks of light blue running lengthwise to the flukes, the tail was long, easily two-thirds the length of his torso, with a diaphanous trailing on each of the two flukes that emerged at the end. In the water, he would have been breathtaking, shining and powerful.

Mia leaned closer and he grabbed her shoulders, shaking her but unable to pronounce words. She wanted to run but with the next flash of lightning, she knew he needed her. His tail was gashed down what would have been his lower thigh. The wound was open, with tissue ripped and blood oozing onto the sand. Gaping slashes followed down to the end of his tail. Mia wanted to vomit, but she knew this merman needed her help. There was no one else who could help him. He obviously couldn't make it back home and had come to the beach in search of the only human that he trusted. She couldn't run now, not after he'd given her his trust.

"I don't know what to do, Tydon! I can't carry you."

It seemed he understood her, and pulled himself a few more agonizing inches up the beach before screaming in pain.

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"No, no! Shh. I'll help you. We'll get you to the tent." What the hell was she going to do with ten feet of merman in her tent? *Oh God*. She swallowed hard.

Mia moved behind him and reached under his arms. She heaved his upper body and let him squirm towards the tent with the muscles in his tail. Blood ran freely, but he would soon be off the beach. Twenty feet more, that was all. She could do it. The grasp he had on her upper arms told her she didn't have a choice.

"We're almost there, Ty. Keep going." The lightning had her ducking again and she couldn't see. The rain plastered her hair on her face and down her chest, but she didn't have free hands to move it.

"Only a bit more." She conjured all her muscles and lifted him into the tent. He laid back and closed his eyes. His breathing was hard and his flesh very pale. Mia knelt in the middle of her tent surrounded by male and dolphin. She wrapped the major wound as tight as she could in a beach towel, securing it with a bra which she wrapped only once around the injured tail. She covered him with the sleeping bag before running back out onto the beach. Mia kicked wet sand over the trail of blood. By morning there would no sign left. Once the tide came in and receded, all evidence of Tydon's injury would be gone.

She returned to find him either asleep or passed out from exertion and pain. She had no idea which. During that moment of contemplation, the most inane thought came to her. She realized merman didn't have scales. Dolphin skin. Somehow it made much more sense to her. She ran her hand along the smooth, slippery skin where it was whole, and wondered if he needed to be kept wet. Surely he would have indicated that to her. She would worry about that in the morning. For now, he had to regain his strength, and she needed to find out who could fix a merman tail.

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Chapter Four

Mia slept the remaining hour of dark curled up as closely as she could to Tydon. It was instinct to keep him warm. She wasn't sure it was necessary, but it seemed the right thing to do. She wrapped her only sleeping bag around the two of them, leaving his lengthy tail to the open air.

It was he who woke her at dawn. He stroked her face and kissed her forehead. Her eyes fluttered and then closed again. He kissed her again, this time on the lips. She sat upright and looked him in the eye.

She was waiting for him to say something. He stared into her eyes and she felt she couldn't look away. His brow was furrowed and tail smacked the floor in what...anger? Frustration? Mia couldn't tell, but he definitely seemed agitated. Suddenly, he pulled her close against him. She wrapped her arms around him in a quick embrace before leaning down to check his tail.

"The bleeding has stopped. You'll be okay, but you'll have a nasty scar. I don't know who can heal a merman around here. Any ideas?"

Tydon nodded and motioned her to back away. She moved to where his tail fins brushed the edge of the tent. He lay on his back, closed his eyes and breathed several deep, cleansing breaths.

As Mia watched in utter fascination mixed with a tinge of horror, Tydon's skin began to slide and crawl before her. It was as if the actual cells of his body were repositioning and realigning. They shifted as if they were lit from within, and very slowly the skin of his tail changed into that

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of human flesh. Tearing her gaze from his lower half, Mia realized his eyes were squeezed shut and sweat beaded on his forehead. He was in pain but trying to keep it to himself. Water! Why hadn't he waited until he was in the water? Mia took his face in her hands and lowered herself to his mouth. She kissed him tenderly, playing with his lips and tongue, distracting him until he relaxed beneath her.

Gradually his breathing eased and his muscles relaxed. When she gained the courage to look once again at the place where his tail had been, she caught her breath. He was the Olympian form she recognized, male genitalia intact and muscular male legs flowing from around them. Her blood-soaked beach towel lay in a puddle under his knees, and the gash was visible but much cleaner on his upper thigh. She reached for more clothing to wrap around his leg.

"We have to get you to a doctor. If this gets infected there'll be hell to pay. You can't get a fever. You have too much work to do."

"You sound so motherly. I'm all right now, Mia. Now that you've found me."

She jumped at the sound of his familiar voice. "Ty, what happened to you? You told me you weren't going to change again for quite some time. How did you get hurt? Did someone see you? Tell me what happened!" Her voice was becoming strained. He reached for her shoulders and pulled her against his chest.

"It's okay. I'll tell you, and then we'll find someone to stitch me up. As a man we can find help but as a merman, I was doomed. I followed one of their boats. I know who is hunting us. I recognized him at the bar after I left you. I've seen him many times, walking the beach, talking with people. He wears a suit everyday whether the humidity is one hundred percent or twenty. I'll have to ask Margaretha about him. She knows everyone."

"Margaretha?"

"She owns this campground. You don't know her?"

"No, I don't. I only spoke with her on the phone to reserve my site, but I've yet to meet her."

"You're in for a real treat then, my dear. Actually, why don't you

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go get her right now? She'll help you get me to a doctor or bring one here."

"Does she know about you...what you are?"

"Yes. She asked me once, and I couldn't lie to her. She's a kindred spirit, though. It really didn't surprise her. Hurry, Mia, it's burning. I can't take this much longer."

"Okay, I'm gone." She moved toward the door.

"Wait!" She turned, irritated that he was delaying help. "You're naked. Not that I mind, but you might if you realize after you're out in the open."

Mia's face burned with embarrassment. She threw on underwear and a T-shirt before leaving the tent.

* * * * *

The morning was wet, but smelled fresh and earthy. Mia likened it to the first wet spring day back home. It was intensely different, though. Mist rose from the flowering bougainvillea and hibiscus bushes, as well as from the small tidal pools to the south of the beach, close to the coral outcroppings.

The sun belied the terror of the storm that had raged during the night. It was already very warm and the sky was clear with no hint of thinning cloud cover like she would have expected. The breeze lifted her hair and teased the back of her neck.

Tydon's blood had soaked into her fingernails, but she hadn't time to clean them. She headed inland, searching for the owner of the campground. Miss Margaretha would know where to find someone to help Ty. She followed the spider web of paths, jogging through the other tent sites and gently smoking campfires, to a small cabin on the edge of the jungle. *This must be it.*

Mia climbed the three steps to the veranda and knocked on the door. It was early yet, and she needed to know if Miss Margaretha was awake. If not, she needed to wake her.

"Yeah, what is it?" The voice was muffled behind the door.

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"Ma'am, I need your help! Can you call me a doctor?"

The door swung open so fast it cracked a hinge. In front of Mia stood an aging woman with grey hair, tanned as dark as brown sugar, dressed in a reddish brown sari and woven flip-flops. Up and down both ears were tiny rings in various sizes along with petite dolphins and fish.

"Are you all right, hon? What's going on? Why do you need a doctor?"

Her eyes raked Mia's body, obviously looking for signs of mortal injury. Finding none she asked, "Have a tummy ache do ya?"

Mia held out her hands for inspection. Margaretha grabbed them, pulling Mia closer for a better look. She ran for the phone while Mia explained. "My friend has been hurt. His legs are cut. He's in my tent."

Already Margaretha had the local doctor on the phone. "He'll be here in five. What do you need me to do?"

"Come with me maybe? He needs cleaning. Warm water would be great, and some clean towels."

"Oh Lord, girl. What was he doing? Was he sailing in the storm?"

"I don't know the whole story yet. We can ask him when we get there."

* * * * *

When Mia opened the tent, Miss Margaretha gasped and dove inside when she saw the injured man.

"Tydon! What happened, sugar?"

He propped himself up on his elbows in an attempt at a greeting.

"They got to me, Marg. I followed them, but they found me and the spears they have, well...they're pretty sharp."

Marg looked at Ty, and then leaned in to his ear. Mia couldn't hear the whisper that followed.

Ty looked at her then. "Yes, she knows I'm not human, Marg. I can trust her. She very likely knows more than she wants to."

Mia leaned closer.

"Yes, I know he's a merman," Marg said. "How did you find out?"

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she asked Mia without looking up from her concentration on cleansing Ty's legs with warm water. The salt from his swim would hold infection at bay until the doctor arrived, but she was taking no chances.

"He told me."

"I've warned him that he tells others his business too easily. It's going to get him into more trouble if it hasn't already. He's temperamental, stubborn as hell, and has a longing for the sea even when he's been out of it mere minutes. He can bring a storm in as strong as if Poseidon himself were battling. All the tried and true signs of a merman, and I've known my fair share. He told me true and swore me to secrecy. He told me one of these days he'd take me to where they live but he hasn't yet, have you sugar?" She playfully glared at Ty.

Mia felt like pinching herself. Was Margaretha for real? How hadn't she heard of this island before when every local seemed to treat merbeings as next-door neighbors? Only minutes earlier a beautiful, full-length merman had been lying in her tent, submitting to her ministrations. He was still here, only now in human form, and he was hers.

Ty laid back down and within seconds, a young-looking salt-and-pepper haired man entered the tent. He was lightly tanned and rather good-looking, wearing shorts and a cotton button down shirt that was undone. He'd obviously dressed in haste. Mia moved out of his way and gestured to Tydon. He swung a black pack from his shoulder and neatly laid it open beside Ty. Mia and Margaretha left the tent to provide the doctor room. They stood staring out at the calm sea, Mia flinching at Ty's grunts of distress from inside.

Margaretha turned toward her. "Are you his mate, hon?"

"His mate?"

"Have you *slept* with him, dear?"

"That's a bit personal considering we just met, isn't it?"

Margaretha smiled. "Well, yes, I suppose it is. It's only that I've been hoping Ty would find a mate of his own soon, whether it is mermaid or human. He needs so much more in his life than windsurfing and chasing women. He's a good boy with a heart of gold that rests on his sleeve. I think that's the saying, anyway. Something like that. What I'm

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trying to say is that if you mated with him, a merman, and he's come back for you, it's very likely he's chosen you as his lifelong mate."

"Lifelong? Well, I don't know about that. I wouldn't say he came back. Something happened in the sea and he came looking for help. He came here either for you or for me, someone to help him. He would never have made it back to the opposite side of the island."

"I see. You're right. When he's thinking a bit straighter you'd better have a talk with him. I think you mean more to him than you think. It's not a situation to be taken lightly."

"I'm not impressed by what you think of me. It was nothing, Margaretha. Not that you need to know. Only a touch."

"I am not here to judge you, Mia, only to warn you. Be sure it was only a touch." Margaretha turned and headed down the path before Mia could think of something to say in return. She watched Margaretha step over a small lizard and disappear into the palms.

The doctor emerged a moment later. He walked up to Mia, eyes dark and heavy with sleep.

"I gave him a couple of stitches and a bottle of antibiotics. Make sure he takes all of them without skipping and he'll heal quite nicely." Mia nodded at the directions. "He did a real number on those legs of his. I can't imagine how. He'll have scars, but they won't be bad. He's lucky that no tendons or joints were badly hurt, only muscle tissue. He'll need a few days off his legs. Is there somewhere other than the tent that he can stay?"

"I'm sure he'll stay in Miss Margaretha's cabin. We'll get a few of the campers to help move him when he's a bit more rested. Is he warm enough, Doctor?"

"Yes, he's comfortable for now, but don't forget to move him soon. He needs a good sleep."

When Tydon was comfortably set up on Margaretha's twin bed inside her cabin, Mia pulled up a chair made from tree branches and sat beside him. For the majority of the day he dozed, occasionally waking for a light snack.

Margaretha had left Mia with a box of crackers and slices of

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warming cheese. Water was pulled from a nearby well and set in a blue jug on the counter. Mia forced water into his mouth with regularity. How long could mermen go without getting dehydrated? She longed to find out the answers to all her questions but Ty was not a specimen, he was a living sentient being.

Margaretha disappeared, claiming important tasks to do with the peaceful running of Utopia, but Mia knew it was to leave her alone with Tydon. According to Margaretha, they needed to talk. Mia smiled at the recollection of their little chat. Margaretha thought she'd had sex with Tydon. She wasn't far off. Mia was well aware of the fact that she would have, had Tydon not stopped her.

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Chapter Five

"Ty, are you going to tell me exactly what happened?"

They were sitting across from each other, Ty favoring his legs but otherwise in good health.

"I overheard them, Mia. When I left you, I returned to La Luna. It's a great spot to overhear things, as you probably noticed. The men were there and I had no idea they were behind all of this until they mentioned the Aquatorium, a type of marine holding tank that's just been built beside the botanical gardens near the city. The island is quickly becoming a haven for ecotourism adventurers looking for a bit of the unknown and untouched. It's a massive seawater pool in which they intend to create an ecosystem identical to the one around the island. For it to be realistic, they need a merbeing to add to the collection. I'm not sure how they found out we're here, but I'm sure it wouldn't take much currency to convince a poor farmer or fisherman that it was worth their while to help these men track us down."

"So, someone sold you out?"

"That's the way it looks. I can't imagine why. We've always lived so peacefully together."

"How can we stop them? It's likely very political, and these men have money and power behind them."

Ty shrugged his shoulders. He paused a moment before speaking, feeling that rush of instinct flare back to life inside his loins as he looked at Mia. He'd only heard the thoughts and feelings associated with finding a

Storm Surge

mate to stay with, but he'd never experienced it himself. Even the first night he'd met her at La Luna, he wasn't sure of what he was feeling. Now, looking at her in the light of the burgeoning evening, he knew. Mia was the one he was meant to mate with.

"Mia, I need something from you. I've been aching with it since I first saw you. We'll talk later," he choked.

She nodded then giggled as she spun her around. With a light pressure on her lower back, he eased her down so that she was on all fours in front of him. Had he ever felt this urgency before? He couldn't think. It didn't matter. He was painfully hard and sheer instinct took over.

At his hesitation, Mia turned her head. "I won't stop you, Ty. You know I want this as well. Are you sure you're up for it? It's been such a long day."

Tydon hiked her skirt up over her behind in response, exposing her flesh decorated by a barely-there thong bikini.

He stroked himself, ensuring its readiness, then grabbed her hips. She squirmed a little when he indented her skin with his fingers. Immediately he drew back, unwilling to hurt this unique female whose urge to mate seemed to match his own.

Tydon pulled aside the string of her thong, but she rose up and slipped it all the way off. His semen burned inside him. Rejecting the brief idea of stroking himself right then and there, he cupped her wet folds. He was delighted to find she was ready for him. He didn't have to wait for her.

Ty rubbed a finger along her cleft as he rose above her to brush his palm across a taut nipple. She ground against his hand and in a fluid motion he had nothing to do with, he found his finger inside her.

He'd never had a female like this before. He barely knew what to do with her.

No man had wet Mia so fast. She couldn't believe how willing her body was to take him in. Sex with a stranger—as long as she didn't take any risks—was intensely erotic and one of her favorite fantasies. Ty hadn't rejected her idea of merbeings. It didn't feel like he was making fun of her. He was no longer a stranger. His eyes held no mirth as they would if sex

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was all he wanted and besides, she'd initiated the foreplay.

Control went out the window the moment he'd turned her around, but she found she welcomed it. She indulged herself. Mia impaled herself on his finger and knew she'd surprised him. Her arousal exploded when he slowly withdrew his finger and replaced it with the tip of his penis. Reaching under, she cradled his testicles in her hand. She stroked, pulling gently, and he made an incoherent noise.

He opened her folds then, to better wrap them around himself. He pushed, and Mia tightened, anxious. It was too much pressure, more than she'd ever experienced. She knew he was big but...*oh, God!* Tydon caressed her back as he repositioned himself.

This time, there was little resistance. He almost growled when he thrust into her. She fell to her elbows. He pushed hard enough for her to feel him against her core, deep and hot. Then, the convulsions of her climax clutched around him.

Tydon used his hands to guide the rhythm of her hips. When their rhythm fell into harmony, he reared back. Mia felt the warm rush inside her at the same time as the throbbing engulfed her entire body, burst open and receded softly.

Ty pulled her up so that she sat on his lap. He wrapped his arms around her breasts and held her as he gave a few half-hearted thrusts before collapsing, taking her down beside him.

Mia sensed some distress, wondering if his leg was hurting him, and pulled off. She snuggled into the dark hair on his chest, loving the feel of his now calm body alongside hers. His eyes were closed, but this breathing was still heavy. She watched his face for a sign of what he felt, if anything, but his finely sculptured features held nothing to give him away.

She moved against his warm skin, hoping to elicit a reaction. Feeling the quiet length of his arousal stir against her navel, she smiled.

"Again?" she whispered.

"Of course," he said, his voice husky with renewed desire.

Mia threw a leg up and over his uninjured thigh. He rolled on top of her, wincing but breathing in the citrus scent of her hair. When he

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slipped inside her, he closed his eyes and relinquished himself to his senses. Her muscles had a tight hold on him. He didn't attempt a climax this time. Holding her in his arms, he knew this was not the regular instinctive mating he was accustomed to. Mia was desirable with the clear eyes and wide hips that sent jolts of electricity flowing to his groin, swelling his cock to an unbearable tightness, but she was different than most other human females he'd taken to bed. His experience was limited to the past two months. However, it had varied. The mermaids he'd mated with in the past had only been interested in offspring. They preferred *human* males for play.

What was different about Mia? He couldn't pin it down. She wanted him again, still slick with wanting and with his semen. He nuzzled her neck when she stroked his back. This female had a hold on him. Was it because she'd allowed him full access to her beautiful body? No, that was too shallow and had happened often enough in the past.

Mia moved her hips in a slow sensuous motion, urging him to move inside her. A moan escaped her lips, and he moved to cover them. It was the first he'd kissed her. His mouth was cool, his tongue patient and seeking. She melted beneath him, realizing the tone of their lovemaking had changed. This time it wasn't just hard, urgent need. It was slow and seductive. He was seducing her now, and it was working.

When he finally left her mouth, he was moving within her at a quickening pace. Mia felt the tension in her muscles growing in reaction. She strained and arched up against him.

"Oh, Ty!" She loved the sound of his name on her lips.

"Mia," he whispered. He rolled them to their sides, still joined, and he pumped his hips hard. Sweat glistened on their skin and the musky scent of their union permeated the cabin. She opened her eyes to find him watching her.

She ventured a light-hearted tone. "So, how do mermen make love?"

He laughed. "I think I just showed you."

It was then that she knew she had her merman, her mate.

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Chapter Six

Ty asked Mia to meet him at the beach the following morning. They'd cuddled as close as possible on the small twin bed in Margaretha's cabin. Margaretha had never returned, and Mia could only guess where she'd taken up residence. This island key was full of mystery. Ty had left Mia asleep, exhausted from her nursing and lovemaking, but he'd left a scrawled note on the bedside table ensuring her he'd not gone far.

Mia dressed in her bathing suit with a pair of shorts over the bottoms. Her bikini top was light green in color and reminded her of the color of the sea. It also showed off her breasts in a classy, yet, come-hither manner.

Tydon was waiting onshore with a small sailboat with its outrigger keels resting on the sand. His legs still looked as battered as if he'd fallen down the side of a mountain. Mia felt chills on her scalp when she thought about men throwing spears at her merman and hitting their mark. She wasn't at all sure he should be in view of others. If the men that injured him saw the marks on his legs, they would know who he truly was. Mia continued to feel uneasy but when he saw her and smiled, she ran up to him and was pulled up into his broad chest.

"We're going for a sail, Mia. I have something to show you."

"Really? Do I need anything?" She heaved herself onto the red canvas that stretched between outriggers with little help from Ty.

"No, you need nothing. In fact, you have more than you need."

From the look on his face, Mia knew he meant the clothing that he

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thought of as overly cumbersome.

"I love being out on the ocean. Where are we going?"

Ty pushed the little boat out into the waves. When he was waist deep, he jumped aboard and released the sail. He sat comfortably, as if he'd sailed his entire life. Mia realized he probably had. He leaned back and despite his bruising, looked quite content.

"I have something I want you to see."

"You're not going to tell me?"

He grinned that mischievous smile of his, and Mia relented.

For over half an hour they sailed in companionable silence, following the shore and relishing the mixture of light breeze and the hot sun. Pelicans swooped to snag nearby fish and Mia thought she caught a glimpse of flamingos, pink and pristine from an abundance of food.

What would she do when it was time to leave? She had only so much money to buy food and pay Miss Margaretha for the campsite. Mentally, she gave herself a week. She'd only meant to stay a few days, feeling that her merman lead was as unreliable or as dead as the others she'd followed in her life. Never would she have guessed she would be falling for a merman. That was it, wasn't it? She was falling for him. *Had fallen* was a better phrase. She looked at him now, bare-chested with rippling abs and sinewy biceps that cried out for stroking. How could she leave him?

Mia lay on her stomach to watch the wake as it bounced off the outriggers. It was mesmerizing and she almost fell into sleep.

Moments later, Ty called her attention to a deep cove.

"That's where we're headed. Look how calm the water is past the rocks that break the water. Isn't it perfect?"

Mia had never seen Ty so enraptured. She shaded her eyes and peered at the shore of the lagoon. There were people, several of them, and some were waving.

Ty guided the boat past the rocky points, and that's when Mia tried to stand and almost lost her balance. Ty reached out to grab her, momentarily letting go of the sail.

"What are you doing, girl?" He pulled her back down to a seated

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position. "It's harder to get back aboard when we're not onshore."

"Was that really what I think I saw?"

"What did you see?" He was grinning.

"A mermaid?"

"Yes Mia. I've brought you home."

* * * * *

As they glided into the lagoon and aimed at the shore, Mia couldn't bring herself to speak. All her dreams were here. Her imagination was playing out in front of her. Merbeings of every color were splashing in the waves, playing like dolphins on the bow waves of a boat. Mia counted ten, both female and male. Despite her lack of scepticism, she questioned her sanity. Then, one of them came quite close.

It was a female who didn't fit the popular renditions of mermaids. Like Tydon, her face seemed fashioned for quick movement through the waters, more streamlined than a human. Her breasts were quite small and like Ty, her tail grew from just below her hipbones, much lower than Mia previously thought. Her hair was long and tangled, but it matched the colour of her tail, which was a deep mahogany. She dove beneath the surface and swam alongside the sailboat; face up, smiling at Tydon.

"A girlfriend?" Mia teased.

"A sister," he answered. Mia had heard him use the term *sister* before, but she still hadn't determined its whole meaning. Did *sister* mean *of the same race* or did it literally mean *from the same mother*? So many questions ran through Mia's mind that she forgot to ask them.

"What are they doing?" Mia asked, referring to two merbeings on the shore quite close to where they were headed. A female lay in the white sand in a submissive position beneath a lengthy male. He was pumping his hips, and Mia's ears turned red when she realized what they *were* doing.

"What do you think, Mia? You're not *that* inexperienced."

Mia was shocked and said nothing, feeling like a voyeur as she watched.

Storm Surge

"How?"

"We have all the parts. Did you not look when you were tending me?"

"I wasn't thinking along those lines when you were bleeding all over my tent!"

"There is a pouch, Mia, that's as close to it as I can explain. The erection starts inside but pushes it's way out and into the female who has a slit, much like a human's. It's concealed, but it's there.

"Wow!"

"I'll show you sometime soon." He smirked.

"I wish you would," Mia said in all scientific honesty. Tydon laughed.

"We don't have the discreetness common in humans. They literally are in the throes of passion and have no regard to the others. Sex between merbeings isn't sex in your view of the world. It's a means of procreation. Only with humans is there emotions involved."

"That's fascinating. I wish I had my camera with me. I know, I know," she said on a breath before Tydon could speak. "Pictures could destroy you all. I can wish, though, can't I?"

"You won't forget this, Mia."

"You're right, I won't."

The two merbeings soon separated and were in the water swimming in different directions.

"With any luck she'll be with child soon, and our kind will continue."

"Are there children—babies—here?" Mia's excitement rose when she thought it couldn't go any higher.

"No, the children are kept hidden even from you. They would not trust you to be near them. I spoke with them about bringing you here, and they agreed, but I'm afraid the children are off limits. They're still learning their own language and learning the way of life in the ocean. To expose them to a human so early could be detrimental."

"I completely understand. Don't worry about it. Perhaps someday."

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The keel of the starboard outrigger scraped up the sand and beached with a dull thump. That was the moment she heard the sound. Tydon had already heard it and was staring out at the opening of the lagoon, his face tense and pale. The sound of a motor drew closer and all the merbeings turned their heads towards the horizon.

It was most definitely a boat. Mia could distinguish the turn of the propeller and the bounce of the bow. She grabbed Ty's arm.

"They followed us. They must have! I was so careful."

The mers were diving and very quickly, most of them had disappeared. A lengthy, lithe male turned in the water to face Tydon. His face seemed to question Tydon without words.

"They're humans, Will! Be safe!" Tydon's brother then dove deep into the lagoon.

"Where are they going, Ty?"

"They're hiding. Running from certain death or capture."

"Are we just going to wait?"

"We'll have to confront them. I don't know what we'll say, but don't give them anything, Mia. Don't say a word about who I am."

Mia watched the sky as she nodded in acknowledgement of his warning. It was darkening faster than was natural. Clouds rolled in from the east as if on fast-forward. They tumbled over each other and turned from light grey to a deep, pressing pewter, bursting with rain and wind. She jumped at the jagged arcs of fresh lightning as it hit the water out at sea.

Tydon didn't seem to notice the growing storm. He focused on the small outboard boat headed toward them.

Mia then remembered a snippet of information on mermen that had escaped her mind.

"You're doing that aren't you?"

"What?"

"You're angry and that's creating the storm, isn't it? You're drawing it in. How are you doing that?"

Distracted, he said, "We don't have time for your research right now."

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Mia pouted. He took her hand in his. "Yes, the sea reflects my feelings along with the other males. This one will be bad, Mia. It's from all of us. William has gone to warn the others. They won't be back until they know what we're up against, but they'll be ready. We have to be ready, too."

Next to where Tydon held the rope of the sailboat, the fishing boat carrying two smartly dressed men bounced ashore.

"Are you two alone here? Thought we saw a few others." The man was big and rocked the boat precariously as he tried to climb out. The boat tipped and threw him onto the wet sand. He jumped up as fast as his bulk would allow and dusted off his behind. His white suit pants were wet now, as was his Hawaiian shirt.

"I'm Bob Millard, director of the Aquatorium. There have been reports of mermaids in the area, have you heard anything about that? Could have sworn we saw a few swimming around in this lagoon as we were passing by."

Tydon answered, "Mermaids, Mr. Millard? You think there are mermaids in this ocean? There was a school of dolphins swimming here, and that's why we brought the boat in. The wife wanted to see if they'd let her swim with them, but your boat motor must have scared them away."

"And I was really looking forward to that, too," Mia confirmed.

Bob Millard looked doubtful. "Well then, that's too bad. I had hoped to have a look at one."

"There's no such thing as a mermaid, Mr. Millard. I'm afraid you'll likely be looking for the rest of your life."

The wind whipped at Mia's hair as the rain began to pelt her face.

"Don't know where this storm blew in from. Came in really fast, but they hadn't forecasted," Bob yelled over the growing wind, his face the color of boiled pasta. Mia clung to Tydon's sturdy, solid form.

He took Mia by the hand and then headed toward the trees. "Not sure where you want to wait it out, Mr. Millard, but we'll wait in the trees."

Thankfully Mr. Millard and his quiet, sulky companion didn't

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follow.

"Where are we going?" Mia yelled over the wind when they reached the trees and bushes. Her legs scraped against the rough twigs as Ty pulled her deep inland.

Ty didn't answer but soon they reached a small cave, and he pulled her inside. Mia ducked through the narrow, cold entrance, which opened into a cavern filled with water, burgeoning rocks and...merbeings.

The water reflected in shimmering cascades against the ceiling, adding to the mystique of Mia's experience. She was overwhelmed. Her lifelong dream was within her grasp. However, she could do nothing about it. No pictures, no location descriptions. There was no proof whatsoever that she could take home with her. When she looked out at the cavern before her, it no longer mattered.

As Ty led her over the slippery rocks, she felt the nasty glares from some of the mermaids who noticed her.

"We'll be safe in here," Ty said.

Mia looked around at the disapproving faces. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Mr. Millard doesn't know where we are, and they won't find the cave."

"They don't look too happy, Ty."

"No, they aren't. No human has ever seen this place. I'll have to change and talk to them."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't be afraid, Mia. I won't leave you, and they won't touch you. They don't like you being here, but they won't hurt you. Not with me here."

"All right. Go ahead." Mia sat at the edge of the water as he slipped down into the cool depths. Ty relaxed as the water around him held him buoyant. He spread his arms to float on the surface and closed his eyes. Several of the merbeings gathered around him and Mia felt the nausea of panic building in her stomach. She longed to reach out to him.

In only a heartbeat, Mia watched the familiar crawling of the skin on his legs as they fused into tight dolphin-like skin. It didn't seem nearly as painful to him this time. He was surrounded by his kin and water.

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When his skin had finished its transformation, he flipped to his stomach and swam to the center of the cavern. Those who were watching, followed him. Beneath the surface they gathered and he spoke to them in their own language. Mia could see the beautiful tail fins sweeping in a rhythm all their own around Tydon. After a moment, the merbeings left the cave through an underwater exit where Mia could see light entering the water. The storm must have passed. They left in single file, an awesome display of quiet acceptance and powerful presence.

Tydon surfaced close to her and held out his strong, comforting arms in invitation. The water was deep, but his powerful tail kept him aloft so that his entire upper body rose out of the water, trailing droplets down his chest and abdomen. Mia was in awe of the form before her. So long she'd waited to have her life's work validated, now here he was before her, lean, powerful and ready to do anything to save what was his.

Mia stripped off her shorts and bikini top so that she was left with only the bottom of her swimsuit. Topless, she slipped into the cold water, shivering at the shock of it. She gasped as the water reached her midsection, but then Ty had her in his arms. He leaned back and swam on his back with her overtop of him. It was pure joy in the thrust of his tail and the smile on his jubilant face.

He'd chosen her. She knew it and embraced it. She held close to his shoulders, feeling the water rush over her and his tail brush her legs. When at last they rested, she put her head to his chest and he floated her slowly across the cavern, stroking her back.

When he stopped and held her upright, he took her hand in his and guided it below his navel to the area where his skin turned rubbery and smooth. She stiffened, fearful of what his intentions were. Sex with a man was one thing but with a merman, whether it was Ty or not, was beyond her imagination. Beyond body language there was no way to express her feelings. She didn't want to hurt him in any way, and rejection of him in his true form would cause him some torment. She could stand now, her feet bare and cool on the sand beneath her.

She let him guide her hand and she felt a burgeoning rise where human genitals would be. She felt it respond to her touch with a small

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twitch. Ty relaxed his head back and closed his eyes. She stroked him for a moment, feeling the skin over top begin to thin and pull away. She waited, watching his face and taking her lead from him. Her hand felt the skin break away and his penis fell into her hands, the same one that had brought her so much pleasure during his recovery.

He reached above his head and held on to the rock cliffs while holding himself above the water with slow strokes of his tail. He was awesome, close to ten feet in total length and a prime male in any species. Mia stroked harder in a quickening rhythm. When Ty arched his back and stiffened, his hot semen spurt forth, where it dissipated in the swirl of water around them.

He released his hold on the rocks and sank beneath the water, revelling in his rapture, seemingly forgetting Mia standing in the water beside him. Mia sighed the moment he remembered her. He opened his eyes beneath the surface and they seemed to sparkle at her.

His eyelashes settled once more against his cheeks and before Mia knew what he intended, he was once again a man. He surfaced and wrapped her in his arms, almost smothering her.

"I wish we could have taken that further, Mia."

"I know," she whispered. "I wasn't ready for that. It was you but it wasn't you. I don't want any awkwardness between us. This is still very new for me. One day I'll be ready, and you'll be the first to know."

He nodded. "It's cold for you in here." He rubbed the goose bumps on her arms, playfully brushing her erect nipple. She jumped at the unexpected touch.

"Let's go to the beach. I'm sure Mr. What's-his-name will be gone and the others won't bother us."

"I do have more of a sense of discretion than you're used to. I could never make love with you in front of them," Mia said.

"Actually, they do have that sense, just not with other merbeings. Procreation is of benefit to us all, and therefore is not something to be hidden away. It excites us in that the species grows strong."

Mia climbed out of the water with the aid of Ty pushing on her bottom. As she pulled dry clothes over her wet body she continued with

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her line of questioning.

"Doesn't procreation happen with mixed species? The way you speak it's as if I couldn't have your baby."

"No, you couldn't. It just wouldn't happen. We're incompatible in that way."

He followed her out into the sunlight.

"You're not mad anymore, are you?" she asked, knowing the answer.

He looked up at the blue sky. "No. Far from it."

Mia laughed but as they emerged from the bushes, her face blanched.

"By the gods!" Ty exclaimed.

"Mr. Millard didn't leave, did he?"

"No. It looks like he and my brothers had a run in."

The water close to the shore was stained with a dark red substance that resembled blood a little too close for Mia's liking. She couldn't force herself to go closer, but Ty did. "What happened here? Did he capture one?"

He leaned down and dipped his finger in the water, rubbing it between two fingers.

"Did he get one, Ty?" she repeated, feeling intensely guilty. She wasn't even sure she wanted Ty to answer.

He rose and walked back to her. "I don't think we need to worry about any more attacks. This is not the blood of my kind." He paused, then pointed to an area near the mouth of the lagoon where the breakers hit coral beneath the surface. "Look over there." A small fishing boat was floating upside-down, bobbing in the surf.

Mia curled her hand into Ty's, searching for reassurance. She decided to wait for him to tell her what had happened.

"We need to get out of here. My brother has killed Mr. Millard, and we don't want to be found here if anyone comes searching for him. Until someone finds bodies, we don't know whether or not his companion sunk beneath the depths as well, or if he escaped."

Mia felt the burn of bile begin to rise in her oesophagus. No, no, no.

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She wouldn't vomit! She wouldn't! She needed to find Ty a safe place until they found out what happened here. She had no doubt about the violence the merbeings were capable of. They were wild and untamed. They were instinctive, and that involved the ability to defend themselves with extreme force if necessary. Mia had seen evidence of what they were capable of during the two storms that Ty's rage had created.

Her stomach clenched as she took in the shocking scene in front of her. Eddies of blood trailed through the waters. Had she created this? Mr. Millard had no doubt followed their sailboat. They wouldn't be here if it weren't for her.

Ty read her thoughts. "It's not you, Mia. I'd very likely be dead if it weren't for you, and one of us would be in that box of an aquarium of Millard's. You've saved us. You've saved me. You can educate the world about us without revealing where you learned it, can't you? I know you're capable of that. Tell them we're not freaks, Mia. Tell them we're intelligent, feeling and natural."

Ty readied himself to push the sailboat onto the water and supported Mia with his hand as she climbed aboard.

She could feel her faculties returning. "You're right. We have to get back. And don't worry, I know nothing."

* * * * *

After Mia was back onshore, Ty returned to the ocean to rendezvous with his brother William. A detailed description of what occurred at the lagoon was needed to determine next steps. Did the merbeings kill Bob Millard, or did he escape? Where was the man who drove the boat? Mia felt only confusion.

Mia found Miss Margaretha and relayed the story to her.

"Is Tydon all right?" she asked, once Mia had finished.

"Isn't he always? Yes, he's fine, although very worried and rightfully so. The continuation of his species is at risk until we find out if Mr. Millard is deceased or not. Do you think he was working with others? Or do you think this was all his idea...the capture of a mermaid and all

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that?"

"I really don't know, dear. It's a small island and I'm surprised I haven't heard anything. It's very likely he was working alone, but we can't be sure. We may just have to wait and see."

Mia sighed. "I hope he gets back soon."

"He will. He wouldn't leave you hanging. You're mated, aren't you?"

"Yes, we are. I'm his now."

"Then you have nothing to fear. He will never leave you."

"How do you know all this, Margaretha?"

"Many, many years ago I had hoped that Tydon would choose me for his mate, but it wasn't to be. I was very young at the time and certainly not ready for what he needed. He was younger, too, although still a century older than I."

"A century?"

"He hasn't told you?"

"I never asked."

"Well, don't worry, dear. It means nothing now. The merbeings around this island seem to live forever, although I've been assured that's not the case. I thought I loved Tydon, but he knew I was not yet capable of true love, of committing to being his mate."

"I'm sorry it didn't work out for you, but I have to admit it was better for me."

Margaretha laughed. "It worked out for the best. I've been able to keep Tydon and the other mermen hidden. It's been more difficult with the females. They tend to be a touch flighty and have an unquenchable lust for human males, hence all the windsurfers on the shore. They're each hoping to be chosen."

"They know about the mermaids?"

"They don't know for sure, but I can tell you they're hoping."

"Yes, they would be hoping. They're male. If there's a chance for eye-popping sex, they're up for it."

"It all comes down to that, doesn't it?"

"I guess so."

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The two women sipped at the green tea Margaretha had brewed.

"So, what now?" Mia asked.

"We just have to wait until Tydon comes back."

They didn't have to wait long. Mia heard Ty's footfalls coming up the gravel path toward Margaretha's cabin.

* * * * *

Tydon was tired. He'd changed forms more times that day than he would have thought safe or healthy. The exhaustion was heavy in his arms and thighs, his flesh felt as if it were still moving, still trying to decide which type of skin to emulate, and his legs ached.

He'd only been gone for a couple of hours, but he already missed Mia. He'd never before felt a loss when separated from someone. It surprised him and left him somewhat perplexed. He had to see Mia. That's all there was to it.

When he returned to the ocean to find William, he'd first gone back the lagoon. If there was a body, it wasn't there anymore. He'd searched the entire sandy floor of the pool. Either the tide had swept away the dead, or Mr. Millard wasn't dead.

Ty followed the coast, searching for the others. He found them all together further up the shore, huddled inside a coastal cave much like the one he'd shown Mia. They only looked at him when he entered and didn't greet him.

William swam up to him then. "What have you done, Tydon? The humans will be out to kill us now if they weren't before."

"You killed Millard, didn't you?"

"I did. It didn't take much. He was a weak man and on top of that, he couldn't swim."

"Where is he?"

"We took him out of the lagoon, so who knows where he is by now."

"The currents run south of here, so it's not likely he'll turn up onshore. You're safe, William. No one knows he's dead yet, and when

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they miss him, they'll think it was a boating accident. No one knows of our involvement."

"What about that little human of yours?"

"You speak of her as if she's abhorrent!"

"She led that man directly to us. How do you know she's not in on the whole ordeal? Perhaps she has interest in that aquarium. Didn't you say she studies creatures like us?"

Tydon faltered. "Yes, she does...but she had nothing to do with this, William."

"How do you know?"

Tydon wondered how William would respond if he knew he and Mia were mated. He hesitated telling him, but also knew William would understand how well he knew Mia's mind. She was not just another human female. She was Mia.

Emerging from the water away from the windsurfers on the breezy beach, Ty felt the now familiar instinctive urge to mate with Mia. He needed to reaffirm that she was his. He needed to feel close with her. He had to find her. He was already hard with urgent need when Mia opened the door to him.

Margaretha stood and excused herself. She had to check in a new arrival; a hasty and contrived excuse.

Mia looked at Ty, but he spoke.

"Mia, I need you first, then we'll talk."

He flopped on the bed, pulling Mia down on top of him.

"Right now?"

"I need to know you're mine."

"I am yours. I've always been yours."

"And I'm going to show you how much of me is yours, Mia." He literally tore the clothing from her body, ripping her shorts along the seam. She laughed and simultaneously stripped him as well.

Mia straddled his body, opening herself wide for him. She took hold of his cock, trembling, and guided him to her warm cleft. He thrust his hips once and taking hold of her hips, let her ride his body as she wanted.

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It thrilled him that she took control of their lovemaking. It was unheard of in females of his species. She pushed hard against him in response to his thrusts, taking from him.

He raised his eyebrows as Mia rose to her knees above him. She laughed a gentle, lilting laugh as she rolled her hips in slow, deep circles.

"Ah, Mia... Do that again." He held her down hard as she repeated the motion.

She bent over him and he pulled her down to him. It was his turn to indulge himself. He held her close, knowing that she would never leave him. His thrusting increased until he arched his neck back and came inside her.

Placid on the bed and completely drained, Mia asked her questions.

"You found William?"

"Yes. And yes, they killed Bob Millard. I assured them that you are no threat, and that we will not divulge any information to the other humans."

"Did they believe you? How could they possibly trust me?"

"I told them you are my mate."

"And how does that change anything?"

"They know now that I can speak for you. I know your thoughts as I would any mate. It matters not that you are human."

Mia snuggled against him and caressed the short hair of his chest. It was soft and it relaxed her.

"How do we manage this, Ty? What happens next?"

"We'll have to keep our eyes and ears open to know if there are more people involved in capturing merbeings for the Aquatorium. Hopefully it was just Bob, but we can't be sure at this point."

Mia touched his chin and tilted it so that he had to make eye contact with her. "What happens with us? This can't be a typical relationship. You've already let me know there won't be children. I can live with that, I really can. With my travel, it wouldn't be practical, and it's not something I ever imagined happening to me."

"Do the mermaids bother you? The ones that have given birth?" he asked.

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"To your offspring? No, that doesn't bother me. You explained it so scientifically that I completely understand. Umm... It won't happen again though, will it?"

Tydon chuckled. "No, you are my mate now and there will be no others. We'll handle this just like we have been. You will live here on the island. Margaretha will help you make arrangements as she's done before."

"She's made arrangements before?" Mia interrupted.

"Yes, there are many humans on this island mated to our kind, both male and female. They keep to themselves and do not risk discovery. You will be one of them, Mia, and will belong to the community. Occasionally, I will return to my kin, but most often I will be with you. Will this be acceptable?"

Mia hugged him. "Anything is acceptable as long as I'm here. This island is more than gorgeous, and so are you. I'm staying. I'll have trips to take so during them, you can feel free to return to your beautiful cryptid form."

"I guess you got your cryptid."

Mia laughed, "I certainly did."

She stroked his whiskered face, while he kissed her forehead. She'd never before felt so sure of where she was supposed to be and what she was meant to be doing. All was right.

The End

Jennah Sharpe

Author Bio

Jennah Sharpe, traveler, mother and author, lives for hot weather and chocolate mints. She has been writing since she learned to hold a pencil but has graduated to a Neo word processor, her new best friend. Jennah loves to hear from her readers. Please, feel free to contact her through her website at www.eroticromance-ebooks.tk.

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Along the Hibiscus Path by Jennah Sharpe

Chapter One

Sera Summers curled up, tired and barefoot, on the sofa with her daily horoscope from the community paper. *Your true love is not where you think you will find him.* She crumpled the paper up and threw, aiming for the woodbin by the woodstove. She missed. *Why can't I stop reading these?*

Boxes crowded the floor of her small cottage home. Absently rolling the beads of her pearl anklet between her fingers, she scanned the open cupboards and shelves for a stray ornament or magazine that she might have missed when packing.

It was finally finished. Her belongings were going into Fiona's basement. The cottage would be rented for three months by a family of skiers who planned to use it only on weekends as a base for skiing at the local alpine hill among other recreational pursuits.

Her tortoise-shell cat, Molly, would continue to inhabit her corner of the sofa. The renting family had agreed to care for her on weekends, and Fiona would check on her during the week. The rent money would cover the mortgage and utilities for the three-month period Sera intended to be away. Everything had worked out perfectly.

The last textbook Sera had written had been picked up by a small government-funded publishing house, and was to be used as a teaching

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tool by the local school board. The funds she'd earned from the book afforded her the time and the means to finally work with a people who were completely unfamiliar, and to possibly produce something of interest to the university. Tenure, she hoped, would not be far behind.

Sera was eager to leave, but the details seemed endless. It had been no small feat to rent the cottage for three months, and then she'd had to make arrangements for the cat, storage for her things, plane tickets, visa and a sabbatical from work. She had taken the next year off to plan, sort, visit and write. If all worked out in the three months she was away, she would go back and continue her study of other cultures in the same area. But she was giving herself three months as a start.

Her outline and proposal lay on her kitchen table. These, she planned on keeping in her carry-on luggage for revisions as the spirit moved her. She was an anthropologist and a decent writer. This opportunity would prove her to the university community. The word "professor" came before her name and the letters MBA after it; however, she still did not feel comfortable in her office. She related more easily to her anxious young students than to her burned-out co-workers.

A gust of wind blew across the porch and into the wooden wind chime hanging in front of her window. It rang with warm, hollow tones, filling her with memories of the summer she first moved in. She felt so excited, so independent. Inside, the comfortable scent of wood smoke permeated the cottage. She was warm, and happy not to be outside. Seven years ago, the rough cottage had been a steal, well within her budget, and Sera couldn't turn it down. With her job at the university, it hadn't been hard to make it work. Now, the property value was substantially higher, but Sera had no reason to sell.

Her home overlooked Lake Glory, a poetic name to say the least, but it really did suit. The red pines surrounding her home and the birch trees on the horizon were often a stark shade of black as the sun descended directly in front of her verandah.

In the summer, she often walked down to the shore where she would sit on her favorite rock, one that kept her feet out of the water, and watch the sunset. It never ceased to bring her contentment. This time of

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year, however, the lake was covered in dull, gray ice. Beyond, she could make out the pressure cracks that snapped and boomed to make her think it was thundering in the night. This time of year, she did not want to be alone on Lake Glory.

Her train of thought disrupted by the wind, she stood, picked up an almost empty roll of packing tape from the end table, and proceeded to seal more boxes. Her stomach rumbled a request, but Sera had not been shopping in two weeks in order to avoid discarding food before she left. Efficient as she was, she had eaten the last piece of toast with butter for breakfast. Lunch would be slim, perhaps a few crackers, but she planned to stop at a fast-food chain before meeting her plane. In the meantime, Fiona would be coming to help load boxes into Sera's half-ton pickup for delivery to Fiona's basement.

The wind chime flew into frenzy, and Sera jumped. Rain was coming. That would make loading and unloading fairly miserable. She rose and taped the last box just as Fiona's truck rumbled down the laneway. Sera finished with the final box, straightened, and looked out over the lake. The ice was mottled gray and silver. The January thaw was just beginning, and Sera was glad she would miss it. She opened the door to find Fiona, huddled deep in a navy parka and about to knock.

"A little overdressed Fiona?"

"Overdressed?"

"It's not going to snow anytime soon."

"But the damp..."

"I don't know about it. I don't go out in this weather."

"I wish I was going with you Sera."

"What? You aren't coming?" Sera teased and Fiona laughed.

"Don't be funny, dear. I might take you up on any offers." Fiona looked down. "Where are your socks?"

"I told you, I don't go out in this weather."

Fiona rolled her eyes at Sera in a motherly gesture as she shrugged out of her parka and hung it gently on the coat hanger on the back of the door. Tiny raindrops fell from her parka, forming a delicate pattern across the hardwood. She wore jeans, but with a striking red turtleneck and

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boots, warm yet fashionably high-heeled. Five years older than Sera, Fiona was married with children, but never looked the part of the stereotypical housewife. She was determined not to let the fact that she stayed home affect how she looked to others. Long, beaded earrings loaded with plastic crystals framed her face, and her deep pink lipstick gave it focus.

The rain had come, a sudden driving sleet. Sera padded into the kitchen and pulled an earthenware teapot from the upper cupboard. She filled the kettle on the counter and pulled two teabags from the pocket of her jeans. These she waved to Fiona.

"Last ones!"

"Well done," said Fiona as she sat at the picnic table that doubled as a dining area.

Teacups in hand, the two friends indulged themselves before getting to work.

"You'll need rubber boots and some sort of jacket Sera. You'd hate to get sick for your first week away."

"Fiona, I keep telling you the cold and damp doesn't make you sick. And besides, if I do, there's too much saline humidity there. I wouldn't be sick for long. It's too good for you."

"You know what I mean."

"Of course, I have boots. I'm leaving them in the closet when I go, but I did hear the weather forecast on the radio last night. I have everything ready, Fi. Don't be such a mom. The boxes are packed, and most of the kitchen stuff is staying for the renters, and for you when you come to check on Molly."

"I'm going to miss you, Sera."

"I know, I'll miss you too, but the time will fly."

"I'll miss having someone to just drop in on."

"Come visit, then. Catch a plane to Cayo Pequeño. Mark can handle the kids."

"Yeah, he can, but not for long. Besides, I really don't have the money."

"You'd just have to pay for a flight."

"Hmm, maybe next time."

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"Okay, next time." Sera knew it wouldn't happen, but it was nice to think of her and her best friend on vacation in the Caribbean. She'd met Fiona at the university bookstore. They were both in the South American history section of musty, used textbooks. Sera took the initiative and asked Fiona if she was a student. Fiona answered no, she just enjoyed reading, and sometimes textbooks fit the bill. They were just as interesting as the novels on the upper level, plus she learned more from them. Sera explained that she was a newly hired professor and the two began chatting. Having a mutual interest in history bonded them, and they met the next week for lunch. Fiona brought her two children, ages three and five, who did their mother proud by sitting still and attempting to contribute to the conversation when possible.

Sera was smitten with Fiona's children, having none of her own. She quickly became the "favorite aunt". In a university town full of cliques, it was important to have stable friendships.

Silence, save for the driving rain, enveloped them. Sera had not been content for some time, and Fiona had commented on it. Sera was about to make a change in her life that would hopefully end that feeling of discontent.

Sera was a competent anthropologist with a gift for making people open up, and share thoughts they might not otherwise have revealed. She was a listener, and was able to empathize with most people. Because she was uncomfortable with walking directly up to strangers and introducing herself, she was grateful that people often seemed to find her. There seemed to be something about her manner that drew people to her. That made it easy for Sera to find a close friend, a confidante wherever she was. At home, that was Fiona.

If Sera were able to create a book that was a hit, she would quickly have a life much different from Fiona's. She wondered if that could possibly change their friendship.

Teacups drained and the faint, exotic scent of Earl Grey left in the air, Sera and Fiona shrugged themselves into their coats and each picked up a box. They spent the morning loading boxes from Sera's living room into the pickup, then unloading them from the pickup, through Fiona's

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back door and down a dozen stairs to the back corner of her basement. It was dry, clean and empty. Fiona's suggestion to store the boxes in her basement allowed Sera to save money that otherwise would have been spent on a storage facility.

They sat in Fiona's immaculate kitchen, so different from Sera's rustic cottage. The women were wet and cold, but Sera's boxes were neatly stacked in Fiona's basement by lunchtime. Since Sera's cottage was now empty of everything except furniture and her cat, locked, and a key left under the front pansy planter for the renters, Fiona made a lunch of tomato soup and grilled cheese. It was comfort food for both of them, and Sera appreciated the thought. Fiona's children had been shipped to her in-laws for the day, and Sera savored the time Fiona could spend with her before she left.

"What's your horoscope say for the next month?" Sera asked.

"I haven't read it. Why?"

"It'll give me an idea how things are going here while I'm away."

"Sera..."

"It probably says, 'home is where the heart is', or something to that effect."

"What makes you say that?"

"The weather."

"Excuse me?"

"It's the time of year for hibernating, and you have that man of yours to keep your bed warm."

"You could have one, too, if you wanted one."

"One to keep the bed warm isn't a bad idea, but they're so much work."

"What are your plans then?" Fiona asked.

"Plans?" Sera feigned confusion, but was only half-teasing.

"You have a plan for when you arrive don't you? You're not just going to get on the plane hoping you will find someone who'll take you in, are you?"

"Well, sort of."

"Sort of?" Fiona's forehead began to crease.

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"I'll get off the plane and take a taxi to Puerto Pescado. It'll still be early enough that I can get a room, or make a friend."

"Pretty risky, don't you think?"

"It's not January there."

"Pardon, but yes, it is!" Fiona was becoming exasperated.

"I mean it's not cold. I know it's January. I meant it's not January weather as we know it." Sera was smiling. "Worse comes to worst, I'll find an empty beach."

"I don't think they allow that."

"I doubt they'll find me."

"You'd risk that?"

"It will work out, Fi. Don't worry so much."

Fiona sighed. "You know I'm going to worry the entire time you're gone."

"I know." Sera put her hand on Fiona's across the table. "I'll call. Often, if I can." Sera gazed out the window. "I can't wait to see the sun."

"Maybe you'll see a decent man," Fiona muttered half to herself with a smirk on her face.

"Well, there it is."

"What?" Fiona feigned ignorance.

"It's been just under your breath the whole time."

"You know I hope that for you, Sera. You're not meant to be alone. You're a Gemini, remember?"

"There's nothing wrong with being alone."

"No, there isn't, unless you count the fact that it's lonely. What about sex Sera? Just go sleep with someone. Safely of course, but have fun. You just need someone to worship you for once."

"I have too much to do to be distracted by a man. I don't want that."

"Why not?"

"I just told you why not. I have to get the book done." Another sigh from Fiona. "Fiona, they're just too much trouble. I don't want to find someone and end up apart. We're done with this subject. I have to get to the airport anyway."

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"Okay, but you know my thoughts. Have *fun* while you're away."

Sera picked up her bowl, plate and utensils, then set them in the sink. She began to run the water, but Fiona stopped her.

"You don't have time. Is your luggage in the truck?"

"Yes."

"Then you'd better head out. It's a bit of a drive, and the traffic at lunch hour will slow you down."

* * * * *

Sera checked her bags and boarded the plane without delay. For the first time since she'd had the idea and her research began, she felt a tightening of anxiety in her stomach. She had had no appetite to stop for a snack, and knew she would not be able to eat the chicken and potatoes the airline would undoubtedly serve. Too many flights to exotic locations as a working anthropologist had resigned her to the fact that this was the meal most often served. She thought she might be able to swallow the brownie for dessert and she anticipated its creamy frosting. If they threw her for a loop and served something else, she could handle it, but not without that brownie.

Sera sat just behind the wing, thankfully in a window seat. Knowing she had a good view, she could relax somewhat. If she had a view of the horizon, she wouldn't be plagued by airsickness. She quickly combed through her red curls with a pick from her pocket. The curls were badly knotted from the wind, and she hadn't thought about her hair since leaving Fiona's.

Upon learning there would be no movie on the relatively short three and a half hour flight, she pulled out a heavy textbook on basic anthropology and a package of red licorice. On her last day of school, she'd made notes in the margins on ideas for where to start, and now thought it would be a good idea to review her plans before she stepped off the plane. She opened the licorice and nibbled as she perused her notes.

The artisans of Puerto Pescado were becoming renowned throughout the northern hemisphere. The clothing, pottery and paintings

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they designed were exceptional in their detail, and Sera intended to record and study the culture of the village, as well as their way of life.

The people were friendly and hospitable. She knew that going in, having visited the island for a week last year on a familiarization tour. She planned to visit a public place and converse with the people until someone suggested a place to stay or invited her home. It wasn't a common tool in her trade, but Sera preferred to stay with locals or to feel around for accommodations. It provided her with a stable foundation to work from and showed her how the culture viewed strangers and foreigners. The island of Cayo Pequeño was particularly well known for its hospitality and the willingness of its inhabitants to invite guests into their homes. It was a risky venture, as Fiona had warned her many times, but Sera was confident she would fit in. She had a good command of the Spanish language, and knew that would increase exponentially during her stay. She knew she could spend years studying this particular community, but she would always have to return home, back to the gray buildings and pervasive conceit of the university.

Sera planned to begin with a family, learning their history, stories and friendships. She would learn their favorite foods, and how they spent their time when they were not working. She would learn their thoughts on religion, politics, and how the elders and children were viewed, their place in the world and much, much more.

The airplane leaned as it made its approach to Cayo Pequeño, the island home of the artisans of Puerto Pescado. The sudden change in balance forced Sera to stash her books, her thoughts and the licorice in order to find the horizon. Her stomach lurched dangerously. Below, she could see the faint green outline of the reef. Seeing only the blue of the sea and the blurry smudge of the reef, it was difficult to imagine how many colors of teeming life were actually under the surface. A completely separate world, yet wholly disrupted and disgraced by ours with pollution, noise and murder, she thought. Despite the fact that she intended to be working all the time, she hoped she would get a chance to go snorkeling at some point during her trip.

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Roofs of buildings became clear and more detailed, as did narrow roads previously obscured by distance. The plane leaned again, and before long, the small paved runway was closing in fast below the plane. With only a small bump, rubber met asphalt. Suddenly, Sera and the surrounding passengers were thrown into their seatbelts as the pilot expertly hit the brakes to accommodate the short runway.

Sera breezed through customs, showing passport and other required papers. She picked up her luggage from a pile by the outer wall and held the handles tightly as she politely brushed off offers of help. She had no extra cash for tipping.

She breathed the wonderfully heady interfusion of salt on the breeze. Her face turned to the sun, and she felt its warmth go all the way to her bones. She was home. Not literally, but that was definitely the feeling deep inside whenever she visited this particular part of the world.

The majority of passengers who disembarked were rounded up by boisterous guides and herded onto waiting air-conditioned buses. Sera sat on her piece of luggage by a curb with her carry-on strap around her neck. She surveyed throngs of people, feeling somewhat overwhelmed.

As she flicked a stray hair out of her eyes, she reached into an outer pocket of her luggage with her other hand. She pulled out a rather battered pair of sunglasses. At that moment, she caught site of a taxi parked behind one of the buses. The taxi driver wasn't jockeying for a position close to the airport doors as they did back home. He leaned against the outside of the vehicle with his arms crossed over his chest. Sera understood why when she saw the lines of people in front of her boarding the buses parked by the sidewalk. He didn't need to fight with the buses for business.

She stood up and waved her glasses in an attempt to grab the driver's attention. The roar of the bus's diesel engines prevented any productive yelling, so hand gestures were all that worked. As she waved, a group of young men and boys surrounded her, politely but aggressively trying to carry her luggage to the taxi. Sera was suddenly very tired as if the noise and people had drained the energy from her. She longed to give in to the self-proclaimed porters and avoid the sound of them all talking at

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once, but knew she must save the few pesos she had as a tip for the taxi driver.

She took hold of her bags and walked with purpose, back straight and eyes forward, to the little car with the English word *Taxi* across the door. All the while she quietly muttered, "*No, gracias. No, gracias,*" to the men who followed her. The men finally relented halfway across the road, and she was granted free passage.

The driver stood by the trunk of the car and raised the hatch as she approached. "Nice day," he said in confident English, with only a hint of accent.

Wow, she thought, unable to pull her eyes from him. Tall, lean and more than a little intoxicating. She chastised herself and answered him. "Yes, well, nice weather anyway." Feeling flustered, Sera heaved her luggage in the trunk as he gave her a quizzical look.

"That's what I meant."

"Sorry, I know. I'm just a little on edge. Traveling doesn't agree with me." He pushed the hatch shut with a thud and Sera took her spot behind the front passenger seat. The palm trees were gently swaying in the warm breeze, and enclosed in the car, safely on the ground, Sera felt herself begin to relax.

"I hope you weren't waiting for anyone in particular," she ventured when she felt ready for conversation.

"I would have said so. It just seemed a nice day for a drive."

"You came to the airport just for a drive?"

"Yeah, it's actually my uncle's car, but it just occurred to me to take the taxi out to the airport. He always meets interesting people out here, and the extra money doesn't hurt. Don't worry; I'll take you wherever you need to go."

"You came for fun?" Sera wasn't sure what to make of this man.

"As I said, I'm not working today, so I thought I'd take the run for him."

"Nice of you."

"No, just something to do."

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The music on the radio was a nice salsa, and Sera felt she was in the right spot. She allowed herself a moment to get a look at her driver. He was slightly taller than she, muscular in the arms and comfortable in his skin. His dark hair had a nice wave to it, and was long enough that he occasionally raked a hand through it to keep it out of his eyes. She briefly wondered if it felt as soft as it looked. Her fingers tingled at the thought.

The taxi jerked ahead of the buses and traveled smoothly down the access road towards the highway. They rounded a bend, and the ramp to the highway was visible he spoke.

"So, where to?"

The question interrupted her thoughts and she felt irritated. Sera watched out the window as they passed by the enclosed compounds of the all-inclusive resorts. She did not miss that kind of enclosed security. The tourists would never learn the real Cayo Pequeño in there.

"I'm headed for the village of Puerto Pescado. You can drop me anywhere on the main street."

"Perfect, that's where I just came from. Your fare will be a bit less because I don't have far to drive home after dropping you off."

"Don't happen to know a place I could stay, do you?" She didn't know quite what she was hoping for but it couldn't hurt to ask.

"A place to stay? You don't have a reservation?"

"No, I don't. I'd prefer not to sleep on the beach. Mosquitoes, you know. Can you give me some names?"

"You don't have a place to stay," he said, as if talking to himself.

Sera figured he was thinking out loud and paused a moment before replying. "Doesn't that ever happen?"

"I just thought you'd have people to visit, or a reservation at the inn."

"That's the one by the beach, right?"

"Yes, but I doubt they have room this time of year. We can check, though. If not, I suppose we can find you a place. Having picked you up, I feel a bit responsible. I won't have you sleeping on the beach. It's not exactly the safest place, especially for a bit of a woman like you."

"I'll be okay," she replied, trying hard not to sound offended.

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"You don't know that. Don't be naïve."

"You just met me. You can hardly call me naïve." Sera fought to keep her voice level, but the bite still came through. She wanted this man on her side, at least until she found a place to stay.

"Sorry, but c'mon. I'll find you a place to stay. Why are you here anyway? Some kind of 'finding yourself' quest?"

"Nosy, aren't you?"

"Not going to say?"

"I'm here to gather research for a book I'm writing. Technically, it's called an ethnography."

"A book?"

Sera sighed, hoping he could hear her impatience. "I'm an anthropologist."

"So, you are here to study...never mind, here we are, anyway." He pulled the car up beside a white iron gate. Behind it were huge bushes of flowers, poinsettias and hibiscus, as well as palms. She could see a white building with flower boxes below each window. It was two stories, and appeared immaculate, and she felt a rising sense of unease.

"I can't stay here," she mumbled.

"What's wrong?" Apparently his ears were sharp.

"It's too closed-off."

"Closed-off how?"

"I'm afraid I'll just stay in there. I'm sure it has beautiful rooms." Sera knew she would have to push herself to meet people. It wasn't something that came naturally, and although she knew she could accomplish all she meant to, it wouldn't help if she had a room and impeccable service along the beachfront. She would feel much less inclined to leave her room and meet people. She had to push herself just a bit more.

"You're not making much sense."

"A tip *and* sense along with it. Asking a bit much, aren't we? Do I have to make sense?" It was her attempt at lightening the mood and thankfully, she saw his shoulders shake in soft laughter. "I won't be able

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to get to know the people and how they live. It's the lifestyle that doesn't fit."

"What are your options?"

"You tell *me*."

They were still sitting in the car, but the driver had stopped looking at her. He fell silent and stared out the windshield. Then, very slowly, as if she did not understand her own language, he said, "There is no other place in town."

"Well, then perhaps you could drop me at a restaurant. I haven't eaten in a while."

He started the engine again, and slowly pulled out of the circular drive and back onto the street.

"Where are we going?"

"Well, you won't get to know the community in a restaurant. They're for tourists. You don't leave me much choice but to take you in for a home cooked meal."

"No, I'm sorry. I don't mean to be difficult. You can let me out where you like. I have your fare." She rifled in her carry-on and produced a few American dollars to wave at him. She knew they were more highly-prized than the local currency, the peso.

"I can't leave you in the middle of nowhere."

"I came here on my own. I'll be fine."

"Trust me. We'll get you a meal and then decide what to do."

Sera was too tired to argue anymore and slumped in her seat. The tone in the man's voice told her she didn't have much choice. He had taken her in, and he felt a responsibility to make sure she arrived somewhere safely.

"If I go with you, I'll need to know your name."

"Cristian." His left hand reached over his right shoulder as he awkwardly strove to steer with this right hand. One of the first things Sera always noticed about a man was his hands. She took Cristian's hand in hers and felt both strength and tenderness. It was pleasurable to imagine that hand on her body. She shook it, and felt at ease.

"I'm Sera," she responded.

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As she was relaxing in the back of the car in an exotic country, she found herself trying to get a better view of Cristian's face. His features were defined, yet his lips were soft and relaxed. He had the air of someone completely comfortable with his looks. His eyes watched the road without a hint of unease or stress despite the crowded roadways. When he glanced in the rearview mirror at her and smiled, she immediately felt the heat of embarrassment rising up her neck. She turned away to gaze out the window. Knowing where her next meal was coming from, she could enjoy the scenery and be in her favorite place.