



DEPT. 87

# Liquid Crystal

*Lynne Connolly*

Dept 57  
**Liquid Crystal**

By

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## Chapter One

When her boyfriend put his arm around Kai Murdoch, Crystal knew trouble would follow. Bolstered by drink, the prejudices Geoff usually hid behind his genial exterior pushed forward. She knew what was coming. She'd seen it before, and she dreaded it every time. To do him justice, Geoff tried very hard to overcome his upbringing and it only emerged when he was off-balance. Like tonight.

Already committed to this party, neither was in the mood for it, but as the alcohol flowed and the music rocked the Thames-side pleasure boat, Crys relaxed. Geoff only got drunker.

"Ow are you, me old mate?" Geoff boozily, hugged Kai close.

"Fine," Kai answered dryly. The music pumping through the pleasure launch made everything but close conversation impossible, but they were standing close, and she heard every word. The muscles in Kai's arms, revealed by his figure-hugging muscle shirt bulged briefly as he pushed away from her boyfriend's clinging grip.

Geoff didn't let him. He dragged Kai back to his side.

From the other side of the room, light glinted against brown hair as Kai's partner, Bryn Murchison, lifted his head. Bryn and Kai locked gazes and Kai shook his head.

Geoff glanced at Bryn, but turned his attention back to Kai. He punched Kai's arm, none too lightly and Crys took a step closer. A light touch on her shoulder made her turn. She stared up into Bryn's sea-green eyes. "Leave them alone," he murmured. "Kai's not drunk, and he's not upset, he'll handle it. Come and dance. We'll keep an eye on them and enjoy ourselves at the same time."

He pulled her towards the crowded dance floor and drew her into his arms. A slow ballad drifted across her senses and she let herself relax. Bryn was right. Kai could handle Geoff on his own. Not for the first time she wished Bryn and Kai weren't gay, but not from any bias. More a longing for a shot at one of them. Or both. Or one after the other, she wasn't fussy. She sighed wistfully.

A chuckle over her head made her look up again. "You should keep your thoughts to yourself. I only have to look at you to guess what you're thinking."

She smiled back. "Can't blame a girl for wishing."

Bryn's easy smile faded, and his expression changed to something she couldn't interpret. Speculative, certainly. Crys had no problem waiting to hear what he had to say. Handsome as hell, Bryn had a deep, charismatic attraction, though whether from his shimmering green eyes or his perfectly toned body Crys couldn't say and didn't much care. Tall, strong and with a decidedly interesting wardrobe, Bryn was a woman's wet dream, but for the year she'd known him, Bryn's interest in women had only been of the friendly kind. Still, she appreciated having friends like Bryn and Kai. And they were distinctly easy on the eye, whether dressed for the evening or for the office.

Just as Kai opened his mouth to speak, Geoff's bellow interrupted him, and she realized Bryn had maneuvered them across the floor so they could hear what the two said. "I say you're a sea creature, and I should know, for God's sake!"

Crys let her head drop against Bryn's chest. "Not again!"

Bryn stopped moving her in the dance. She felt his fingers under her chin, gently pushing it up. "What do you mean, *again*?" he said, when they were once more looking into each other's eyes. While his voice was still soft, it held a sterner note. Those eyes were so magnetically green, she almost forgot what they were talking about.

"He has this obsession." She made a face, deprecatingly apologetic. "He's prejudiced."

"You mean against gays?"

She swallowed. "No. God, this is hard. I think he's nuts, and I've tried to stop him. No, Bryn, he thinks you and Kai are — are —"

"Spit it out, precious."

"He thinks you're mermen," she finished in a rush, before she could lose her courage and sound even more stupid than she felt. It sounded much worse when she said it aloud. Geoff's researches were thorough and convincing, but they hadn't quite convinced her, even though she'd had her own mermaid-fixation in childhood.

"Does he by God?" Why wasn't he smiling? Gay bashers were disgusting, but Geoff's particular obsession was laughable. Bryn ought to be relieved Geoff had some kind of weird fixation, he shouldn't be frowning in concern. He drew her to the edge of the small dance floor, past her genially drunk work colleagues.

At last, Bryn took his attention away from her and looked away. She followed his gaze to where Kai glared at Geoff. He turned his head and stared at Bryn. Their gazes locked and an unspoken communication passed between them, almost as if they were speaking mind to mind.

"Don't mind Geoff, he's mad," she said, drawing Bryn's attention. "I'll take him home."

Bryn's head jerked, as though she'd broken in to something. When he turned back to her, his genial expression was back in place, curving his strong mouth and touching tiny lines to the corners of his eyes. "Probably best if you do. I'll take you over to him. But I want to come and see you soon, Crys, if that's all right."

Before she could answer, he took her hand and pulled her behind him, pausing a couple of times to speak to people and murmur a few reassuring words about the brief altercation between Geoff and Kai. Few people had noticed, but Bryn and Kai must have been aware their invitation was for novelty value, a pair of real-life flamboyant gays in this otherwise boring office party. His hand, firm in hers, made her long for things she could never have, things it wasn't even right to think about.

She probably wasn't the only woman to think that. Bryn's tight t-shirt and equally tight jeans displayed every gorgeous, bulging muscle on his body. Kai's black waistcoat and leather trousers clung to his lithe, athletic form lovingly, outlining every movement with drooling, delicious perfection and Kai's spectacular mane of white-blond hair drew every eye. More than one woman had found an excuse to touch it tonight.

Watching Kai and Bryn made her realize what a perfect couple they were, and what a perfect couple she and Geoff weren't. The feeling had built for some time, ever since she'd met Geoff's crazy parents, and Geoff had tamely agreed with their insane ideas. His parents openly displayed every prejudice they could think of, while Geoff was obsessed with one fixation only. The stupid merman thing. The stupid merman thing she couldn't let herself believe, despite the photographs, the studies and the seemingly incontrovertible evidence on Geoff's computer. They didn't exist and that was that.

It had to end. *They* had to end. She swallowed, realizing the necessity, understanding how she was about to disrupt her life. But she couldn't do anything about it now, she'd have to get Geoff out of here and home, where she could figure out what to do. The flat was theirs, not hers, so she might have to find something else for a while. Her parents lived in Newcastle, at the other end of the country, but an urge seized her, a need for loving arms that asked nothing of her and gave everything. Perhaps she could get leave

from her job and go home while she sorted her life out.

Perhaps Geoff would be a gentleman and move out. After all, his parents only lived in Plumstead. She could hope. That would solve a few of her headaches, at least leave her with somewhere to live.

When they reached the other side of the dance floor, a few people watched them, most with hopeful expressions. A fight would ginger up this decidedly lackluster party, a winter party thrown by hers and Geoff's employers, done on the cheap. This pleasure launch had been a favor from a friend to the head of the company, and if they hadn't used it tonight it would have stood empty. Accountants always knew how to make the best of every asset, even if they lacked the heart to make it a real party. Tired decorations and a pay-for-your-own bar, with a sub-par singer had made the evening tedious rather than fun. Why Kai and Bryn had accepted her invitation passed her understanding. But they had, and she felt better for having them there.

Not least because Geoff was as drunk as a skunk, and ready for trouble. When they reached him, Bryn stood in front of him, and Crys moved to the other side to Kai, neatly boxing him in. Geoff flicked her a glance and then immediately returned to the two men. "How do you do it, eh?"

"How do we do what?"

In any other circumstances, Geoff might have taken notice of Bryn's strongly muscled body and quiet, determined tone, but not after half a bottle of whisky. "Change into mermen. And are your dicks covered up by your tails, or not? I've always wondered that."

Bryn slapped his legs. "No tails here, Geoff. Where do you get ideas like that?"

"My parents, to start with." Geoff took a sharp breath, cutting off whatever he was about to say next. He didn't sound so drunk now, for some reason. "They taught me things about people. But they don't like anyone who's any kind of different from them. Hell, they don't like my Aunt Cathie because she's Welsh!"

Bryn smiled grimly, while Kai caught Crys's attention, his blue gaze searching hers briefly. She had the feeling she'd come to associate with Bryn and Kai, a feeling they could read her mind, but that, she told herself, was because their eyes were so piercing. Nothing to do with the weird stuff Geoff kept ramming down her throat.

The feeling receded and Kai turned back to Geoff. "So what did they tell you?" His voice was just as mild as mild as Bryn's, but only a fool would ignore the careful control and the underlying menace.

"That your kind change when you hit the water. You can't help it, as soon as you get wet you change into a fish. You talk mind to mind, and all that stuff." Geoff grinned, but it looked sickly, insincere. "Come on, guys, I thought you'd like the joke!"

"Sure. Very funny." But Bryn wasn't smiling.

"Shall we go home now, Geoff?" she tried, hearing her conciliatory tone and hating herself for it. But she *had* to get him out of here. Her work colleagues were looking at them, waiting for a show. She'd never hear the last of this. Neither would Geoff. Best to get away now, before he made it worse and got labeled the company nutter.

"Yeah." He sounded sulky now, but still not drunk. "But be warned, guys. We're on to you."

Kai quirked a fair brow, but said nothing. Bryn ignored Geoff, addressing Crys directly. "Do you want to come home with us?"

She forced a smile. "No, not tonight guys." Geoff gripped her arm, digging his fingers in.

"Although," Geoff said, belying his painful grip by his easy smile, "if she had to go home with a couple of men, I'd pick you two. She couldn't be safer, could she?"

Bryn tilted his head to one side and smiled wickedly. "Oh, I wouldn't say that, Geoff. Why don't you try us and see?" His short brown hair gleamed in the low lights of the launch. The music resumed, the slow dance interval obviously over, and Status Quo pumped out of the speakers. The deck shook with the pounding.

Geoff grinned. "Definitely time to go home. G'night, guys."

Bryn still held Crys's other arm, and seemed reluctant to let it go. "You'll be okay, Crys?"

"Oh yes. No problem."

Geoff chuckled and glanced around, snagging his jacket off the back of a nearby chair. "We'll have to get a cab."

At that moment, Geoff's boss walked past, obviously on his way out, too. He couldn't have heard much of the conversation, thank goodness, but he heard the last remark and stopped. "You live in Stratford, don't you? Do you want a lift? I'm headed that way, and I'm a designated driver."

Crys eyed the group of people obviously with him dubiously. "That's nice of you, Mike, but aren't you a bit crowded already?"

"Nah, I brought the SUV. Plenty of room. Come on."

With one last glance back at Bryn and Kai, she let Geoff tug her along. Kai mouthed, "We'll call you," and she nodded.

Out of the heated pleasure launch, Crys took a moment to adjust to the dimmer lights along the Embankment, casting a soft glow over the ever-swirling Thames. She loved the river, it had marked her life, and now her parents were living next to another great river, the Tyne. A change of rivers might do her good. A change of boyfriend certainly would.

But not tonight. It was too late and she was too tired. Geoff almost dragged her down the ramp linking the boat to the narrow stairs leading to the Embankment, and she had to concentrate on keeping her footing on the damp, occasionally slick-wet steps. No time to think of anything else.

The SUV wasn't far away, parked in the office car park. The office, near St. Catherine's house, was a dingy building but it had the luxury of a piece of waste ground for a car park, although Crys wasn't sure any ground in London could be described as waste. If it wasn't now, it certainly had been the most expensive real estate in the world. Handy, though, avoiding meters, the clamps and the horrible charges the public car parks extorted. Not that Crys used anything but the tube every day. Too expensive to do anything else.

The big silver vehicle gleamed in the moonlight. Geoff glanced up into the sky. "Full moon. They have to change at the full moon. We should have asked them if we could watch." They waited for the others to climb in and take their seats, and Crys pulled her jacket closer around her. Her sundress was definitely too thin for the October weather, which had turned colder in the last week, and her jacket left the bottom half of her body at the mercy of the lazy wind that whipped around her legs.

"Don't go on about it, Geoff. They weren't amused, you know."

"Neither was I, particularly." Geoff said 'particularly' almost without thought, and at that moment, Crys knew he wasn't drunk in the least. He'd dumped the copious amounts of whisky he'd bought, or used ginger ale to eke out a couple of singles. At any rate, he was no more drunk than she was. Her feeling of uneasiness increased. What was

going on here? Why had Geoff deliberately provoked Bryn and Kai? And why wasn't anyone laughing at his stupid obsession with merpeople?

At last, they could climb into the car. The two spare seats were in the middle of the vehicle, and Geoff sat next to the window. Mike started the engine and the heaters blasted into life. "I'll just give the windows a minute to clear." He turned in his seat. "There's a bottle of vodka somewhere in the back, and some lemonade. If you look in the bag, there should be some paper cups, too. I can't drink, but there's no reason you can't have one."

With delighted exclamations of thanks, the drinks were found and handed around. Crys didn't particularly want one, but perhaps it might warm her a little. Only when she'd taken a deep swig of the mixture in her cup did she notice the slightly off taste.

Suddenly, all the drinks she'd had that evening returned in full force. She shut her eyes against the dizziness that hit her, but opened them again in alarm. She took another sip. Now they had their lift there was no reason for her not to. She'd just drunk too much, that was all, and perhaps another would get her past the dizzy stage.

"So you don't believe in mermen, Crys?" a feminine voice asked. Crys vaguely recognized it as Carol, one of the girls who worked in accounts.

"Does anybody?" She was glad of something to concentrate on, to focus the lightheadedness until it went. Perhaps she was tired. She'd been overdoing it lately. She could have sworn she had no more than three drinks all that evening, although perhaps they'd been stronger than she thought. "I mean, I loved *The Little Mermaid* when I was a child, but it's hardly likely, is it?"

"What if I said I'd seen one?" Carol asked.

Crys frowned and looked around, blinking. The car had fallen strangely silent, apart from the soft purr of the engine. "What is this?"

"Well, it's like this." Geoff gently pushed the cup up and she had to move her hand to stop him forcing her to drink. "We know they exist. We have the proof. But we need to capture one. When we discovered you were good friends with a couple, we had our bait. Now we're setting the trap. Drink up, darling."

"No." she tried to lower the cup, but he held her fast and wouldn't let her.

His voice turned hard. "Finish it."

Fear crawled through her, rising the hairs on the nape of her neck. "What's going on?"

"We're going to flush them out." That was Mike, still sitting in the driver's seat, but not wearing his seat belt, his body twisted towards hers. "Tonight or never. We thought you'd be perfect bait and everybody knows you need bait to catch a fish. So finish your drink."

Geoff's grip on her arm tightened and when she tried to push him away, Crys found someone on her other side, stopping her moving away from him. Another pair of hands came from behind her seat, gripping her shoulders, holding her in place. Yet another gripped her hair and yanked her head back, pinching her nose tightly and when she opened her mouth to breathe, Geoff tipped the drink down her throat.

*Drugged.* Her last sight was of Geoff, smiling grimly down at her, as her eyes fluttered closed.

## Chapter Two

"He was just trying to rile us." Bryn kicked a stray pebble with far more viciousness than it deserved.

"You think?" Kai's mouth hardened to a thin line. "He knows more than is good for him. I'm calling on the Department come Monday morning, let Grady know about him."

"Hey boy, I'm the full time MI6 agent, not you. Can't have you part-timers doing the job I should do. Anyway, if you call him, you know Director Grady will put you on to watching Geoff, and you can't stand the sight of him." Bryn grinned, knowing how much Kai would hate that.

Kai shrugged. "If I have to become his best buddy, it won't be the first time I've had to pal up with somebody I don't like."

"I hope you don't mean me."

"Never, lover." Kai pulled Bryn close to snatch a quick kiss.

They strolled up the Victoria Embankment towards the Houses of Parliament, looming above the river, leaving the dull party behind them. Pop music drifted over the churning water, which seemed black and fathomless. Bare-armed, Kai hadn't bothered with a jacket, figuring they'd just order a taxi straight from the party, but both felt the need of fresh air.

"I'm not sure I want you in a foul mood." Bryn sighed. "But yes, you're right. We have to tell Grady, just in case Geoff turns out to be more than a stupid drunk with a big mouth. When Crys told us he was prejudiced, I thought she meant the normal thing, you know, an anti-gay attitude. Not bloody mermen!"

Kai paused and stared up into the star-filled sky. "Makes you wonder how he guessed. I mean we don't look like the merpeople in the books, do we?"

Bryn glanced at Kai, giving him the once-over. He was well worth looking at, with his lean, fit body and flowing white-blond hair. It reached almost to the crack in his ass. Bryn should know, and the mental vision of Kai bending over for him made his cock twitch.

Hastily, Bryn turned his mind to other matters. It'd be an hour at least before they got home. He didn't want to travel the whole way with a raging hard-on. And London was too busy, too well observed, to risk male-male sex on the waterfront. Although he could try fuzzing, that mental technique all Talents used when they wanted to pass unobserved. Kinky, but definitely tempting.

His mind made up, Bryn turned to Kai, to see his partner waiting with a whimsical smile on his sharp-featured face and his arms spread in welcome. That was when his phone rang.

He bit back a curse as he glanced at the screen before flipping the phone open. Number withheld, but that wasn't unusual when you worked for Department 57. "Yes?"

"A bit snappy, aren't we?" came a voice he didn't recognize. He opened his mind and let Kai in, to share the call telepathically. This could be business, and it would save explanations later, if Kai heard the orders as well.

"Get on with it." His plans disintegrating around him, Bryn couldn't get enthusiastic about orders at 2 a.m. He didn't care if it was Will Grady himself, he couldn't go willingly on every assignment. What he expected was a code number and an instruction, not what he actually got.



"If you want to see Crystal Miller alive again, you'll come to Vauxhall Bridge now. You've got ten minutes."

The caller cut the connection. Numbly, Bryn stared at the screen, willing it to tell him more before his brain clicked into action. "No time to contact Grady, but I think we just got our answer. Geoff does know more than he should about us, and he has friends."

Kai groaned. "The PHR."

"Yep, most likely." The PHR or Perfect Human Race, the association of purists that wanted all Talents dead. Somehow they'd targeted Kai and Bryn. "And they've got Crys."

"They won't hurt her, surely?"

"We can't put anything past these bastards. Come on!"

He broke into a jog, then a run, heading for the bridge half a mile away. People stopped to stare after them, but apart from briefly regretting the attention they were drawing, Bryn ignored them. He had far more important things to think of.

Ten minutes proved to be the right amount of time for them to get there, and time for Bryn to think things through. Unlike a certain president, he could run and think at the same time, just as well considering his job as a field agent for a covert department of MI6.

The party was probably packed with PHR members and they'd all been watching him and Kai. Bryn had assumed it was the novelty of having a full-on, fully out gay couple at a company do, but he should have known better. Nobody gave a man in leather pants a second glance these days. Resenting being the floor show, Bryn hadn't scanned properly, but he was glad he'd kept his telepathic mental barriers well closed. Except for that moment when he'd asked Kai if he needed help when Geoff harassed him.

Damn. Fuck and damn. That's why Geoff had done it, to draw him out. They must have a sensitive on their side. While they hadn't yet developed reliable electronic sensors to detect telepathy, not all sensitives were on the side of the angels. Or the good guys, the ones who only wanted to live in peace.

Crys was their friend, had always befriended them. PHR or not, she was in danger and they had to help her.

Bryn was scarcely out of breath when the bridge came in sight, the familiar arched structure the most welcome thing he ever wanted to see. Kai, just behind him, heaved a couple of deep breaths and paused. "Should we split up? You go up to the bridge and I stay here?"

"No, not yet. We need to assess the scene first." Taking the rest of the distance at a fast walk, they scanned the parapets above them.

They saw it at the same time.

Three men carrying a heavy burlap bag, something ominously still slumped inside the folds. To a casual onlooker, it could contain an animal, a bundle of cloth, even a large bag of potatoes, but Bryn knew better. Inside that bag lay the body of Crystal Miller, bound and trussed. He scanned them, and found her. She was deeply unconscious. Kai went still as he, too, scanned and discovered her. They were going to throw her in.

"They want us to show ourselves. Doubtless they have men with cameras, and access to the security cameras around here." Kai's words were hardly above a murmur.

"Then they're going to be disappointed. They think we'll change as soon as the water hits our skin, but we'll dive down first. What they'll see is two men jumping in the river. It's murky enough down there to hide what we do when we're deep enough."

Kai's short, mirthless laugh told him better than any words that he'd understood.

The incessant noise of traffic surrounded them, such a constant they barely registered it any more. Even at 2 a.m. London was alive. And yet such things happened

right under their noses. "Keep your mind locked completely down now," Bryn warned. "They could have sensitives. We had to scan them to find Crys. Let's not give them anything else."

Kai snorted. "Sensitives. That's not what I'd call them. Damn, it's too cold for this!" Bryn glanced to the side, never taking the major part of his attention off the trio on the bridge, and saw Kai wince in the cold autumn air when he stripped off his t-shirt. His nipple rings glinted in the moonlight as he bent to unzip his pants and kick off his boots. "I'm putting my key chain around my neck, with my pocketknife and wallet. Other than that, I think I'll be shopping for boots pretty soon."

"Yeah." It burned to lose his clothes, but one way or another they had to go. Bryn stripped off his top, and dumped it, ignoring the curious glances of the passers-by. As they watched, the men heaved the bundle up on the parapet. It teetered, wavering on the edge before it plunged down to the river below, landing with a deep splash.

"Fuck!" Kai was the first to dive. Bryn heard a shout from the bridge before he leapt in the air to come down into the cold, muddy water.

The Thames was a large, turbulent body of water, and these days it was illegal to dump anything in it, much less a human being, but the riverbed was littered with iron bedsteads, old bicycles, and more esoteric items of junk. Which now included Bryn's trousers and his cell phone. He'd have to start carrying a keychain long enough to hang around his neck, like Kai. He blinked, finding it hard to keep his eyes open in his human form, and shuddered against the deep chill that struck right through to his bones.

A flash of bright hair showed him where Kai waited for him. Even in his human form Kai was a strong swimmer, better than he was. Glancing up, Bryn took the chance he had to, and changed into his other form.

His tail whipped out behind him, ripping away what was left of his clothes, but in this form the chilly water didn't freeze his skin, and his eyes became the eyes of a sea-creature, easily able to see for distances in even the murkiest water. He took a deep breath through his gills, now open, situated just behind his ears. Kai had already changed, and waited, the blue-green scales of his great tail gleaming in the dim light.

Bryn didn't want to risk telepathy. They were still too close to their enemies to take the chance. They'd taken enough already and if they spoke mentally now, a sensitive this close could detect them. At this depth, all any onlooker could see would be a great fish, but he fuzzed his mind, so anyone looking at him would see what they expected to see, not what was really there. He'd been reported to the authorities as a stray dolphin more than once. Although with this level of filth and debris, the Thames wasn't any merman's place of choice to swim.

Making as little disturbance in the water as he could, in the hope he would avoid stirring up problems above and below, Bryn raced to the site under the bridge where the sack fell.

And there she was. Nestled between an old bicycle and a lump of ancient timber, lay the sack. With a sinking feeling, Bryn saw no movement.

Kai got there first. His knife flashed as he sliced down the burlap and Bryn was there to help him drag her out.

Crys. His heart plummeted, but he went into action, nonetheless. They must have found her within two minutes of her hitting the water, although it felt much longer to him. He glanced at his watch. Two minutes and counting.

Grabbing her head, he tore off the piece of duct tape, sighing with relief when a stream of bubbles poured out of her mouth. That tape might just have saved her life,

preventing the unconscious woman losing all the breath in her lungs when she hit the water. Bryn lost no time. He sealed his mouth over hers, pinching her nose, and blew.

Her lungs gave, taking in what he offered. But unless he did it properly, all he'd give her was expelled carbon dioxide, which wouldn't do her any good at all. Bryn blocked everything else from his mind and concentrated. He took one breath for him, one for her, not drawing it in to his system, but expelling it straight into her lungs.

The rhythm established, he opened his eyes and watched Kai. He'd cut the cord away from her body, but a chain wrapped around her several times, and was attached to a weight meant to hold her down or hold them up. Or both.

He broke the telepathic silence. *We have to get away. This is a trap!*

As he passed the communication, he felt Kai's response and something feathery touched his shoulder.

A net. They'd dropped a weighted net down to trap them all.

*Jesus!*

Kai's startled exclamation jolted Bryn into action. Kai wasn't the only person with a knife. Or with weapons. Careful to keep Crys's body cradled in his arms, he extended his claws, sharp and deadly as a crab's, arcing out the ends of his fingers. He slashed at the net. It didn't give.

Tearing his mouth away from Crys's, he kept them sealed and took a quick look. *There must be some kind of metal in the net. Keep going. If they pull us up, we're done for.*

*We'll concentrate on one area. You choose. I'll keep Crys going and you use my claws if you need them.* Thrashing with his tail wouldn't accomplish anything, so he let Kai control him, taking his claw in one strong hand and directing it at part of the net, to join his hand, also now clawed. Kai slashed, repeated, as the net tightened around them and they began to draw closer together with the tension. Then, a sudden loosening freed his tail. *It's a small gap, but we can get through, if we transform then switch back.*

Kai went first, changing back into male form, and darting through the gap. The jagged edges would have torn his tail, especially the large fin at the end. Careful to seal Crys's nose and mouth, Bryn followed suit, feeling the rush of cold water invade his body, to his very bones. He dragged Crys after him. No way was he leaving her for those bastards. Where they went, she went.

As soon as they were through, they changed back, and Bryn felt the relief as his now cold blood adapted to the temperature of the water. They turned and watched as the people above drew up the net.

*Should have put some rocks in it.*

Kai glanced at Bryn, a mischievous look gleaming in his eyes. He kicked away and grabbed the old bike, heaving it out of the sucking mud at the bottom of the river. Reaching up, he hooked some of the frayed fibers around the handlebars, entangling the bike with the net. He swam back to them. *That should keep them busy.*

*Good idea.* His mouth still clamped over Crys's, he watched the bike drawn slowly up through the water, then was seized again by the urgency of the situation. The oxygen he could give her wasn't good enough, wouldn't keep her going too much longer. There was much less oxygen available under the river than above it. Holding her carefully cradled to him, Bryn kicked away and began to swim upriver. They needed to get clear before they could risk emerging.

They swam for a mile before Bryn decided they had to surface. For the most part, they swam in silence, fighting the tide surging towards the sea and their own thoughts. Until the moment they burst free, after scanning the area for cameras and people, Bryn wasn't sure if he was breathing air into a dead woman or not.

They waited, surrounding Crys's body as if their cold-blooded forms could save her. Then a convulsive shiver took her body and she gasped.

"She's alive! Good work, Bryn." Kai took a few strong strokes up the river. "It's easier underwater. Let's get her home as fast as we can."

"I'll be a bit slower."

"Do you want me to take a turn?" The moon shone brightly now, so Bryn could easily see Kai's worried frown.

"No, I'm fine." Kai's expression turned quizzical, so Bryn explained. "You go ahead, call Will Grady and tell him what's gone down tonight. He might be able to send someone to the scene before they've cleared the area."

"Good thinking. But keep your mind open, so I can come back if you need me. They won't track us now. It would take a real Talent to do that." Kai poised his body, his back muscles tensing to take the dive back under the water, but he paused and turned back. "Wait. We need to strip her."

Deeply bewildered, Bryn couldn't follow his reasoning. "What? Not yet, she needs all the warmth she can get."

"What she's wearing won't keep her warm. No, if I know the PHR, they've planted a bug on her. Maybe two, just in case we find the first one."

"Dear God, then we'd be leading them right home." Only Crys knew their address, and on the pretext of protecting them against gay bashers, Bryn had made her promise not to tell anyone else. Seeing his point, Bryn fumbled for the buttons on Crys's dress. "This doesn't seem right."

"Stow it, Bryn. Just take this lot off her and dump it."

While he knew Kai was right, stripping an unconscious woman went against Bryn's sense of fair play and what was allowable. Born in a different age, sometimes he found it difficult to cope in this new world, his basic instincts harking back to a more repressive time.

Kai was right. He stripped the dress off Crys, then her bra, and nestled inside one of the cups, they found a small, metal object. Kai held it up, and it glinted like a jewel in the moonlight. "Waterproof," he said, examining it by what light was available to them.

"A tracking bug," Bryn confirmed. He could have kicked himself. If it hadn't been for his concern for Crys's survival, he would have thought of it. More than ever he was glad one of them remained on guard. He watched Kai tighten his fingers and squash the little object with the extra strength his Talent gave him.

They found another in her panties. Bryn hated the idea of someone invading Crys's body without her will, merely to create trouble. He crushed this one, glad of the chance to hurt something. Better it was an inanimate object at this stage. They needed to go cautiously, and see what Grady could tell them.

After a final check, sifting his fingers through Crys's hair to make sure there was nothing concealed there, Bryn took her underwater again and Kai surged ahead. Bryn came up every quarter mile until the buildings lining the river became more familiar and finally, the terrace of his riverside house appeared.

He'd never been so glad to see it before. He loved his house, but it had never resembled sanctuary as closely as it did at that moment. Holding the naked, shivering

body close to him, he checked he wasn't watched, and heaved himself out of the water, changing back to his human form.

When the shivering seized him, too, he realized he had to get Crys warm soon, or risk losing her to hypothermia. Now her shivering was convulsive. He swung her into his arms and headed up the narrow staircase and indoors.

Kai met them, cradling a telephone receiver to his ear, and motioning upstairs with his head. "I've run a hot tub," he said, hand over the receiver for a moment. "Get her in there, and you too, by the look of you. I'll join you in five." Bryn didn't need a second telling. He strode upstairs, cradling the still inert body of Crys.

Kai was as good as his word, joining them five minutes later. Bryn held Crys against his chest, gently pouring hot water over her head and shoulders. "She's still cold, but the shivering's less."

Shedding his robe, Kai climbed in to the sunken tub, one of the first innovations Bryn had introduced to the house. A hot tub big enough for two, or three or four, for that matter, and it had certainly seen all that. But right now it contained two very concerned men, intent only on warming the woman they held between them.

After half an hour of re-heating the water, Crys stopped shivering and they realized something else. Crys had been drugged. Her reactions were sluggish, and when Bryn read her mind, he found a consciousness completely asleep. "I think she'll be okay. But I don't want her to be alone tonight. I want to monitor her."

"Should we call for medical help?" Kai touched Crys's forehead. "She seems warm enough now."

"I vote we put her to bed and monitor her. I think she'll be okay. She's breathing, she's warm and although she's drugged, her systems are intact."

Kai gave a brief nod. "I agree. Grady's taking care of things in town. He's sending a team to the bridge, but they're probably long gone by now, and he'll investigate her office. Tomorrow's Sunday, so he can send a team in to investigate. The regular staff won't be there, and our people will go in as cleaners or something like that. We're to care for Crys and question her when she wakes up. If we need medical help, he said, we can call on him."

"Sounds good to me. Although I want to go back to Vauxhall Bridge and tear up every inch of it until we find something," he finished with gritted teeth.

Together, they lifted Crys gently out of the water. In a way it seemed an invasion, to see her naked body, but Kai had given up being a gentleman years ago, and Bryn reluctantly admitted he didn't want to be left out.

She was purely lovely. Long, straight black hair clung to her body in wet strands, and her upward-tilted eyes added a touch of piquancy to her pointed face. Her luscious lips were wholly sensual, and the pearly sheen to her body enhanced her full figure.

"Great boobs," Kai muttered as he patted them dry. Full, with large, milk-chocolate colored nipples. "More than great."

"Definitely." He wondered what she'd look like with shaved pubes, and then caught Kai looking at him instead of Crys. He flushed. "Sure, she turns me on. Doesn't she do it for you?"

"Isn't that obvious?" Kai glanced down at his own healthily blooming erection. "Well boy, tonight we're nurses. Better get her covered up before we end up going places we definitely shouldn't go."

Sighing, Bryn turned away and found an old t-shirt. Kai held her spread across his lap while he eased the garment on. It wasn't much better putting it on, than holding her.

Her soft breasts curved it as his pecs never had, and she looked lost inside the folds of material. It came down to mid-thigh, so her gorgeous legs still tempted him to lift them over his. Struck by a thought, he chuckled. "If our friends could see us now, as the old song says, they'd never believe it."

"They might about you," Kai remarked, "but not me. At least, not the mortal ones. As far as they know, I'm wholly gay."

"Sure you are," Bryn couldn't repress his smirk. "You're just not fussy."

Kai reached out a hand and caressed Bryn's chest. "Oh I wouldn't say that, lover. Not when I have a great specimen of manhood at my beck and call. I'm just not fussy about the sex I fuck, but call me picky when it comes to body shapes. Yours is just about perfect." Too far away to kiss him properly, he pressed a kiss to his hand and touched it to Bryn's lips. "And I look for personality first, whatever the sex."

Bryn burst out laughing. "Yeah, you and Hugh Hefner."

Kai carried Crys into their bedroom and placed her in the center of the big bed after Bryn had pulled the covers down. They looked down at her, and Bryn felt a pang of sorrow for her. "She looks lost in that bed."

"Then we'd better join her." By mutual consent, they each slipped on a pair of boxers before getting in on either side of her. But maybe, just maybe, when Crys was feeling better they wouldn't have to do that any more.

## Chapter Three

Crys opened her eyes to the bright light of day, her mind fuzzy with hangover, her body blessedly numb. She waited for her senses to catch up with her consciousness. Light filtered through shades drawn over two big windows on the other side of the room.

She blinked. This was a room she'd never seen before. She'd have remembered the understated elegance, the simplicity of it. She liked this room, wherever it was. Maybe it was a hotel. White shades, a big couch just in front of them, the perfect place to spend a quiet afternoon reading.

The strangeness of the situation hit her with a mental hammer-blow. She'd been drugged, she remembered, that was why she hadn't got the headache and stomach pains that went with hangovers, but the fuzziness of the aftermath of strong sleeping pills or an anesthetic. And why she couldn't feel anything yet. Best to wait until she felt better. Without moving her head, fearing the fuzziness would turn into nausea, she looked around.

This wasn't a hotel room, as her fogged mind had at first assumed. Personal items lay about, a stack of well-thumbed architecture magazines on a small table, a couple of science fiction books, the kind that Bryn liked to read.

Bryn? She almost put a crick in her neck; she turned on her side so quickly. There he lay. Bryn Murchison, fast asleep, close but not touching her, his face turned towards hers. The covers were drawn up to his shoulders, which were bare. Was the rest of him? What was this? The fearful words *date rape* seared into her brain.

Clutching at her body in panic, Crys was relieved to find herself clad in a t-shirt, much too big, but that was all to the good, because it covered more of her. She forced her mind to accommodate what was happening. How could she be here? In bed with Bryn? Date rape, would they really do that? From the bottom-of-a-parrot's-cage feeling in her mouth, it seemed likely.

Except she didn't like to think it of him. It didn't work. For one thing, Bryn was gay. And she hoped her judgment of character was better than to mistake a warm friendship of twelve months for rabid desire.

"Morning, precious."

Twisting on to her back so fast she almost winded herself, Crys looked up into the sea-blue eyes of Kai Murdoch. Feelings and sensations were back with a vengeance now, and she felt the presence of two warm bodies close to her like a protective sleeping blanket. Or a captive one.

Panic gripped her so hard she couldn't move for a minute, then she lashed out, her only thought to get out of here and to the police.

Kai caught her wrists, bearing them down to either side of her head, seemingly without effort, leaning over her to speak to her gently. "Wait a minute, baby. We're not the enemy here."

"No, we're not." Bryn's sleepy voice sounded amazingly normal. "Give us a chance, Crys, and we'll tell you what happened after you conked out."

Swallowing, she subsided. With these two powerful men she really had little choice. She'd have to try to get away by other means. Find a telephone, perhaps. "Tell me then," she croaked.

"First things first." Hoisting her up, to rest her back against his chest, Kai brought a

glass of what looked like water to her lips. "You're thirsty. Drink, Crys."

"No!" Convinced they intended to drug her again, she clamped her lips shut. Kai sighed and put the glass down on the small bedside table behind him. "Listen, then. Yes, you were drugged, but not by us. Do you remember anything about last night?"

She closed her eyes briefly and shuddered when the memories flooded back. "Yes." She took a deep breath to steady herself. "I got into Mike's SUV and they gave me a drink, vodka I think they said it was, but it tasted strange so I didn't want to finish it. I started to feel dizzy. They forced the drink down my throat." Her eyes snapped open at the realization. "You didn't drug me, they did! So why am I here and not with them?"

Bryn tucked his arms behind his head, the sinews flexing with his movements. He seemed perfectly at ease, lying naked for all she knew, under the crisp white sheets. "Crys, they threw you in the river. They wanted us to rescue you, so they could capture us. They didn't care about you, you were just their bait. I'm sorry."

"What?" She remembered some of the muttering she'd heard as she'd gone under. Mike and Geoff and their twisted friends said something about the river. And a bridge. "Which bridge?"

"Vauxhall." That was right, that was what they said. "I got a call on my mobile telling us to go there, if we wanted to see you alive again. We knew what they planned, but we had no choice."

"We could hardly leave you at the bottom of the Thames, now could we?" Kai asked from behind her. She still rested against him, weaker than she could ever remember feeling in her life before, but her panic subsiding a little now. "Crys, you know we'd never hurt you. Deep down you *know* that's the truth."

She did. She found it impossible to believe these men would deliberately hurt her. Their friendship had been understanding and steadfast; why would they suddenly do this to her now? So she listened.

"They tied you up, and sealed your nose and mouth with duct tape. That's what probably saved you, because you didn't take in water when you went into the Thames. Once we got the stuff off you, I breathed air into you while Kai freed you."

"How did you do that?" Kai and Bryn exchanged a glance. Crys sighed. "I want to know. I'm finding all this so hard to believe, I need to know it all."

"She does." Bryn lost all his customary good humor, and watched her carefully. "They were right about one thing, Crys. I *am* a merman."

She thought back to the files on Geoff's computer, the ones that seemed to prove something she knew was impossible. Or was it? "Prove it."

Bryn threw back the bedcovers. Underneath, his tighty-whities covered his genitals and she breathed out in relief. A glimmer of relief and truth seeped into her consciousness. Another indication they hadn't done anything she didn't want them to do. Only her initial panic had caused that fear.

Not that she didn't want them to do it, just she wanted to be awake when they did. There wasn't much chance of that. Bryn and Kai still shared a bed, they were still a couple.

Bryn caught her gaze, his green eyes gleaming with friendship and truth. "Watch. And don't be afraid. Whatever I am, whatever you think of me, I'm still Bryn Murchison, the person you've known for a year now." Was that trepidation entering his eyes, fear, nervousness? He slid his underwear down his legs.

Well she'd be nervous if she could turn her feet into a tail fin, she realized after a fraught moment when she doubted what she was seeing, blinked and finally accepted it was real.



"You can touch it if you like."

"No!" Recoiling, she backed hard against Kai, looked up at him as he caught her, and received her next surprise of the day.

Kai Murdoch had a hard-on, and he wasn't looking at Bryn. His erection pressed into her back, hot and unmistakable.

"This is an alternative universe!" Putting her hands to her face, she felt them tremble. Kai's arms tightened around her, but they felt comforting, not restrictive and she knew if she wanted, he'd let her go. She didn't want him to.

"Turn back, Bryn," Kai said steadily, and Bryn did, with no more effort than he'd transformed. She watched through the spaces between her fingers, lowering her hands to rest them on Kai's warm forearms. She kept her attention well away from Bryn's midsection. Kai had a hard-on, and she didn't care to see if Bryn had one, too, or if this was some kind of betrayal by Kai, wanting her when he shouldn't.

The transformation from feet to fin and back again was so easily effected it seemed more like an illusion, but she knew it wasn't. The last vestiges of the drug had left her system a few minutes ago, and this was for sure real. She felt the truth of it deep inside, and realized, in a way, she'd always known. Not that they were mermen, but they were different, special.

Bryn pulled the covers back over his body, but she stared at his feet, where the fin had been a moment before, still stunned. "I dreamed of mermen when I was little. *The Little Mermaid* was my favorite fairy story. But people persuaded me they weren't real, and I had to live with that. Am I nine years old again?"

"I certainly hope not." Kai moved sinuously against her, his erection blatant against her backside.

She might as well go the whole hog. What was sexual orientation next to the reality of being in bed with two mermen? "And you're not really gay, right?"

"She guessed."

Kai's voice was deadpan, but Bryn's grin wasn't. "You're hot for her, Kai."

"And you're not?" Kai mocked.

"I didn't say that." Bryn turned serious again. "Crys, we promise we won't hurt you and we won't do anything you don't want us to do. We're here for you, that's all. And no, neither of us is exclusively gay. Kai's bi and he's my first male lover. We work well together, and I was open-minded enough to let him show me what I'd been missing. Whatever we are, whoever we are, you're safe with us."

She slumped back, against Kai once more, his erection no longer threatening, but an affirmation of some kind, a way of believing in her own reality, as well as theirs. "I'm certainly not safe with Geoff. What am I going to do? We're living together, all my stuff is at his place. I gave up my flat to move in with him."

Bryn lifted his hand to take one of hers in a warm clasp, resting on Kai's forearm. "We'll go with you to get your things when you're ready. You're welcome to stay here as long as you like. I have four bedrooms, plenty of room for a guest."

She bit her lip, worrying at it as she always did when she was thinking hard. She was safe with these two men, and it seemed she had no one else to trust. Unless she went to her parents, but London was her home and her job was here. And no way did she want to be run off her own turf by a slimeball like Geoff. "I don't know what to do. Will you tell me the rest, please?"

Bryn raised a dark eyebrow. "The rest? We freed you and swam upriver to my house here. This is a Thames-side house, so it seemed the best course to take. Kai has a

place in the city, not so easy to get to."

Kai huffed a short laugh, his breath hot on the outer rim of her ear. "Not that I spend much time there these days."

Crys nodded. "I knew you lived by the Thames, you told me before. By 'the rest,' I meant what is Geoff up to?"

Kai loosened his hold and slid one hand up her body to just under her breast. "Do you need to know now? They drugged you, then you froze in the cold water. You've been through a lot. You need to rest. Will you at least drink the water?"

He reached behind him and picked up the glass. This was far more than a drink of water, it was a declaration of trust.

Yes, she trusted them. She drank the water.

Kai gently took the glass from her and put it down on the nightstand. "Come and lie down. Rest. We'll tell you anything you want to know."

She saw nothing but kindness and concern in their eyes, from Kai's blue to Bryn's sea-green. "Why am I here? In bed with you and not in one of your other rooms?"

"That's easy to answer." Kai lifted her and lay her down next to Bryn, coming down to lie on her other side. Bryn lifted the covers over them all.

Snuggled between the two men, the covers pulled up over her shoulders, she felt warm again. Bryn took her hand. "You were deeply unconscious and freezing cold when we got you back here, but you were breathing easily and we managed to warm you up." He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed a knuckle, his tongue lingering in the dips. A responsive thrill went through her body. "We didn't want to leave you alone to sleep, in case you had problems, and we were tired, too. We couldn't sit up with you all night. This is the biggest bed in the house, so we brought you here."

She didn't feel tired, but she was weary. "Talk to me. Tell me the rest."

When she moved towards Bryn, he lifted his arm and she raised her head to rest it on his shoulder. It felt good, as though she belonged there, although she'd never been there before. Kai moved closer, snuggling up, his barely-clad erection pressing into her side. Cozy and intensely arousing, but Crys didn't exactly object to that.

Bryn's voice rumbled close to her, and she felt the vibrations of his voice in his chest. "There's an organization that hates our kind, the PHR or Perfect Human Race. They're bigots who think their kind of human is the only kind entitled to inherit the earth. We're different, but we're still human, Crys. We have as much right as anyone to be here."

"And Geoff belongs to them?"

"We think so. We'll know more tomorrow."

"Why tomorrow?"

Bryn caressed her waist, and kissed her forehead. Every touch aroused her just a little bit more, made her want more. "Ever wondered what I do for a living?"

She shook her head. "I thought you had a bit of money of your own, perhaps worked with Kai as an architect, something like that."

"Right on the first instance, I do have a 'bit of money.' He moved gently and Crys realized Kai wasn't the only one with an erection. She hadn't looked, but from the size of it, now she wished she had. "I let people think I'm one of the idle rich. But I'm an agent, what they call a field agent, with MI6. I work for a special unit called Department 57. We consist of Talents—people like Kai and me, and we work for our country and for other Talents."

"Talents?"

Bryn smiled. "It's a good enough name, nicely vague, so if we're overheard

discussing ourselves, most people are none the wiser. You're not a Talent, but you're probably a sensitive. You know telepathy exists, don't you?" She nodded. She'd often picked up signs, snatches of thoughts, but she'd long since stopped trying to make anything of it. "Everybody is telepathic, my sweet, but most people have evolved a natural barrier, and they don't realize they are. Talents never develop the barrier, so we have to build our own. In the meantime, we hone the telepathic abilities."

That made sense to her. Her abilities varied depending on how tired or stressed she was, when she seemed to be more receptive.

Kai's breath whispered on her neck. "How open minded are you?"

She shivered. Did Kai just lick her neck? A touch, just where her hair fell away across the pillow. "You have gorgeous hair." She felt Kai's tongue on her neck. Yes, he'd licked her.

It felt good. She swallowed and looked at Bryn. "We've already decided to keep you in bed for the rest of the day," he murmured. "What we do here is up to you."

"You mean...?"

"Oh yeah. We both want you and we have no problem in sharing, but if you do have a problem, we'll just hold you and pamper you a bit. I'd guess it's a long time since you've been pampered, isn't it?"

"I never thought about it. But yes, it is." Geoff had taken her at her word when she told him she wanted equality. He'd never treated her as anything less than a rational adult female, but sometimes everyone needed to be spoiled, and it had been a long time since anyone had spoiled her. When she and Geoff went out to dinner, they went Dutch, Christmas and birthday presents were carefully calculated, usually something practical, and holidays were usually somewhere 'useful,' not beautiful or luxurious. Somewhere educational, or a near a place where the small accountancy firm they both worked for had business.

Kai pushed her gently on her side, so she faced Bryn. Kai stroked her back in long, gentle sweeps, and Bryn moved his hands up to her shoulders, massaging. She smelled them both, Bryn's sharper natural scent contrasting with Kai's almost musky fragrance. Both intoxicated her senses, and she breathed deeper, to take them in.

"We'll go slow. You say no whenever you want to, and we'll stop, I swear. And we don't need to use anything, unless you feel uncomfortable with that. We can't make you pregnant and we can't catch or pass on any diseases. Okay with that? I mean it, Crys. This is for you, because we want you and we want you to feel better. None of this nasty business with the PHR is down to you, baby. Just let us love you."

She tipped her face up to his and Bryn slowly brought his mouth down to hers. Just before he touched her, she whispered her answer. "Yes. Yes please, Bryn."

He kissed her, gentle at first, his lips barely caressing hers, but soon escalated to openmouthed passion. His tongue delved into her mouth and she welcomed it with all her soul, lifting her arms to slide them around his neck and hold him close.

Kai's hands slid around her, cupping her breasts, feathering her nipples lightly, making her groan into Bryn's mouth. Kai slid his hands down her body, returning to push the t-shirt up and skin met skin. He pressed close, his chest meeting her lower back, touching her breasts, kissing the sensitive spots at the back of her neck, his nose pushing her hair aside to reach more of her.

And all the while, Bryn kissed her, breaking off to touch his lips to her mouth, her cheek, her throat but always returning to her mouth to dip deep and taste.

Kai kissed down the ridges in her spine. Always sensitive there, Crys shivered and

arched her back, which brought her into closer contact with Bryn, and his erection. Without breaking their kiss, Bryn reached down to lift her leg, and slide his own between them, rubbing his cock against her hip, pushing against her as if it had a mind of its own.

Fingers slid down her back, tracing every nub, every hollow, before slipping down her ass and between her legs, now opened by Bryn's thigh. Bryn pulled away a little, giving Kai room. Kai touched her and it felt like an electric shock, tingling every nerve-end in her body. He explored, sliding his fingers along her cleft, and she felt wetness flood out of her. The soft sucking sound when he slid one finger just inside her opening made her thighs tingle, and she yearned to be filled, really filled. She moaned into Bryn's mouth. "Please..."

He drew away. "Please what, baby?"

"Fill me. Fuck me, please. Do it now!"

Bryn opened his eyes and stared into hers, while he pulled her closer, lifting her leg higher over his. He used one hand to guide his cock down until it slid against her, sinking into the wetness Kai had helped draw out.

Kai didn't withdraw his hand, but touched Bryn, moaning softly and guiding him to Crys's entrance. Bryn slid inside, barely breaching her and with one swift motion, threw the bedcovers off them, exposing all three.

Kai slid down Crys's body, one hand caressing Bryn and Crys, so near to joining, one against her hip, holding her steady for his partner. His hot breath branded her buttocks, heating her ass and making her wish for things she'd never dreamed of before.

With Kai's help, Bryn slid inside Crys's welcoming body. He didn't stop until he'd pushed all the way inside, in one sinuous movement and Kai's hand left them, no room for it between them any more. Crys felt herself open, welcoming Bryn in.

Kai moaned. "You have no idea how good that looks. Fuck her Bryn, fuck her hard, give her what she needs."

As Bryn pulled her close, Kai pushed her from behind, right into him, and her breasts crushed against his chest. He kissed her eyes, the tip of her nose and her mouth, sliding out of her then back in carefully controlled, slow thrusts. His mouth devoured hers, as Kai continued to caress them both, cupping Bryn's balls and sliding her moisture over them with deft fingers.

Kai caressed, spread the wetness oozing out of her body, but she tensed when he circled her back passage, teasing her sensitive skin, gently caressing. She had no idea that could feel so good. Sex with Geoff had been rigidly normal, whatever that was, although in the past she'd had more interesting lovers. But she'd almost forgotten how transcendent sex could be, only to be reminded by her two new lovers.

When Kai slid a finger inside her tight opening, only a thin layer of skin separating it from Bryn's thrusting cock, Crys screamed and came, the power of her orgasm unlike anything she'd known before. Kai curved his finger into her and found her sweet spot.

Crys was helpless, with Bryn's thrusts increasing in power and depth, Kai teasing and stroking, pressing wet kisses to her back and ass. She shook with the power of her climax, and then they took her higher, and higher still, until she forgot who she was, where she was.

Past words, all she could do was cry out, clutch at Bryn in the hope he would keep her on the earth, and push back against Kai's invading finger. "That's it, baby," Kai muttered. "Keep coming for us, never stop, go for the big one!"

Bryn slammed against her, every thrust accompanied by the music of their bodies slapping together, and he threw his head back against the rising heat between them.

His balls tightened against her body, and he came, crying as loudly as she, hot streams spurting into her body.

Crys's channel was still convulsing with her last orgasm when Bryn withdrew. Kai removed his finger and eased her on to her back. "My turn," he murmured, his wicked, tender smile inviting her to share him, to love him as she had just loved Bryn. She opened her legs, lifted her knees and invited him in.

Kai didn't need to be invited twice. He shoved hard into her, not pausing, as Bryn had done. And she was surprised at the difference. Kai's cock was longer, but slimmer than Bryn's, and she winced when he touched her cervix, then sighed when he slid past the sensitive opening into the deepest part of her vagina. He took her mouth with his, twisting his head to reach in further, his long hair brushing her body when he moved.

A hand touched her breast. Bryn, caressing and tweaking. Had her breasts ever been this sensitive before? No, never. She arched up into Kai's chest, while his cock finished the work Bryn had started, driving her to a higher peak.

Kai tore his lips away from hers and lifted, arching his back to drive harder into her. When she turned her head, Bryn was there, to kiss her and caress her breasts, pulling and twisting while Kai drove into her like a pile driver, relentlessly urging her to another climax.

When she screamed, he gasped, and Bryn covered her nipple with his mouth, licking and kissing, while Kai shouted his climax above her, pulsing into her in powerful waves.

He stayed there, his arms locked into place either side of her, while Bryn's caresses and kisses grew softer and gentler. When she opened her eyes she stared into Kai's triumphant ones. "You are amazing," he murmured, bending to kiss her gently. Then, his body still in hers, he turned his head and kissed Bryn.

Watching two men kiss wasn't high on Crys's list of things to do, but Bryn and Kai made the sight erotic. Even though she'd had two mighty orgasms and all the stations in between, the sight of her lovers enjoying each other had a rejuvenating effect on her, and she touched them both, feeling their responsive delight as if it was her own.

Kai slid to one side of her, gathering her close and Bryn spooned in behind. "Think you can sleep now?" Kai said gently, as he kissed the top of her head.

She didn't answer, not in words, but drifted away.

## Chapter Five

Crys woke when Kai lifted her, but smiled up at him and curled her arms around his neck. No shocking awakening this time, she remembered every fantastic moment. "Where are we going?"

He touched his lips to hers. "Shower," he said briefly. "Bryn's making a phone call. He'll join us when he's finished."

"I can walk, you know."

"Don't you like this?"

For answer, she snuggled close. Kai felt good, and if he was happy, so was she.

The bathroom was a revelation. A large room with a sunken tub in one part, and a walk-in shower in the other, separated from the main room by a glass door and partition, almost like a separate, see-through room. "Wow, what an amazing bathroom!"

Kai put her on her feet. "Glad you like it. I helped Bryn remodel this room."

"You're a good architect, aren't you?"

Kai nodded and went inside the shower, turning the top faucets on. Warm water jetted down on him, soaking his fine, glossy hair. "Bryn's the man of danger. I just design buildings."

Cry snorted. "Oh yes, I'm sure you're as gentle as a kitten." She followed him in and closed the door.

"Depends who you ask. With you, baby, I'm all kitten. Unless you don't want me to be." His eyes glinted wickedly and he took the step that separated them.

She lifted her hands and put them on his shoulders, feeling out of her depth in more ways than one. "Kai, I'm a novice at all this. What we did, back in the bedroom, that's never happened to me before."

"Having second thoughts?" He put his hands on either side of her waist, but didn't draw her closer. Water beat down on them, soaking them in delicious hot rain. He met her eyes, asking and getting perfect sincerity.

"No, I'm not. I'm just trying to tell you I'm not one of those seen-it-all-done-it-all women. I feel a little out of my depth."

"If you want to stop, say so. Neither of us will think any the less of you for it." He smiled at her, eyes steady and kind. "Turn around, sweet, and I'll wash your hair for you." She did so, and felt his hands sifting through her hair. "To be perfectly honest, Bryn isn't as adventurous as you think. At least he wasn't until eighteen months ago. It shocked him that he found another man attractive, but now he's into it." His hand left her briefly and returned, massaging a dollop of herb-scented shampoo into her hair. "And if we're being honest, I have to say that we've had fantasies about you for a while now. Both of us, Crys, but perhaps Bryn a little more. I don't do love, you see, I'm perfectly happy with attraction, liking and friendship. The grass is always greener, and all that. One day I'll move on, and Bryn knows it."

She caught back a gasp at his light tone, his honesty. Things really weren't all they seemed. "I thought you were a couple."

"We are. For now. Except we seem to have turned to a threesome, as of today." He drew her back against the stream of water. "If you're willing, that is."

She shook her head. "I don't want to make plans. All the ones I thought I had turned into nothing last night. Worse than nothing."

"Hey." Crys never thought Kai Murdoch could be gentle, but she knew better now. His public persona was hard, sarcastic and arrogant, but underneath she was beginning to find a considerate, thoughtful man. "It's all up to you, Crys. You can stay in one of the guest rooms, and it'll still be a pleasure to have you around." He gave a short laugh. "I'm the one talking about plans. The only ones I carry through these days are blueprints."

His hands left her hair and she turned around to face him. "What's wrong?" She heard trouble in his voice and asked him the question she wouldn't have dreamed of asking until last night. Kai had problems, she knew it. Sometimes she'd seen him staring into space, an expression of lost longing on his face, but he was a private person and she didn't want to pry where she wasn't wanted. But now, if she could help him, she would.

He smiled down at her, his eyes sharply amused. "I can't hide anything from you, can I?"

"You can if you want to. I don't want to make you do anything you don't want to do."

Wryly, he looked down and she followed his gaze to where his cock swelled for her. "You have control over one part of my body, that's for sure." He pursed his lips, gazing at her. "Let's just say I had a disappointment and I'm giving myself a holiday from love. I enjoy men, but I don't get romantically involved with them."

That was as much as he'd tell her, but it was enough. "Don't get romantically involved with me, Kai."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Somehow, I don't think it's because Geoff hurt you too much. You always held a little apart from him, whether you knew it or not." He studied her a moment longer. "Is it Bryn?"

She owed him honesty. She nodded. He smiled in comprehension.

"Then we'll enjoy each other without compunction, Crys. Friends who fuck. A holiday for us both."

She smiled. "Maybe. As I said, I don't want to make any plans right now. Maybe in a few days, when this mess is behind me." She liked Kai, even more than she had before last night, but now she knew for sure. She liked him a lot. But it didn't compare to the feeling she had for Bryn, had always had if she was going to be honest with herself, as well as to Kai. Thinking him gay, beyond her, she'd put it aside as something she couldn't and shouldn't have, but now...

"Talking of behinds—" Kai reached around her and cupped her backside, drawing her closer. "Yours is particularly fine. I couldn't help noticing that." He slid his hands around, cupped her buttocks then insinuated one long finger between them. "Ever been fucked in the ass?"

She shook her head, tensing a little. "I'm not sure I'd like it." She looked up shyly, peering through wet strands of dark hair. "But I enjoyed what you did earlier."

He kissed her forehead. "We'll see, baby. Only what you want, remember?" He moved his other hand to her front, and pushed between her legs. "You're wet. That's not the water, is it?"

"No." Her voice seemed to have dropped an octave. Then she did what she'd been dying to do ever since she'd seen them, one day at a swimming pool nearly a year ago. She touched his nipple rings. At his gasp, she hastily pulled her hands back.

"No, no, do it again. It's good, so good when you touch them." Unlike her voice, his rose a little in pitch, but when she lifted her hands again, his groan was full-throated and deep.

She tugged one a little, and received a gasp of encouragement. His hands played

between her legs, catching her clit between his first and second fingers, and massaging it until it swelled, sending pleasure-spikes through her body. Her eyelids grew heavy with desire.

She leaned forward and took one of his nipples into her mouth. She pushed the tip of her tongue through the ring, tickling his nipple through it, and his low throated groan told her she'd hit the jackpot. His cock leaped between them, the hard ridges marking her body with heat.

A gust of cool air told her the shower door had opened. "Am I interrupting?" a cool, dark voice asked.

"Come in," Kai breathed.

Hands parted her legs from behind, and one hand became two, as Bryn touched her, shadowing Kai's actions and stroking the most sensitive tip of her clit before slipping down and into her. She groaned, but didn't stop caressing and licking Kai's nipples, enjoying a treat long denied her. Bryn slipped another finger into her, pushing deep. "That's it, sweetheart, open right up for me. Wider!"

She broadened her stance, and kissed down Kai's body to his navel. That meant he couldn't touch her clit any more, but Bryn took over from him. The hot water rained down on them all, making their embrace slick and wet.

Their touches were different, Kai's playful fingering was replaced by Bryn's blunter, stronger fingers, pinching her clit hard and then releasing it suddenly, to devastating effect.

She came, bucking back, while Kai grabbed her shoulders to steady her. While she was still coming Bryn pushed his way inside her, even his thick cock needing no extra help. He drove in hard, his body slamming into her buttocks as Kai held her steady.

She'd slipped down even further, so without thinking, she opened her mouth and took in Kai's deliciously straining length. She felt Kai widen his legs to make access easier for her and she took advantage of it. Caressing him with her tongue, she licked him like a particularly delicious candy, and finally took him fully into her mouth and sucked hard.

Kai gave a running commentary of obscenities and encouragement, while behind her, Bryn gave her the fucking she deserved, or that was what he said. "Like this, baby?" He gave her clit a hard tweak and when she moaned her approval he laughed, pure joy like she'd never heard before in him. "Oh yes, she likes it."

He shifted and his angle changed. Kai's howl came a fraction before her orgasm began to pulse inside her, and Kai's essence shot into the back of her throat. Greedily swallowing, she found herself unable to take it all, short of breath as Bryn continued stroking into her relentlessly. Kai pulled back and she left her mouth open, letting the still-warm shower rinse the surplus come from her mouth and chin. Kai let out a whoop of sheer delight, breathless at the end. She heard his breathless pants, but Bryn's hard, unremitting strokes pushed her up and up and up, until she couldn't hold herself steady any more.

When she fell forward, Kai caught her, sitting on the tiled floor and cradling her forehead against his strong shoulder. "Shout it out, baby. Show us how much you like it."

She had no choice. She yelled, as she'd never done before, loud and long.

The orgasm exorcised the remnants of the horror and fear from last night. It faded away, leaving only anger behind. Anger that Geoff should treat her so, consider her worthless bait for bigger fish. She shoved the emotion aside. Not now, not after such a devastating loving.

Bryn slid out of her and joined them on the tiled floor of the shower, leaning against one wall. The water beat over them and washed them clean.



They'd taken her so high, she hadn't been aware of anything else. "Bryn, did you come?"

"Oh yeah, I came all right. Can't you tell?" Bryn dipped his hand between her legs, bringing out more than water. He watched the water rinse his fingers and reached for the soap. "Come on, we have to get out of here. We have an appointment."

Ignoring her querying look, he held out his hand and hauled her up. Kai stood up, but after rinsing quickly, kissed them both and stepped out of the shower. "I'll get some robes."

Bryn washed them both efficiently, but his hands all over her body, soaping, massaging and rinsing, aroused her again. Bryn held her close for a deep kiss, unheeding of the water still pounding down over them. "If it weren't that we're expected, I'd take you all over again," he murmured, his breath heating her lips. "You're addictive, Crys."

"So are you." She paused. "Both of you."

"You're not the first person to say that."

A pang of disappointment hit her stomach. "I'm not the first one with you both?"

He smiled gently. "I always considered my bed my own, and with the other bedrooms available, I used them when I slept with anyone else. You're the second person I've shared my bed with. The first is Kai. I've had affairs, men and women both, and sometimes Kai's been a part of that."

"I'm a real innocent, aren't I?"

He kissed her again. "If you are, so am I. You and Kai are the only people who have ever joined me in my own bed, and that should tell you something." He paused to cuddle her close. She snuggled in, feeling absurdly safe with him. "When I saw you a year ago I wanted you, but I'm not a home wrecker. As time went on I realized Geoff wasn't good for you, but what could I do? I wanted to take you away, but I had no right, while you chose to stay with him and he didn't actually abuse you." He touched his lips to hers again. "I've wanted you here for some time, Crys, but if you imagine me as some kind of saint, waiting patiently for you to be available, I'm afraid you're in for a disappointment."

"No, I don't expect that. Are you saying...?" She couldn't articulate what she wanted to say. It wasn't right, although it might be one day.

"Baby, you've had too much happening to you recently for any more big changes. Let's take it a day at a time, hmm?"

He was right. Relief swept through her. She wasn't expected to be anything here, or do anything she didn't want to. Both men had told her that, and she believed them. At last, at last, she was safe.

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Miraculously, they found some clothes for her, a pair of jeans and a smaller t-shirt, but no underwear. She doubted she would have worn it, not knowing who'd left it there. Her hair dry, her body clean, they went down to the kitchen and threw together a meal of bacon and eggs while Bryn told them what would happen next.

"We're going in to the Department. I called Grady, and he'll brand Crys when we go in." He was only just in time to grab her hand when she shoved her chair back and made to leave the table, fear thrumming through her. "It can't be helped, Crys. We've told you things you shouldn't know about what we are and what we do, and if we'd told you without approval, we could all die. We're not allowed to tell, on pain of death. It was inevitable in this case, since we didn't have an aqualung to explain how we could remain

underwater for so long, and Grady understands. He has the power to approve our decision, and make you safe. It's not as bad as it sounds, honestly. He'll put a mark in your mind, a bit like a tattoo, and then any telepathic being who reads you will know you're safe."

"Will it hurt?"

Bryn grimaced. "Yes. But the pain won't last long." He reached across the table and took her hand, feathering his thumb across the palm. "I'm sorry, but there's no other way around it."

"Okay. Should I get my *Kai and Bryn* tattoo at the same time?"

Kai howled with laughter when he put a plate down in front of her. "Oh yes. I know just the place."

"Neither of you have tattoos."

"I know a man who does."

Even Bryn, obviously under strain by having to tell her there was more pain to come forced a smile. "You don't have to go that far. You don't have any tattoos, either."

"I wanted one, but I chickened out. A shame, it was a great design. A little cat, on my ankle." She glanced up at Kai. "Perhaps I should have a fish instead."

Kai twinkled at her and shoved his hair, still loose, back over his shoulders. "Appropriate. Maybe a bit of a giveaway."

She picked up a fork and set to eating, hungrier than she'd thought she would be. While they ate, Bryn told them what he'd planned. "We'll go to the Department first, see what Will Grady's discovered. Then out to dinner, somewhere nice." He glanced up from his food. "If that's okay."

She gave a derisory laugh. "In these clothes? Better to try for a takeaway or something like that."

Bryn pushed his empty plate away and leaned back in his chair, cradling a cup of coffee in his big hands. "I wanted to ask you about that. It'd be a good idea to search your flat for evidence of the PHR. How would you feel if we took you back to get your stuff, and happened to take a few other things away?"

"Like what?"

"Like a computer."

When she tried to fight down the waves of panic threatening to drown her, Kai and Bryn were there, in her mind, waiting.

They weren't joking about the telepathy. It seemed effortless, the way they held her in her mind, comforting her, assuring her as they couldn't in words that they would look after her, protect her from their enemies. Bryn spoke aloud. "Whether we want it or not, our enemies are yours now. You've allied yourself with us, and so they'll want to know what you know. They're not pleasant people, Crys, and their methods are nasty."

"Since they threw me, unconscious and weighted, in the Thames to die, merely as bait for you, I think I realized that." She had some of her sass back. Not before time, she thought wryly. And she had to admit without their loving care of her, it might have taken much longer. If at all, considering she'd been at the bottom of the river last night.

"If you're with me, I'll do it."

"Great." Bryn didn't sound enthusiastic. "I'm sorry, but we'll have to go. Unless Grady's wrapped it up already."

"Tell you what," Kai put in, between mouthfuls of egg and bacon. "If he has, instead of going to get her stuff, we'll go shopping."

Crys shook her head. "Thanks, but there are some things I want back at the flat."

Things I can't buy back."

Bryn glowered at Kai. "Idiot."

"I'm sorry. People like us get used to moving on and leaving things behind. Of course there are things you want, Crys."

She smiled at Kai. "That's okay." Frowning, she added, "Why do you have to move on?"

When Kai and Bryn exchanged an exasperated glance, she knew they were hiding something from her. "What? Tell me?"

Bryn shook his head. "It's not important, not yet. Can we leave it for now?"

Reluctantly, she agreed. She did trust them, and she had the feeling their answer would leave her with another problem to cope with. She wasn't sure she could take much more.

Mermen, a secret department and the knowledge that her ex-boyfriend was a member of an organization who killed people was enough for now. More than enough.

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They traveled into London in Bryn's Volvo, less flashy than Kai's car. Huddled in a borrowed denim jacket, Crys sat in the back with Kai, who held her closely like a precious package. Well her package days were over. She was regaining her spirit now, and she felt like kicking some ass. Not that her ass-kicking skills extended much past her weekly karate class, but still, it had to count for something. The ass she most wanted to kick belonged to overbearingly handsome, domineering Geoff. Now she was definitely out of the relationship she felt more at peace, and the thought that she wouldn't have to fight him any more made her realize how much her recent life had resembled a battlefield. Geoff declared proudly to anyone who would listen that he was the 'old fashioned' kind of man. The kind of man who went to the football match on a Saturday without asking her along, the kind who liked his food on the table when he got home, the kind who expected sex when he wanted it, on his terms. Scratch the surface of the Geoff's 'equality' claims and you came up with a full-blown male chauvinist pig.

She'd bought her own football ticket, stocked the freezer with microwaveable ready meals and refused sex on a regular basis, but had rarely initiated it recently.

When had it all gone wrong? When they'd met, the attraction was instant and mutual, but after a few memorable times, she'd somehow accustomed herself to battling Geoff. His obsession with merpeople was quaint, an interesting character trait, balancing her obsession with the painter Alphonse Mucha, except it was much more than that. She should have realized, because he wasn't interested in art featuring sea people, or literature about them, just so-called textbooks 'proving' their existence.

How could she have let it go on so long?

They reached the center of London pretty quickly, although the streets were thronged with traffic, even on a Sunday. London never slept, not for a minute. The old Routemaster buses, the touristy London vehicles sold in miniature in every souvenir shop had given way to modern vehicles, except on the tourist routes, so Bryn maneuvered past quite a few long, sleek buses going at a faster clip than the old double-deckers. His driving skills were pretty good.

"Do you get a driving skills course at secret agent school?"

She was rewarded by Bryn's fruity chuckle. "Oh yes, all of that. We're taught a few tricks, and learn a few of our own along the way."

They reached the Oval cricket ground, and it finally hit Crys where they were going. Right into the lion's den.

Since 1995, the MI6 building was a prominent part of London's riverside buildings, which was odd, since the country had only acknowledged the existence of its secret services recently. Built in a deliberately nautical style, the building looked like a beached ocean-going luxury liner. She'd seen it many times before, but never dreamed of going inside. Much less holding the hand of a merman, currently clad in jeans and a short black leather jacket.

The world had turned upside down in the last twenty-four hours, and she had a feeling it hadn't stopped yet.

Bryn left the car in an underground car park, and they took the lift upstairs to the main building. An ordinary metal lift, with ordinary plastic buttons. She'd expected something high-tech and James Bond-like, but this prosaic lift was rather disappointing.

She'd imagined the process of admission would take a long time. This was MI6, after all, but it seemed someone had prepared for her. A man handed her a plastic clip-on card at the admission desk in the hall.

Inside, large windows alleviated the usual 'government department' atmosphere. Past the entrance areas, the décor degenerated to efficient business layout, utilitarian signs, hard floor, and plain painted walls. They followed the signs to the Archive department. She held Bryn's hand all the way, intimidated by just being there. Kai walked behind them, and when she turned her head, smiled at her reassuringly. The snide, street-smart architect was completely absent here, replaced by a caring person. Merman or no, Kai was far more human than Geoff.

Outside the area marked 'Clippings Library,' a machine scanned her retinas when she bent and stared into it. Apart from that, after walking past an eagle-eyed woman to have her mind scanned, which didn't hurt a bit, they were in.

They had to pass through a turnstile before walking past several closed doors and into a large office, containing cubicles that looked like perfectly ordinary office cubicles to her. Each contained an office chair and desk, a screen, a computer, a few personal items tacked up on the partitions. A few people occupied them. Although this was Sunday, she assumed some of the staff at MI6 worked weekends.

Bryn led her straight through a door and through another, smaller office, which only had one absent occupant, perhaps a PA, then to the final door. He tapped and went in, dropping her hand.

Crys felt bereft and alone, even with her two men in the room with her. Before her stood the largest man she'd ever seen. Or at least, the largest man she'd ever seen without an ounce of spare fat on him. Dressed in plain black trousers and a pale blue polo shirt, as if he planned to visit the pub for lunch after this meeting, he towered above even Kai, who was around six foot two, with shoulders that would have graced the boxing ring and a body to match. Short, dark hair and intense gray eyes completed the awesome sight.

He looked Crys over, taking his time, and she wondered why she wasn't insulted. Maybe because she detected no leering, and no condescension, merely a desire to know. This man was insatiable for knowledge.

Eventually, he nodded, stepped forward and offered his hand. "I'm Will Grady, I run the Department here. You're Crystal Miller. Bryn told me about you."

She shook his hand, a dry, warm touch, then she smiled, tentatively. "I'm pleased to meet you."

"I hope so."

Without warning a sharp pain seared into her skull, as though someone had driven a fine needle right inside. She cried out, and felt Bryn's steadying hands close around her shoulders.

"Better done quickly, without warning," came the deep, steady voice. "You're safe now, Crystal. I've marked you, branded you. Now if anyone reads your mind, they'll know you're under my protection."

"Thank you." That didn't come from her, but from Bryn, his voice near her ear as he supported her. Grady motioned to a sofa on one side of the room, and Bryn helped her there. It was the shock of the attack as much as anything else that stunned her. Grady sat down on a black leather chair opposite, while Bryn and Kai ranged either side of her on the sofa.

"We have you to thank," Grady rumbled. "You've flushed out a nest of PHR members. A cell." He leaned back and reached for a teapot resting on a side table. He poured four cups and offered milk. They took milk.

By the time she held her cup in her hand, Crys was over the worst of the branding. It no longer hurt, in fact it hadn't hurt much to begin with, but the shock had taken her breath away. "I didn't know these things existed. These people. Until recently I thought Geoff had a harmless obsession with mermaids." She swallowed. "But it wasn't that harmless, was it?"

"Not harmless at all." Grady frowned. "I've chased the PHR for years and I'm no nearer understanding why they do it."

"Jealousy, perhaps, maybe some kind of sense of injustice." She couldn't think why, either, but they came closest to sentiments she'd seen in Geoff.

"The truth is, they don't do it for one reason only, but for many." Grady leaned back and finished his tea in one gulp. He reached for the pot again. It was a large pot, and Crys was beginning to see why. "It's not my job to philosophize, and it's too late for most of them, anyway." He paused to add milk to his tea. "I need to break up the cell and render it harmless. Whatever it takes."

A chill spread over her whole body. "Terminate with extreme prejudice?"

"If necessary." Grady cocked an eyebrow at her. "That bother you?"

"Yes, it does."

Grady regarded her solemnly. "Don't let it. Really. If they catch a Talent, or anyone they even suspect of being one, they kill without compunction. That's why we're here, in this building, working under the auspices of the British Government. It's why there's a similar Department in New York, working in the CIA, one in Paris, another in Rome. The PHR is a terrorist organization. The members even organize themselves that way." He poured another cup, grunting with disappointment when the tea gave out.

"The Government did consider moving us to the new organized crime unit, or the anti-terrorist unit, when they set them up, but we're settled here, and besides, we do more than that. We help in ordinary operations, for one thing." He frowned, a thundercloud forming over his gleaming eyes. "It's a war, and don't let anyone tell you any different. The PHR started on the offensive, they attacked us, but for years we were reactive, responding to threats and preventing the spread of the organizations. We can't do that any more. Too many Talents have died for us to do that. It's clear we have to stop them now before they stop us." He sighed, and put his empty cup down on the glass-topped table between them.

"We never asked for this," Kai said, sorrow deepening his voice.

"Sometimes it comes to you. They've given us no choice. Especially this time." He

regarded her, seemingly looking right through her soul. "You don't have to do any more, Crys. You've done enough already. Bryn and Kai will make sure you come to no harm, and I'll contact you when the job is done."

"No. I can't walk away from this. I need to know why, and I need to make sure nobody else suffers as I did. I'll do whatever you say, and I'll obey orders, if that's what it takes."

Grady leaned back, not taking his eyes from her. "What can you do?"

"I know Geoff. We used to work together, so I know the office. I can get us into his flat, because it's my flat, too."

"Can you look after yourself?"

"I know a little karate."

"Can you fire a gun?"

"I did, once, but that's all."

"Thank you." He cocked his head on one side. "Honesty. I like that. You didn't exaggerate what you could do. Now I'll tell you something. Your mental barrier is weak enough to get through. If you wish, I can show you how to control it, to use your telepathy."

Crys gasped. "I'm telepathic?"

He nodded. "I'm sure Bryn and Kai have been in contact with you. Get them to help you, practice with you." He glanced to where the two men sat on either side of her. "It shouldn't be a hardship." For the first time he smiled, and it was a revelation. His face changed to one of sheer delight, the forbidding aspect temporarily dispelled.

Bryn took her hand warmly in his. "No hardship at all. Yes, we read her. More than the scanning when we took her home, to make sure there was no corruption in her."

"Glad to hear it. She could have been a PHR spy, and you took her right into your house."

Into their bed. Nobody said it, but they didn't have to. Crys felt the heat rise under her skin, but nobody commented on it. Bryn squeezed her hand. "We were sure before we scanned her, but we had to be absolutely certain. So we scanned her while she was under. Yes, her barrier is weak. We could help her to fulfill that part of her potential, if she wants us to."

Grady gave a brief nod of acknowledgement. "The weakest point is near her logic center. Start there."

"She can receive passive telepathy," Kai pointed out.

Grady inclined his head to Kai. "Yes she can. You can use that for now."

"Willingly."

Crys turned to Kai, a query in her eyes, and he smiled at her. "We can speak to you telepathically and you can reply if we hold the channel open for you."

*Like this.*

With a small exclamation of surprise, she turned to Bryn. "You did that!"

*Yes I did. Now answer me the same way.* Like ventriloquism, but for real, Bryn's mouth didn't move and his throat was completely still.

*I don't know if I can.* Clapping her hands to her mouth, Crys laughed in delight. "How wonderful!"

Bryn squeezed her hand. "It's something we need to learn. You can't speak underwater, so our ancestors must have developed this for their own survival. Other shapeshifters have it for the same reason."

"Other shapeshifters?"

She swung around, regarding Grady with a speculative eye. "Are you —"

Grady chuckled when the other two men drew in a sharp breath. "I have Talents, but like Cristos in New York, I don't say what precisely I am. Most will introduce themselves and include their Talent. I understand there's been a lot of speculation about us, but we prefer not to reveal exactly what we are. In any case, what would they run a book on if they knew exactly where we fitted in?"

His quip broke the ice nicely, and they smiled. Bryn chuckled. "How did you know about the book?"

"Oh we're all-knowing, all-seeing." Grady said it with a smile, but Crys wasn't sure any more if that wasn't the plain truth. She guessed that was why Grady said it. And probably why the Department heads chose not to reveal their Talents.

How easy it was to slip into the terminology, into the way of life! "I can't understand why I never spotted it before, that there were other people living among us."

Bryn laughed this time. "Because we've had centuries of practice. We live among mortals, with them, and we always have. People see what they expect to see, so they look into the sky and instead of a dragon, they see an eagle."

Her jaw dropped. "There are dragons?"

"Why are you so surprised?" Bryn smiled at her, but it was reassuring, not derisory. "You know we're mermen, why be surprised at dragons?"

"Oh but — but — dragons!" she finished with a delighted laugh. "Can we see them?"

"I'll introduce you to one. One day."

Her face fell. She had no intention of imposing longer than she had to on Bryn and Kai. She'd always known them as a couple, and she was determined not to be the instrument of their breaking up. The minute she saw that, she would leave and she wouldn't look back.

Bryn's hand tightened around hers. "You're not going anywhere for a while, Crys. Make your mind up about that."

Wow. She wasn't sure how to take that. Did they want her or was it necessary for the operation that they kept her handy?

Either way, she would have to make her own life sooner or later, and she'd better make her mind up to it. For now, this was crisis time, a big change, and she'd take things as they came.

"I really appreciate you guys taking care of me. I'd be dead if it weren't for you."

*I don't want your gratitude!* The voice came deep, deep in her mind and she knew the words were for her alone. Bryn sounded angrier than she'd ever seen him.

*What do you want?*

He didn't answer. Either she was doing it wrong, or he hadn't heard her. The tension in the room increased a notch.

Then she heard it, a voice deep, deep inside. *Your love.*

## Chapter Six

Why had he said that? She was skittish, had too much to cope with. Now he'd admitted to her and to himself that what he wanted was her, just Crys, for now and always. The feeling had grown over the last year, and coalesced just this morning, when he'd loved her in the shower.

Now he'd probably lose her for good.

"I'll post someone outside Crys's flat when you go in, to act as point," Grady was saying. Christ, he should be listening, not mooning about his own problems. "I don't think you'll have much trouble. You're just going in to collect her things, aren't you?"

"Sure." At least Kai was listening.

"And the computers."

Crys recovered from her reverie. "We only have one computer. He might object."

Grady shrugged. "Pay him for it. Buy him another one. I want that hard drive."

"No problem." As it happened, Bryn had a fair amount of cash on him. He'd bet Kai was similarly loaded. A new computer wouldn't be any problem. They could go down to Tottenham Court Road and get one that afternoon, if Geoff got awkward with them.

"The hard drive will contain the addresses and websites to lead us to the rest of the cell," he told Crys.

Her reply surprised him. "If he's guilty. If he really is part of this thing."

"You doubt it?"

"Bryn, I've only seen one thing, and I've felt others. I lived with Geoff for two years, and I never saw anything like you describe."

He wouldn't let her go, gripping her hand hard, then releasing it. When she winced, Bryn cursed his own strength and lack of consideration. "You're thinking of going back to him?"

She shook her head and relief flooded him. "No, it was over before all this happened. I was just going to do it, you know, the human way. The normal way."

"As far as Geoff is concerned, it will be the normal way. You're breaking up with him, and we're going back with you to help you move out."

"That's the best way to play it, then we can take the cell by surprise," Kai added. He put his cup down on the table, the last to finish his tea, and by his demeanor, the coolest person in the room, his blue eyes tranquil, and not a hair out of place from the neatly drawn back pony tail. "A dawn raid, perhaps?"

Grady shrugged, a massive movement of his great shoulders. "Probably."

"What will happen to them?" Her voice was quiet now, almost afraid. Bryn wanted to hold her tight and keep her safe.

He hated her to sound like that, but he owed her the truth. She wasn't a child, and she'd come so far already. "If we can, we'll capture them alive. That's our preference. We want to question them, see if they know any more cells, where their point of contact is. They work in small units, cells if you like, and only one member has any connection with the parent organization."

Grady grimaced. "It makes it hell on wheels to catch them all. They're a loose conglomerate of cells, rather than an organization with a single chief. In every cell there is what is called the daisy, two of them, one linking their cell to the next one in line, the other linking them to the previous one. They are the key. The PHR is especially active here, in



Britain, and in recent years they've caused a lot of damage."

"They've killed Talents." Kai, as grim as Bryn'd ever seen him, hard-eyed and angry. He didn't need their mind connection to know how furious he was. All Talents were angry, their normally peaceable natures roused to battle fury by the murders inflicted on them by the PHR. "I'd be happy to kill them all. If it wasn't for the information I'd say kill them on sight."

"Thus making us no better than they are," Grady pointed out. "We give them the chance. Wipe their minds of the knowledge of the PHR and set them free, keep an eye on them until we're sure they're of no further danger to us."

"They still bother other minority groups," Kai growled. "Are you saying that's not our problem, either?"

Grady sighed. "If we start to kill them wholesale, you think nobody will notice? True, we have to eliminate the worst offenders, the ones who will never be reformed, but the others, the foot soldiers, they can be reformed. For the most part."

"I still say kill them all, for what they've done." Kai leaned back, arms folded over his chest.

"Is there something you haven't told us, Kai?"

Kai sighed. "Nothing new. I've lost too many friends to these bastards to feel any compassion for them."

"Amen to that," Bryn murmured. He felt tired, and weary. Sick of conflict, of being singled out for one thing or another. Living the way he thought fit inevitably invited comment from people who thought they had the right, somehow, to dictate the way he lived.

Crys's hand once again covered his, a lifeline to kindness and love. He wanted her. No, he needed her. "Let's get on with it, then." He made to stand, then thought of something else he wanted to ask Grady. "Did you find anything in the office when you raided it?"

"Plenty," Grady said, grim-faced. "But no connections outside this cell. The company *is* the cell but I want more. I want the next cell in the deadly necklace, and so on until we've got them all. I'm picking up the members of this cell later tonight, when you've been to Geoff's flat and cleared that out. If we forewarn them by arresting Geoff immediately, there'll be no records for us to look at, they'll wipe the records clean. So get that done and get Crys out of there. I'll contact you if I need you, but for now, your first job is to take care of Crys, once you've extracted the hard drive. She's been used as bait once, I wouldn't put it past them to use her again. And now they know for sure what you are, even if they didn't see you when you shapeshifted."

Kai was the first to notice how downcast Crys had suddenly become. "What is it, baby? What's wrong?"

She swallowed and looked up, her lovely eyes a mask of misery. "No flat, no boyfriend, and now no job. Sorry. I'll recover, I'm sure."

"You'll do better than that." Bryn drew her closer. "You have two men now, not just one, and you can live at my house as long as you like."

"I'm sure I can find you something here," Grady put in, "if that's what you want. I'm recruiting, the increase in violence against Talents has seen to that. If you haven't got a criminal record, that is. You get one of those *after* you join MI6, not before."

Bryn saw hope replace misery and his heart soared. "It's a beginning of something better, not an end."

"Yes," she said. "I suppose so. But what can I do? I'm only an accountant, how

would I fit in a place like this?"

"Honey," drawled Grady, his voice pure sugar, "every organization needs accountants. But if you wanted to change direction, I could still find you something. Not everybody in this Department is a top-rank agent. We need more backup and support than you'd ever believe."

She blinked. Bryn watched her luscious lashes cover her cheekbones and sweep up again and wanted nothing more than to kiss each lid, then move on to the corners of her eyes, her mouth, and find out where it took them. "I could do that, I suppose."

Caught into his train of thought, Bryn nearly said something completely inappropriate and before he could cut the reflection, Kai picked up on it. He felt the touch in his mind and heard Kai's low chuckle. "Later," he murmured darkly.

"First the flat," Bryn said, all business now, or at least trying to be.

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They drove to Stratford in near silence, Kai taking the wheel this time and Bryn sitting in the back with Crys. She rested against his shoulder, taking the chance to build up her strength for the encounter to come. Geoff would be waiting, she just knew it.

Outside an ordinary looking tower block, she paused, her hand in Bryn's. Kai parked the car and joined them, going to her other side and reaching for her hand. "Let's get this over with," she muttered, and led them inside.

The block had been council owned, but had gone into private hands some time before, and now the lifts worked and didn't stink of piss and worse, and drug addicts didn't lie in all the halls and passageways.

Their flat was a perfectly ordinary one-bedroom apartment on the twelfth floor. Before the weekend, it had been her haven, the place she relaxed at the end of the day. Now it was just another place, somewhere she was about to leave for good.

For better or for worse, even. No, not that. At least, not with these two. She'd use Bryn's house for the shortest time possible, then move on. Whatever she felt for Bryn, Kai had been there first and the men were happy together. When she found somewhere to move to, she'd go, although she loved Bryn's Thames-side house. It was full of brightness and laughter, something she'd never felt in a house before. They'd done enough for her already, her two merman lovers. But she mustn't expect too much, however much she might dream of it.

They reached the eleventh floor with a slight judder from the elevator, and under his breath, Kai muttered, "I hate these things."

She gave him a sympathetic smile, and he smiled back before the steel doors slid open and they walked into the empty, sterile corridor with blue-painted front doors, all plain, all without character. The new owners of the block preferred it that way. All the character was on the inside. What there was of it.

Having lost everything in her night-time plunge into the Thames, she was forced to knock. "What if he's not in?" she whispered, kicking herself for not thinking of it before.

Bryn gave her a wicked grin. "No problem." He reached into his pocket and drew out some small metal instruments. From the TV spy programs, she recognized them as skeleton keys.

"So you can't...?" She made a flicking gesture with one hand, indicating magic and mayhem and some kind of psychic ability.

Bryn's grin broadened. "Maybe I can. But it might draw a bit too much attention to

us. Using these, the neighbors would think we're bailiffs or something."

There was no need for either the skeleton keys or Kai's help, because a sound came from behind the door that she recognized as the rattling of the door chain.

Geoff opened the door, the chain in place, peering at them blearily. His eyes widened when he saw her standing there. "What the—"

Before he could slam the door closed, Kai shoved his foot in the narrow space and Bryn stepped back, pulling her with him. With one swift kick, he broke the chain and the door slammed back on its hinges, pounding against the wall behind it. Geoff leaped away, but the door still caught him and knocked him off balance.

Kai stepped inside as if their entrance had been perfectly normal, seemingly at ease. "We've come to collect Crys's things. Then we'll be out of your way for good."

Geoff stared at them, his mouth working helplessly.

"Anyone else here?" Kai raised his voice. "Hello?" He turned back to Bryn and shook his head. "Nobody here but us chickens." With her heightened sensitivity, or the sensitivity she'd finally had confirmed as real, Crys recognized the slight tension in her mind that meant Kai had scanned the flat for any other occupant.

They went inside. Bearing in mind what Will Grady had asked them to do, she led the way into the living room. Long, filled with comfortable furniture, with a small dining area at one end, she'd once enjoyed relaxing here after work. She made for the CD rack, which happened to be next to the PC. "Take the tower, and we'll leave him with the screen and printer. That's a fair split." Kai nodded and bent to disconnect the wires.

Bryn walked up behind her and spoke quietly. "Take what you can't replace. Personal records, photos, inherited jewelry, that kind of thing. Leave everything else. We'll get new."

She bit back her acid retort, that she'd just invested in a new winter wardrobe and she wasn't about to leave that, and realized the sense of what he was saying. There were some things she would always regret losing if she didn't take them, and they didn't have much time. Geoff would probably call his friends, and it depended how far away they lived. While she collected up photographs, her finance file, and her personal file with passport, birth certificate and other documents, she kept an eye on the time and on the door.

When she'd collected the things she needed, she shoved them in one of the plastic storage crates she kept in the kitchen and pushed them at Bryn. "Can you take these out?" He nodded, and bent to kiss her cheek, a reassurance she needed as she went through to the bedroom she'd shared with Geoff.

Geoff followed her in, blocking her access to Bryn and Kai, but she trusted her lovers to find a way to her, if she needed it. His smile was more of a sneer. "Hiding behind gays now, are we?"

"They're not gay." That cut the smile right away from Geoff's face. "And they did more than you did to help me. How long have you been chasing them?"

Geoff leaned against the door jamb and folded his arms. "Since I took up with you, really. This flat was a bonus. The only reason I went out with you was I could afford this place, and you knew those two. You're not going to ask for your half of the money for the flat, are you?"

She was indignant at his arrogant assumption and didn't balk at showing it. "Too right I'm going to ask. My name's on the mortgage with yours. I'm entitled to my half, and I need it to get somewhere else."

"Well that's a pity. I know where they live, don't forget. There might be a team on

their way now to trash the place.”

When her fear rose, she felt Bryn within her mind, soothing her. *We thought of that. It's protected. No-one can get in.*

*Special protection?* The ease of communication astounded her, but she was careful not to let any of it show on her face.

*Very special.*

She left her mind open, so they could keep in touch.

Looking at Geoff, she found it hard to believe he could be involved in anything as sinister as the organization Will Grady had described to them this morning. There he stood, tall, handsome, carefully cut short, dark hair, friendly brown eyes, dressed in a blue t-shirt and casual trousers. She'd seen him in just such a pose before he came in the bedroom to make love to her, or before leaving for his Sunday morning football game with his friends from the pub around the corner. Pub league football didn't seem to go with hunting down and killing other beings. Did he really know, or was someone manipulating him?

The urge to discover more about the man she thought she knew, but it turned out didn't know at all, consumed her. “Did you join an organization to kill people?”

His eyes narrowed as he studied her closely. “What have those queers been telling you? All kinds of garbage, I imagine.” He smiled, that easy, seductive smile she knew well. “You shouldn't believe everything people tell you. Yes, I suppose you could call the PHR an organization. The Perfect Human Race. I'd rather call it a charity.”

“Charity?” She choked.

“Yes. We do fundraisers for it, that kind of thing. You know I do charity work.”

She did, but no more than most people. He'd done sponsored walks, swims, that kind of thing. Was that all for the PHR? It must have been. All those activities she'd thought sweet in him, has all been for that subversive, sinister organization. “Is it a registered charity?” That would give the PHR certain privileges under law, tax benefits, the right to solicit for money.

He shrugged. “I never checked, but I think it is, yes. Otherwise I wouldn't be fundraising, would I?”

“Do you do anything else for them?”

He cast a derisory glance back at Bryn, waiting for her in the other room. Kai had disappeared, presumably to stow her box in the car. She turned back to her task, gathering a handful of underwear and tossing it into a sports bag, then finding her jewelry box. She had some family jewelry she'd hate to lose. Forcing her mind to remember where her treasures were, the things she would hate to lose, she moved around the bedroom, gathering items, talking to Geoff.

“What do you do for the PHR? And why do you do it, Geoff?”

“Everybody's got to have a hobby,” he said lightly, as, so often before, he'd diverted some of her questions. “Yes, I do stuff.” She mustn't alert him to the forthcoming raid on their work colleagues, or that they knew about the company they both worked for. An ordinary seeming small accountancy agency. That it could be a cover for murder!

Geoff stepped into the room, keeping his big body between her and Bryn. “You know this is wrong, Crys. You shouldn't join these people. It's a sin, it's obscene.” She thought of the beautiful men who'd cared for her, shared their bed with her, and couldn't see anything obscene in it. “Crys, we were getting married. On our wedding day, I wanted to tell you about it all. A kind of present. My parents knew what was what. When I was a boy, they showed me things, pictures, enough proof to make me believe. It's real, Crys.

These people are wrong, evil. They're not like us. Don't go away with them. Please don't." He held out one hand to her, but she didn't move to take it, preferring to continue to fill the bag. "Crys, you know how I feel about you. I've told you often enough. It's for your own good. Stay with me. Don't go with these abominations."

*Abominations.* It sounded like something out of the Bible. How could he think that way? "Geoff, you're wrong. Kai and Bryn just looked after me, and cared for me. They're good people. Whatever they are—"

"You admit it then!" His face took on a triumphant look, one too close to fanaticism to make Crys anything but uncomfortable. "You know they're different!"

"They're—they're adventurous, certainly. Aren't we all different, in some way?"

He turned, and looked from Bryn, standing silently in the living room, back to her again. Then he addressed Bryn. "You fucked her? You bastard, you're gay!"

"Bi, actually," came Kai's cool voice. He must be standing close to the door leading to the small hallway, where she couldn't see him. "We're bisexual, Geoff. You have any problem with that?"

"You've defiled my woman?" Geoff had lost any pretension to affability, but stood his ground. "You won't have her for long, you bastards. You can piss off now. You've upset her enough."

"They haven't upset me at all, Geoff. You have. You drugged me in that SUV on Saturday night, didn't you? You tried to kill me."

His outraged innocence would have fooled her, if she didn't know better. He'd been there, held her while he and his friends forced her to drink the drugged vodka. For all she knew, he'd helped truss her up, ready for death. "How can you pretend you care for me, when you did that?"

"Did what?" He sounded irritable. "What are you saying?"

"That you drugged me, tied me up, put me in a sack and dropped me in the Thames."

He laughed. "How do you work that out? You passed out because you were drunk, and you imagined the rest."

"So how did I end up with Bryn and Kai? They weren't drunk, and they got wet rescuing me."

Triumph tinged his features again, but he was letting more out than they were. "They rescued you? And how did they do that?"

He wasn't denying throwing her in the Thames, then. Her heart sank. He knew. He might well have thrown her in himself. Until that moment, she'd harbored a hope that he'd helped drug her, but had no hand in what happened afterwards. That hope died for good now. "They dived in and got cold and wet. Untied me and brought me up to the surface." A mile upriver.

"You owe us a set of clothes each," Bryn said grimly to Geoff. "They got ruined."

"And how do two queers manage to dive to the bottom of the Thames and untie a bloody sack?" Geoff sneered.

"You subscribe to the 'all fairies are feeble' theory?" It seemed Bryn could sneer, too. "We're both good swimmers, and Kai carries a pocketknife with him. Answer your question?"

"So how did you get out of the net? A pocketknife wouldn't have done that!"

Silence. Geoff had not only admitted he knew she'd been thrown into the river, he had knowledge of the net. Geoff spread his hands in a gesture of pacification. "We didn't want to hurt you, Crys. I sealed your mouth so you wouldn't take in that foul water and

we were hauling you up. I was desperate when that net came up empty.” He turned a vicious look on to Bryn, who stood closest to him. “I thought you’d killed her. My woman.”

Crys opened her mouth to answer him with a furious tirade, but she never got to tell him what was on her mind.

“We need to leave,” Bryn said suddenly. “Now. Take what you have Crys, and get moving.”

Someone or something was coming. Geoff had been expecting them, and he’d called his friends. Fear clutched at her, and she grabbed the bag, as Bryn had told her, making to leave the room.

Geoff stood in front of her, blocking her exit. “You’re not going anywhere, girly. You and your queer friends. You deserve everything coming to you after —” Whatever he was going to say was jerked out of him as strong hands closed around his shoulders and jerked him out of the way.

Geoff spun around and grabbed Kai, forcing him into the room, away from the door.

Bryn was there already. “Come here, baby,” he said quietly, his voice carrying over Geoff’s angry yells and insults. “I’ll get you out of here. Kai can take care of this.”

“They’ll take him, they’ll take him!”

“Come here.” His voice was harder now, commanding.

She went, crossing behind the struggling bodies of Geoff and Kai. Why didn’t Kai just knock Geoff aside? She knew they were stronger in their other forms, maybe in their human forms too, for all she knew.

Then she realized what he was doing. Kai was keeping Geoff busy, blocking his punches, offering none of his own, but taunting him. “That the best you can do, straight boy? Take your best shot, come on!”

Bryn grabbed her arm and pushed her towards the front door. She lost no time in following him. Once outside, he took the bag from her. “We can’t risk the lift. We’ll have to take the stairs.”

Eleven stories, each a double flight. “They’re sending reinforcements over. They might take the stairs, too.”

“Some of them will, for sure. I’ll take care of you.” In the middle of the empty corridor, danger rushing upon them, Bryn dropped the bag and stopped to take her shoulders, staring down into her eyes. “I’ll always take care of you, if you’ll let me. Do you trust me, Crys?”

She nodded, sure she could trust him with everything she had. “With my life, Bryn”

He grinned, a swift, feral baring of his teeth. “I’ll hold you to that.” Picking up the bag with one hand, and taking her hand with the other, he headed for the stairs.

Half way down they met someone Crys knew. Two someones. Tim and Harry from the office, but not dressed in their usual bland suits. They were dressed for fighting, tight, dark outfits and carrying guns, scary dull, black weapons. Crys had only seen guns in the movies before this. Tim motioned at Bryn with his gun. “Okay fish boy, fun and games are over. We’re taking you in.”

“You think?” Bryn pushed her behind him, and she lost her balance, falling on the stair behind her to sit awkwardly. When she tried to get to her feet, Bryn pressed her back down. “Wait. These jokers deserve a lesson.”

“Yeah? Looks as if you’re the one backed into a corner.” Harry jerked his gun up, aiming it at Bryn’s chest. “Come on, show us your fins.”

“I’ll show you more than that.” Without any kind of warning from his body

language, Bryn leaped into the air and went for the nearest man, who happened to be Harry. His feet collided with Harry's chest, and Harry went down with a soft grunt, his body collapsing under the blow.

Immediately Bryn was on Tim, knocking the gun out of his hand with a forward swipe and swinging backhanded at his face with the backstroke. Tim stumbled, but recovered to take a hard punch at Bryn.

Who was no longer there, but had leaped to one side, so when Tim swung, Bryn kicked again, a short, sharp blow to the testicles.

Tim howled in pain and Bryn gave that mirthless chuckle again. "Stay there, boys, and think of all your mistakes." He glanced at Crys. "Cover your ears, sweetheart."

Numb, she did as he told her, but caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. Before Harry could get to his gun again, she surged to her feet and stamped on his wrist, adding a particularly vicious twist with her heel at the end. The long hours of balance training at karate came in useful, and she didn't even stumble as she stood upright.

"*Now* cover your ears," Bryn said. She did as he told her.

Bryn opened his mouth and a piercing sound emerged, sharp and pure, gone almost as soon she registered it. The men slumped unconscious.

Cautiously, she moved her hands away. Bryn went to where he'd dropped her bag, picked it up and held out his own hand to her. "We'd best be on our way or Kai will beat us to it."

She stared at the two inert figures. "Why didn't you do that immediately?"

"What, sing? Because they'd hurt you and deceived you and I thought a little payback was in order. They wouldn't have used those things. They weren't even holding them properly. I'd guess the safety catches were still on." He bent and examined one of the guns, before standing up again, his face drained of color. "My mistake. Glocks. No safety catch." He picked up one of the guns and pocketed it. "I've never been fond of Glocks but it might come in useful. Let's go."

She didn't argue, but took his proffered hand. They completed the descent in silence, listening for more attackers, on guard when they turned every bend of the stairs.

At least Bryn's car was still there. So was Kai, leaning against the passenger door.

"Let me guess," said Bryn. "You took the lift."

"Yeah." Kai turned and opened the door for Crys. "Was that you singing?"

"You call that singing?" Crys demanded, regaining some of her spirit.

Kai grinned at her. "We can do better than that. When we get home, perhaps we'll show you."

## Chapter Seven

As Bryn had promised, his home was untouched, but Crys was still nervous about staying there. "They probably know where you live. Don't you think we should stay somewhere else?"

Bryn snorted. "This is one of the best protected residences in London. Believe me, sweetheart, it would take more than a sneaky journalist posing as a meter reader to get in here."

"He's right." Kai waited for Crys to enter before following her. "Top of the range burglar and intruder alarms. I installed them myself. And psychic barriers. Anyone trying to enter without permission will be seized by an unreasonable terror, frozen into immobility. They might know where we live, but they don't know what an arsenal we have. And in any case, we can draw them out. We are being watched, Crys. There are webcams in most rooms, usually inactive, but they're switched on and connected to the Department." He grinned briefly. "Not in the bedroom or bathroom, though. If I don't mistake Will Grady, he's set a team to watch this house, just in case more than one group targets us. We're proactive now. That means we're not waiting for them to attack us first."

"I don't like this."

"Nor do I," said Bryn from behind her. He folded her in his arms. "I'm thinking of taking you away somewhere, out of danger."

"I only feel safe with you guys around."

Kai looked over her head to where Bryn stood. "I guess we're stuck with each other for a while, then. Whatever will we find to do with the time?"

Bryn cracked a laugh. "Well I'm starving. We'll eat, and I'll call an order in, then we won't have to wait. We can pick it up on our way." He fumbled in his pocket. "Damn, I've left my mobile phone at home again."

Kai dismissed it with a wave. "You're always doing that. One day you'll be sorry. No matter, we'll pick up some food on the way."

Bryn gave a wicked grin. "Then I think we should show Crys our little surprise."

Kai quirked an eyebrow.

"The surprise in the basement." Bryn bent to kiss the side of her neck. "Don't worry, baby, it's a nice surprise."

"A very nice surprise," Kai agreed, grinning, too.

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Crys wanted nothing more than to go to bed and sleep this horrible day away, but she hadn't eaten much, and hunger pangs were keeping her awake. She thought of telling Bryn and Kai that she'd see their surprise another day, especially since there didn't seem to be any work to go to on Monday morning.

They picked up a pizza on the way home, and ate it in the kitchen when they got there, downing it with cola.

Crys grabbed a paper napkin and wiped the grease off her hands. "Well that was just what I needed. Fast and sinful." She picked up her cola bottle and drained it. When she put it down, both men were watching her, glints in their eyes. "What?"

"I like a woman with a good appetite." Kai picked up the messy carton, now empty,



and crushed it ready for the waste bin. Bryn busied himself with the empty plastic bottles, putting them in the blue recycling bin.

When she went to the sink to rinse her hands, she found Bryn drying his. He waited and handed her the towel. "Ready for the surprise?"

"Actually, I'm rather tired. Drained."

Kai caught her around the waist from behind. "Let us do everything. Come and see. Decide then if you want to go straight to bed."

Curiosity got the better of her and she followed Bryn down a set of stairs behind a door in the hallway, a door she'd assumed led to a storage cupboard. No fear assailed her. She trusted these men with her life. They'd proved steadfast friends, passionate lovers and they'd showed her their minds and hearts without compunction. She had to trust them, or doubt herself at a fundamental level.

Bryn flicked on a switch at the bottom of the stairs and she walked into another world.

Tall, square glass pillars stretched floor to ceiling in front of her, filled with twisted bark, sculpted by the sea. Small fish darted around the structure, flashes of color living their own lives in their own world. When she could take her eyes off the fascinating display, she stared around in wonder.

Blue marbled walls echoed the reflection of clear, pure, water, from a large structure sunk into the floor. She turned to Kai in delight. "You have a swimming pool!"

He caught both her hands in his, laughing with her. "It's Bryn's. This house has belonged to his family for a long time. Here we can be ourselves, without worrying about onlookers or pollution or anything like that. Are you ready to see us in our other forms?"

Now or never. She nodded. Her old fascination with merpeople swept to the forefront of her mind, and she felt like a child again, all cares gone. Kai lifted her into his arms and took her to the pool. He sat her on a bench at the side and bent to remove her shoes and hosiery, his touch deft but not lingering. Then he lifted her again and sat her at the side of the pool, her feet dangling in the water. "Watch."

He walked back to touch the large columns, smiling as the little fish gathered around his fingers. "Welcome, cousins," he said gently, reaching up to undo the tie behind his head. His hair fell around him, straight white-blond, gleaming in the soft light of the underground paradise. He stripped, swiftly and efficiently, and Crys enjoyed the show.

Kai seemed lighter somehow, as though shaking off a burden he bore with difficulty. Then she realized what it must be. Kai was in his element, literally. Water, fish, the twisted branches inside the columns, this was where he felt most at home. "Why don't you live in the sea?" she asked, impulsively.

When he turned, his face grave, she wished she hadn't asked. Blue, blue eyes met hers with all the sadness he'd shucked off a moment before. "Because the sea is dying. Along with other habitats, man is destroying our home. We need to do something about it, before it's too late. So I became an environmental architect. I design buildings in harmony with nature, not ones that fight with it. I want to show humankind it doesn't need to destroy in order to live. Nor does it have to live in the past, rely on old technologies. They were worse than the ones we have now, sometimes, just that there were fewer people around to do it. We have to develop ways of living that don't harm the beings we share the earth with."

She nodded, tears in her eyes. Kai had never been so sincere, never as honest as at that moment. That was the heart of him, and in that moment she knew she loved him. Not as she loved Bryn, as a woman loves her other half, but as a brother, a beautiful soul.

And Kai knew it. So did Bryn. Their minds were linked now. She turned her head to see Bryn, naked, standing on the other side of the pool. The water's reflection glimmered on the strong muscles of his bare chest. She let him see her heart, open for him, hoping he'd accept. He said nothing, didn't communicate with her in any way. Only lifted his arms and performed a perfect swan dive into the pool.

A flash of greeny blue, and then a ripple, as the lower half of his body transformed, and when he hit the water, he was a merman. Crys caught her breath. He was so beautiful. Then Kai ran past her and leapt, and he twisted, flicking his tail at her playfully before he landed with a terrific splash.

They dove and came to the surface once more, then dove again, the great tail fins curling in the air before disappearing into the water.

Bryn's tail was more green than blue, shimmering with reflected light and scales, while Kai's was a pure blue, gleaming with health and beauty.

The men came up laughing, seemingly forgetting her presence, but Crys knew better. They were seated firmly in her mind, sensing for any fear or doubt in her, relieved when they found none. They did a few lengths of the pool in easy, powerful strokes, then played.

Showed off, Crys thought after ten minutes. She loved watching their acrobatics. Bryn would lie on his back, and Kai leap clear over him like a dolphin, diving under his body and over again. Then Bryn twisted down and into the water. This pool must be considerably deeper than most domestic pools, for he disappeared completely until Crys began to feel alarmed. As soon as she did, he emerged, bursting out of the water, showering her with sparkles of water. "Hey, I didn't mean to startle you. Haven't you ever heard of gills?"

"Gills?" She frowned. "You have gills? Where?"

Bryn laughed. "Join us and I'll show you."

She didn't need another invitation. Standing up, she quickly shed her clothing, inwardly marveling how unselfconscious she felt before these two handsome men, staring at her in obvious admiration. She stopped at the side of the pool to preen and pose, gaining low growls of appreciation, then laughed and gazed down at them. "I'm safe while you're in this form, aren't I?" She stared pointedly down at their hips, where man became fish. "You can't do much without cocks."

With a slow smile, Bryn's hands went to his waist, then lower, pushing at the scales around his waist. To her shock, they slid down, just enough to let his now erect cock spring free. "It's a kind of foreskin," he said. "A pouch to protect our most delicate parts against the rigors of the sea. Can you imagine brushing up against a coral reef?" She winced. "Exactly. Now come here, woman, and I'll show you more than my gills."

She jumped, not daring to dive in case she lost her footing. They caught her, two pairs of hands, underwater, one at her waist, the other catching her hands in his, drawing her upwards, until she emerged, gasping, between their bodies.

Bryn kissed her, taking his time, parting her lips with his tongue and diving into her mouth. She returned it, feeling his strong body against hers, his cock now pushing against her belly in a way she'd come to know well recently, but below that, everything was new. His scales felt silky, only when she lifted her leg against him, wanting to feel the scales against her skin, did they roughen. Not enough to hurt, but enough to stimulate.

Kai stroked her skin, letting his tail drift against her legs. She felt his kisses on her shoulders. When Bryn drew away, he didn't let go of her, but looked at her, just looked and she saw everything in his eyes that she knew was reflected in her own. Love.

"I was so worried you'd be afraid," he murmured. "I wouldn't blame you. But you're not, are you?"

She shook her head, mildly surprised she wasn't. "It seems right. I can't really explain. But I always loved stories of the sea and sea people, so perhaps I was more receptive to the idea. Now show me your gills."

Bryn laughed and bent his head, lifting one hand away from her to bend his ear forward. Behind, in the crease, was what looked like an open, crescent-shaped cut, but as she watched, it opened and closed gently, revealing soft flesh inside. "That's how I breathe underwater. In my human form, these are closed. They look like small scars, but they open when I shapeshift."

"Are there any other changes?"

"In this form, I'm cold blooded." He held her closer and she felt him, as cold as the water she swam in.

"Yes, I thought it was a bit cold in here."

Concern swept his face. "I'll turn up the temperature when you want to swim. Since we don't feel it, it seems a waste for us." He made a face at Kai. "And my friend here says it's more ecologically sound to save the energy we'd use to heat the pool."

"Absolutely." Kai floated away, lying on his back. "But we have to keep you warm, don't we? Come here, baby."

After a glance at Bryn, who smiled encouragingly, Crys swam towards Kai. When she got close enough, he grabbed her waist and lifted her clear out of the water. Crys gasped. "You're stronger as mermen, too."

"We're stronger most of the time. We can partially shift to take advantage of that." Gently, demonstrating the sheer control of his power, Kai brought her down to straddle his waist in a deliciously lascivious pose. "Now how do you feel about sex with a merman?"

"It's something I wanted all my life." She blushed, feeling the heat warm her chilled skin. "When I was little, I dreamed about pretty mermaids frolicking at sea. When I grew up, I dreamed about virile mermen, taking me in their arms to their kingdoms under the sea." She cocked her head, smiling. "Have you got kingdoms under the sea?"

"Underwater cities, that kind of thing? No. But we have hideaways, caverns, that kind of thing. Sorry, but not all your childhood fantasies can come true."

Under that deceptive pouch at the front of his body, Crys felt his cock harden. Greatly daring, she pushed her hands down his body, as she'd seen Bryn do, and freed him from the confining pouch. It was skin inside, pink human skin. Wonderingly, she slid her hands around, underneath his balls, exploring the new sensation of a merman's cock. It felt very much like Kai's, but the surrounding skin was different.

Her explorations were cut short by Kai's groan. "Crys, I want you."

Baldly put, his words sent her libido soaring. She lifted up, let his cock slide down her cleft, over her clit, sending a brief shudder through her.

She took him in, gasping as the chill hit her warm interior, but it seemed to warm up faster than she could register, and soon felt hotter than she did. She planted her hands on Kai's chest and stared into his deep blue eyes. "This is incredible."

His slow smile warmed her even more than his cock was doing. "I have no trouble believing it." He glanced aside, to where Bryn was floating alongside him, lying on his side as if he was on a comfortable sofa. The men exchanged a smile, then Bryn drew closer and kissed Kai.

They took their time, open mouthed, exploring each other, tongues gently caressing and all the while, Crys moved gently on Kai, watching, feeling her body drench with the

erotic sight. Bryn touched Kai's chest, tweaked his nipple rings and Kai flinched, his delight suffusing them all.

Bryn drew away, smiling at Kai, who smiled back, sharing a communication she wasn't party to, before turning his attention to Crys. "We want to take you under. We'll breathe for you, keep in touch with your mind, so we'll know even before you do if you're in trouble. We want to show you what it's really like to make love as a sea creature."

She swallowed. Could she do it? Of course she could, if the lovers were Bryn and Kai. She trusted them with her life. Hell, she'd already done that.

"Yes."

Kai gripped her waist to keep her in place and plunged under the surface of the water. Bryn followed, and swam close, so when Crys opened her eyes, he was waiting for her, gazing at her. He drew closer and kissed her.

*I'll breathe for both of us, sweetheart. Open your body to us. One breath for me, another for you. That's how I got you here, but now let me show you. For our pleasure. For our joy.*

At first she couldn't understand, but when Bryn breathed pure air into her mouth, she got it.

Kai plunged into her, holding her steady, while Bryn breathed for her, his mouth clamped to hers in a kiss more erotic than any she'd ever known. She let them take her, so after the first few thrusts they didn't stay in the same place, but used the whole pool for their pleasure. Kai drove hard, and when she gasped in response Bryn was there, filling her mouth with air, caressing her lips with his. He brought his hands to her breasts, tweaking and pinching, stimulating all her senses until she felt the familiar thrill in her body, her orgasm coming to fruition.

It was like loving as birds, swooping and diving, the dive towards the surface a plunge into her body, the drop into the pool the retreat, surging and ebbing, each surge bringing her closer, closer still.

Their minds firmly locked with hers, and with each other's, they knew when she was about to scream and Kai's last drive brought her head out of the water.

Bryn tore his mouth away from hers, and she screamed, letting the ebb and flow of her body take her to heights she'd only dreamed of before. She clutched at Bryn, and felt Kai slide away from her, still erect, but she had only a moment to think about that before Bryn took Kai's place, pushing hard into her, taking over where Kai had left off. She bucked, and they took her down again, this time Kai breathing for her.

Kai tasted different. She'd never really noticed that before. His mouth was a little harder than Bryn's and he tasted of salt and something tangy, not as sweet as Bryn, but just as pleasant. Kai breathed as Bryn loved her and they kept moving, swirling around the pool, the water flowing past them deliciously.

She didn't realize they were heading for the surface until her head broke free, and Kai drew away, smiling at her. "Breathe for yourself for a while, precious," he murmured, and dove underneath the water, his tail finishing the elegant move with a saucy flick, showering her with droplets.

Under the water she felt two pairs of hands supporting her, one either side of her waist at the front, that was Bryn, and another at her back. Kai smoothed down her spine, following with his lips, kissing every bump, until he reached the hollow at the bottom, where he lingered, his hands now on her thighs.

Bryn returned to her, guiding his erect cock to the entrance of her body, and, his gaze locked with hers, slid inside as if he belonged there. He drove in deep, and withdrew almost to her entrance before pushing inside again.

Then, with Bryn plunging into her body in hard, driving thrusts, under the water Kai opened her legs wider and pushed his head between them from behind. He twisted on to his back, his tail breaking the surface with a light splash, and he feasted.

His tongue caressed her, touched where she and Bryn joined, then moved and she felt, through Bryn's mind, that Kai was sucking and caressing his balls. When he returned, it was with tongue and fingers, and even hair, caressing her in fronds of soft sensation.

He pushed the tip of his finger into her back passage, gently rotating and caressing, not penetrating, but stimulating the sensitive skin to prickles of delicious awareness.

Bryn tilted back, pushing her in the other direction, gripping her legs to steady her and then her hands, pulling her close so their joining was secure. Their bodies were just under the surface, then Bryn drifted further down, so her head was above the water. She watched Kai swim around, over them and then dive down between, aiming at their joining.

He sucked her clitoris into his mouth in one smooth motion, and returned to caressing her behind, touching and stimulating in exquisite ripples of sensation. His other hand cupped Bryn's balls, squeezing gently, and Crys lost her mind.

She cried out, over and over again, Bryn's hands around her thighs, dragging her to him, while Kai lay over them, sucking, caressing and kissing. She could hardly move, paralyzed by her two lovers, each delivering a level of sensuality she'd been unaware existed before.

The sensations grew together into a peak of feeling. She wasn't sure she could bear it, so high, so hard, so relentlessly did they push her.

Then Bryn exploded, hard and fast, and took her with him. When Kai withdrew, Bryn surged up out of the pool and dragged her into his arms, meeting her mouth to mouth above the water, for a deep, passionate kiss.

His tongue plunged into her mouth, his mind into the secret place only shared by the two of them. *Oh how I love you!*

She replied without reflection. *I love you too, Bryn, so much!*

They broke apart, and stared deeply into each other's eyes. The shock that came with the realization froze them for a brief, fraught moment. Then Crys turned around and headed for the edge of the pool, trembling in her reaction to the loving and the declaration.

This wasn't the love she felt for Bryn and Kai, this was single minded, full-blown romantic love. In love with Bryn, loving Kai, she knew the difference, so clear to her and immutably set. She pulled herself out of the water, turning to find something warm.

A rack in the corner held large, soft towels and when she reached them, she found they were heated. Only then did she realize her shivers were from more than the passionate loving. She was chilled. She wrapped herself in a large towel, taking another, smaller one to rub her hair with and went back to the pool.

She intended to kiss Kai, thank him in some way, feeling guilty she hadn't thought of him before now, but that brief, fraught exchange with Bryn had rocked her world.

When she saw the mermen, playing together in the pool, her heart plummeted. Kai and Bryn laughed, swimming around each other in a dazzling display of theatrics and as she watched, Kai drew Bryn close, kissing down his chest, and returning to his mouth.

It was beautiful to watch, this erotic ballet. Crys sat on a bench and watched, knowing they had temporarily forgotten her.

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Kai kissed Bryn, used his fingers to bring Bryn's cock out once more, and smoothed

it back to attention.

*Kai, I have to tell you something.*

*No you don't. I saw for myself. You love her.*

*So do you.*

Kai smiled wryly. *Not the way you do. I love her as a friend and lover. You're in love with her, Bryn. You want her for your own.*

*No!*

Kai lifted his hand and stroked Bryn's short, wet curls, gazing at him tenderly. *Yes you do. Bryn, I can't love like that. I don't think I have it in me. Take her, my friend, my lover. Say goodbye to me here, and take her.*

Guilt arced through Bryn in an aching pang. *What will you do?*

*Move on, as I always have. There's no need for any traumatic scenes. I'll give you some space to see what you have, that's all. I'll come back and see you both. We knew this would happen, lover. Didn't we?*

Bryn bit his lip. *Yes, but not his soon. I don't want you to go.*

Kai touched his lips to Bryn's, reaching down to free his own cock. *I want to. When Grady gives us the all clear, I'll give you some space. I'll be back, Bryn, never doubt it, but you and Crys need some time to yourselves. Take her, love her.*

Tears misted Bryn's eyes. *It's been good, hasn't it?*

*The best.* Before Bryn could get too maudlin, Kai swooped underwater and took Bryn's cock into his mouth, making him groan loudly. But no, he wanted to love Kai, show him just how much he meant to him. Kai was right, Bryn had fallen deeply in love with Crys and they probably did need time to explore each other, but the thought of Kai leaving filled him with sorrow.

He pulled away, reaching for Kai under the water, and sank down below the surface, bringing Kai's mouth to his for a deep, passionate kiss. They gently withdrew from Crys's mind. This was their time, perhaps the last they would have.

They emerged gently, quietly, breaking the water with scarcely a ripple, exploring each other's mouths, tonguing deep. Kai reached down and adjusted them, bringing their cocks into alignment. Bryn began the gentle up and down that would stimulate them both and bring them to fulfillment. He wanted them touching, from head right down to tail fin, exploring for their last time purely as a couple. From now on, Crys was part of him.

Kai chuckled, murmuring to him. "You always did have the most perfect body, Bryn. So strong, each muscle honed to absolute perfection. That's what turns me on, lover, perfection. And you are it." He gasped as their friction had an effect, and pressed closer, joining in the sinuous movements.

Bryn cried out, once, and his hot seed jetted up between them. He reached around to grip Kai's waist, stay with him until Kai had found fulfillment.

It didn't take long. With a great cry, Kai came mightily, and pushed away, floating on his back, dreamily staring up at the blue ceiling above them. He lifted his head. "Thanks. That will keep me going for quite some time." He righted himself, staring past Bryn's shoulder. "She's gone, Bryn, probably upstairs. Go to her."

Bryn glanced behind him, seeing the bench where Crys had been sitting was vacant now. "I hope she understands."

"She will. Go to her, Bryn. I'll take care of things down here."

Bryn chuckled as he pulled himself out of the pool, changing back to his human form as he did so. "After a session like that, the pool certainly needs a clean. Thanks, Kai. See you upstairs." He kept his words deliberately light, knowing Kai wouldn't want a scene.

He hurried away.

*So eager!* Kai mused, wondering if he should share the bed with them tonight. They would welcome him, but would that be politeness only? He hoped he'd be welcome back in the future, but only for visits. He couldn't impose on what he'd seen in Bryn and Crys's minds. A deep connection, one he'd seen only a few times before, but they needed time together alone, to work out their relationship. Only when they had a firm basis to build on would he venture back.

Sighing, he climbed out of the pool, reaching for a towel, shivering now he was back to human again. The pool was really too cold for humans. Bryn would have to heat it for Crys. Still, she hadn't complained in the heat of passion. That might be an even better answer.

It was when he was wrapping the towel around his middle and thinking of hitting the hot shower, when Bryn came hurrying back down the stairs. "Kai, she's gone!"

"What?"

"Crys, she's gone. She's not upstairs, not anywhere."

"Oh no!"

Fearing the worst that Crys had felt hurt or excluded by their lovemaking, Kai followed Bryn upstairs, gathering his hair out of the way behind his neck.

## Chapter Eight

"What did she take with her?" The spacious kitchen seemed much smaller with the massive Will Grady pacing up and down its length.

Bryn sighed. "Nothing. Her purse is still here, her mobile phone is by the front door —"

"Wait." Kai held up his hand. "Did you say her phone was by the door?" Bryn nodded. "She has a special place for it in her bag. She only took it out if she had a call."

"Get it." Bryn didn't need Grady's order to race outside and fetch the phone. Returning to the kitchen, he flipped it open and hit the caller button. "Address withheld, it says. Fuck."

"Give." Bryn handed the phone to Grady, who examined the thing as it he could bore a hole through it with his stare. Perhaps he could. "The one before that is another withheld call. Is it yours, Kai?"

Kai shook his head. "I haven't called her for a long time. She's been here, for me to talk to, face-to-face."

Grady checked again. "She hasn't used it since last Friday, and then this call came in half an hour ago."

Bryn tensed. Half an hour. She could be anywhere, especially if a Talent was involved. He couldn't lose her, it was unthinkable. But he was thinking it.

The phone hung on the kitchen wall rang. Bryn got there first.

"Bryn Murchison?" The same voice as the one who spoke to them that Saturday night, when they were instructed to go to Vauxhall Bridge. Male, slightly hoarse, possibly disguised.

"Yes."

He felt Grady and Kai enter his mind and he willingly let them in.

"You're missing someone, aren't you? You want to trade?"

Grady gave a sharp nod, but Bryn was already saying, "Sure."

"Same place, midnight tonight. You know the drill. Don't bring anyone else. We've set sensors up and we have access to the public webcams. Believe me, we'll know. And that's underwater as well. You for her. Be there or she dies, the same way as before."

He hung up.

"That phone traceable?"

Bryn gave him a pitying look. "Of course."

Grady pulled out his own mobile phone and hit a speed dial number. "Check who was just on Bryn Murchison's phone, will you? This has the highest priority. Yes, I'll hold." He didn't hold for long. "Okay. Go pick it up and get a team together, will you? The names are on my desk. Yes, now."

He hung up. "We're on. They tried to scramble the call, but it seems our technology is better than theirs. It was a mobile phone, so presumably they made the call from somewhere, and dumped it on the move. But we do have more than technology on our side." He leaned his elbow on the table. "They're on their way to pick it up, and we'll get a Sorcerer on to it."

"Which means?"

"He should be able to read the owner from the remains on the phone. We have several telemetrists on call. Meantime, we need to move. Needless to say, you're not going



in alone. Domenici Serafini is on his way, he'll go in with you." Bryn quirked a brow. "He's an Italian dragon shapeshifter. He'll shift, shrink and go in your pocket."

Bryn didn't feel like making the smart-ass remark he would usually have made. He just nodded. This didn't go unremarked by Kai, who leaned across to put his hand on Bryn's and give it a gentle squeeze. "We'll have Talents in the sky, high enough to avoid their sensors. And an electronic tracker on you, Bryn."

"They won't bring her to the bridge."

"Highly unlikely. They might try to trick us with another bundle. If they throw one off the bridge, you'll have to go in after it, but they have to know they won't catch you like that again."

"I'll know if it's her."

"But they'll put an unconscious body in it and we'll have to save whoever it is. No matter. If it's not Crys, leave it to me. They can't patrol the area completely, they haven't the technology. I've already arranged to have someone underwater, someone they won't detect. If it is Crys, go after her and leave the rest to the team." Bryn nodded. He'd been through a similar routine so many times before but never, ever had it meant so very much.

"Kai, you're on point with Howard Tryfanwy and George Smith." Kai nodded. His usual sardonic demeanor completely gone now, only deadly seriousness remained, which served to sharpen his already high cheekbones and flatten his mobile mouth.

"My conclusion has to be that Geoff was the daisy." Kai raised an eyebrow in query. "The link with the next cell, the daisy linking one part of the chain to another." Kai nodded. "We closed down his cell earlier today, easier than we thought. And this is why Geoff had already moved on to the next one. If we play it right, we'll pick up those, too. But the priority is Crys. Then, Bryn, you're on leave."

"What about me?" Kai protested.

"You don't need it."

Kai sighed. "That's right. I don't." Grady knew everything, it seemed, even the state of affairs between Bryn, Kai and Crystal.

Grady got to his feet. For such a big man he moved remarkably swiftly. Less a black panther on the move, more like a thoroughbred horse, Bryn thought. Not for the first time he wondered what Grady's Talent was, then, as most times, the thought faded away again. It was more habit than curiosity by now. Likely he'd never know.

Right now he didn't care, except to pray that Grady was as powerful as he thought he was.

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Approaching Vauxhall Bridge, Bryn felt a familiar tension, but this time increased tenfold. Because it involved him, and the woman he wanted to love forever. He forced his mind to deal with the present, without dwelling on unnecessary 'what ifs'.

The man in his pocket shifted a little, then grew quiet. Domenici Serafini had turned out to be a giant of a man, usually stationed in Rome, but as the owner of a travel company, he had a reasonable excuse for moving around the world in search of new and better locations for his discerning clients. Bryn trusted Serafini instinctively, something about the way the Italian's dark eyes met his without flinching, and with a great deal of sympathy. Bryn hadn't hidden how much Crys meant to him. He had the feeling Serafini respected his honesty.

Kai, his mind locked with Bryn's, was stationed a short distance away, on point, with

two others. The team was in place. Rock and roll, as he used to say before this operation became so very important to him.

Two men stood on the bridge, comfortably leaning against the parapet, seemingly enjoying the view over the Thames, the South Bank and the Victoria Embankment. Doubtless more were nearby, carefully watching for anyone approaching. They'd know him on sight, he was sure.

Bryn strolled across the bridge, careful to keep his walk steady, looking around him, adding a hint of anxiety to encourage his enemies to a feeling of superiority. He'd cultivate every advantage to get her back safe. Humbling himself was the least of it.

If the PHR could get access to the public webcams, Grady wanted to know why, and he'd launched another investigation to discover any leaks. But this part of London was thronged with surveillance cameras—to keep the traffic moving, to monitor activity at nearby stores, any number of reasons. But if the PHR could commandeer some cameras, that went for Department 57 in spades. Department 57 was part of MI6, a government department, and requisitioning was almost routine.

Bryn knew umpteen officials were watching him, others monitoring him, using their psychic Talents, but he never felt so alone. Perhaps a precursor of his feeling, should this operation fail. He pushed the thought away. Yet again.

Reaching the two men he felt sure waited for him, he didn't say anything, but leaned his hands on the parapet, and like them, looked out over the churning waters of the Thames. They said nothing. He couldn't bear it. "No sack tonight, I see."

One of the men turned and smiled. "Yes, you're right. No sack. We thought about it, but you know we wouldn't do the same thing twice. And in any case, you're stronger in your own element." He gestured down into the Thames and the churning, muddy water below them.

Bryn nodded, although that was far from the truth. A partial shift would give him the extra strength of his merman form, and it didn't depend on water. "So what do you want?"

"We want you. Just that." The man with cropped dark hair and dark eyes, stood up straight. A large man, but not as large as the man Bryn had in his pocket. "We'll let her go if you come with us. No tricks. We've scanned you, we have technological instruments you've never dreamed of and we know people are watching you, but they're not close." Then their instruments weren't as good as they thought. Good to know.

The other man, sandy haired and middle aged, studied him, raking him up and down and back again with his gaze. "Never seen one of your kind before." He said 'your kind' as if Bryn was something exotic and inanimate, something to be admired or reviled, as he pleased. Bryn forced down his ire. "Call me Harry and my mate is Jim. You can dump the trace, as well."

Was that bluff, or real? "What trace?"

"The one attached to your lapel." Shit, real. He did as he was told, unclipping the seemingly innocuous badge from his lapel and dropping it on the ground. The dark haired one, Jim, stepped on it, grinding it into the floor.

The more sophisticated device, with the cloaking mechanism remained undetected.

"Here's what we do," said Harry, keeping his voice down carefully, avoiding attention. "You come with us as though we know each other. You get into the car, you drive with us. You don't talk once we're in the car. We'll take you to her, we let her go, you stay with us. Simple."

"Okay."

"Okay?" Jim mocked. "Not so brave out of the water, are we?"

Bryn shrugged, trying to look sulky. "I want her out of this."

"You know you're going to tell us everything you know, one way or the other."

"I don't know that much."

The dark haired one, Jim, shot him a look of disbelief. "We'll see about that. There must be a nest of you dirty bastards somewhere and we're going to flush you out. Take off your coat."

"What?"

"Take your jacket off and dump it at the end of the bridge."

He stared at Jim. "It's cold."

Jim pursed his lips in a mockery of sympathy. "Poor baby." His face regained its hard lines. "Drop it."

He did as he was told, but as he pulled his arms out of the sleeves, he pretended to get his arm caught, long enough for Serafini, in a form so tiny he appeared to be a fly, to get out of his jacket and into his jeans pocket.

They walked to the other end of the bridge and he dropped his jacket at the foot. Another item of clothing they owed him. His clothes on the night of the party and now this jacket.

Their car was parked in a space not far from the bridge, a small, unobtrusive Skoda two-door. Not surprisingly, they made Bryn get in the back. Before they set off, Jim leaned back and fastened a strip of wide duct tape across Bryn's eyes. He only just got his eyes closed in time.

But they didn't seal Serafini's. The shapeshifter crept out of Bryn's pocket and flew up to his shoulder, where he perched out of sight and reported back to Grady. Every street, every turn. Grady sent them a reassurance that the team wasn't far behind. Bryn didn't care. If these people had hurt Crys, they were dead men, and any leads they could give would be interesting, but incidental. His goal was clear—get Crys, get out of there and cause as much mayhem as possible doing it. She was his, and she was the mission. Grady could find his own daisy, if he could link with anyone conscious afterwards. Years of training, of cold-blooded calculation, of professional detachment were as nothing now.

The car stopped.

*Where are we?*

Serafini answered instantly. *South Kensington, near the museums. A large, three storied terraced house. Not a private residence, not flats. A brass sign near the front door. A pause. This place is a records office for one of the museums. My guess is they have people working here.*

Grady broke in. *Give me the address.*

*Sure thing.*

Serafini relayed the address, then added, *You okay there, Murchison?*

*Fine. They've duct taped my eyes, I'll probably lose my lashes when they pull it off but nothing serious.*

*Lose your perfect looks?*

Bryn gave an internal chuckle. He liked Serafini's sense of humor. *Those as well.*

"Out." Jim hooked one hand over Bryn's arm and hauled him out, dragging him quickly into the chill night air.

*You there, Serafini?*

*Hanging in. On your shoulder, just under your collar. I'll jump off when we get inside, less chance of them catching me, but I'm here.*

*I'm taking no prisoners, so you'd better look out for those.*

*Understood. Grady wants them alive, so he can question them.*

*He'll have to want, then. I only have one objective, and when that's accomplished, I'll see about the rest.*

Grady's voice came loud and clear, deep inside them. *Achieve your objective, Bryn, and take your lady away from here. Your house should be safe. She let them in, for some reason, they did not breach your defenses. But take her where you feel safest and let me know where you are. Serafini will continue with the operation. Clear?*

*As crystal.* Her name, her nature, clear and precious. Bryn pushed away the waves of sorrow and anxiety to concentrate on doing his job to the best of his ability. He'd never gone into a situation with higher stakes before.

Serafini continued to relate where they were going, naming the streets, until they reached a street in South Kensington. *This isn't a residential property. There is a brass plaque outside. Ah yes, it is a building belonging to the museum service. Probably for storage and research. Several large museums were situated in the Cromwell Road, not far from where they were now. This was probably one of theirs. They are parking.* Bryn heard a car door slam. *One of them is putting money in the meter. It seems they are planning to stay for quite a while.*

A rough voice. *"Get out now."* An arm grabbed his shoulder, dragging him forward. Careful not to hit his head on the car getting out, Bryn stumbled a little, and was jerked upright. A guiding hand touched his shoulder. *"Keep your head down, we don't want to attract attention.*

*Another voice inside his head, in the channel he kept open for his colleagues. I'm in place, Grady, on the roof. There's a ventilation duct. I can get inside there, if you want.*

*No, stay outside for now. It's enough to know you can get in if you need to.*

*I'm in place too, said another voice. Kai. At the front of the house. I'll need help to get in, if you want me to. If Crys is in trouble I share Bryn's objectives.*

*Bryn, you have Kai and a vampire at your command presently, plus a shapeshifter on the roof. Two Sorcerers will be arriving in the next five minutes. They'll break the house wide open if you want them to.*

*Thanks.* As long as Crys wasn't dead, they would get out of this house and away to safety. That was all that mattered to him now.

Up four steps, then in through a door, which slammed behind them.

*You still with me, Serafini?*

*Si.* The voice rumbled deep in his head. *They are going to take you down into the basement.*

Down into another level, Harry in front of him, Jim, prodding him behind with either a gun or his finger. He guessed the gun.

"Ready for this? I hope you closed your eyes before we put the tape on, or this is going to blind you." Without any further warning, Harry tore the tape away from his eyes. A gush of blood flooded one eye, and Bryn tried to lift his hands to wipe it away, but they were still bound. Harry chuckled. "You've lost most of your eyebrows and your lashes." Yes, Bryn knew that. He had braced himself not to scream, but his whole eye area stung and smarted. If he could shapeshift, even partially, his accelerated healing powers would take care of the injuries, but he couldn't. He endured the pain and the blood, blinking it away, forcing himself past the pain. Why was it that superficial injuries could cause the most problems?

Gritting his teeth, Bryn opened his eyes to meet a flat, white light. An old-fashioned fluorescent light tube lit the bleak, cream-painted cellar of this house, a windowless room with boxes stacked all around them.

And a table in the middle of the room, perhaps to help with unpacking the items, or studying them. But whatever had been on the table wasn't there now. Crys was.

Ropes lashed her arms and legs to each corner of the sturdy Victorian kitchen table, and she was naked. Exposed to anyone who cared to look at her. Bryn guessed she'd probably been raped, but that only roused his fury against anyone who'd done it. If he had his way, everyone in this room except himself, Crys and Serafini would die. And if Serafini looked at her wrong —

*No, my friend, I see a woman in distress.* Serafini had the delicacy to tell Grady and the others what the room contained, instead of sending a mental picture. Bryn thanked him for that.

Geoff stood at the other side of the table, grinning broadly. "I thought you'd come. You're a real knight in shining armor, Murchison."

"You have me, now let her go," he said flatly, knowing it wouldn't be that easy, but beginning the negotiations anyway. He so wanted to kill Geoff, right now. He'd lived with Crys, he must know how lovely she was. How could he do this to her?

At his voice, her head jerked and she painfully twisted it around so she could see him. Her hair fell into her eyes, and he wanted to brush it away for her.

*Bastards.* Kai's voice came through, charged with emotion. *Don't kill them, Bryn. I know what Grady plans to do and they might wish they were dead by the time he's through.*

*We're not barbarians, Kai. We will only do what is necessary,* came Grady's voice, softly chiding.

*Then I hope they resist with every bone in their bodies.* Bryn heartily seconded Kai's hope.

"Bryn! Oh Bryn, they want to kill you!" He couldn't bear the anguish he saw in her eyes.

"I know that, sweetheart. I came here for you." It hurt to take his eyes away from her, but he looked around, committing each face to memory. Three men were already here, sitting staring at him, as they must have been staring at Crys before he arrived. At least one was flushed, perhaps fresh from her body. "What did they do to you, Crys?" He heard his own wavering tones, and cursed that he hadn't more control over himself.

"N-nothing, not yet. They tied me here. They want you to watch, they said." Tears spiked her lashes. "They've just been telling me what they want to do." To his utter amazement, she forced a smile. "They haven't much imagination."

He wanted to crow with laughter. They hadn't cowed her! Frightened her, yes, but she had the spirit to fight back. His wonderful woman wouldn't go down without a fight.

"He looks normal," said Harry, giving Bryn a careful once-over.

"Well he isn't," Geoff said, sneering his disdain. "He's a fish, not a man."

*Two cameras I can see, probably a few more hidden ones. Probably a live relay or two.* The PHR would be transmitting these scenes elsewhere, then, and any unusual activity would be relayed and recorded in another place. That meant they had to wait until the Sorcerers arrived, so they could destroy the cameras.

*Stay hidden, Serafini.*

*I will, until we know we are safe from observation.*

Even if they succeeded here, any film of them shifting or otherwise could be fatal to the whole Talented community. It was possible to fuzz cameras, vampires did it all the time when they fed, but not if they couldn't target the cameras. And the PHR had special cameras too, ones that recorded temperature change and the like. Simple fuzzing didn't faze them. No, they had to stall until the Sorcerers arrived.

"Change, fish. Turn into what you really are. Let's see you," Geoff taunted him, coming around the table to circle him.

"Don't know what you're talking about." That earned him a backhanded swipe across the face, stinging and making the cut above his eye bleed anew. As he turned his head to go with the blow, he caught sight of a gleam in the corner of the room. A camera, trained precisely on the spot where he stood. He cursed his weak telekinesis. He could barely turn the page in a book with the power of his mind, much less put a camera out of action.

He'd pushed the pain away from his mind and was hardly aware of it now, but the sight of his own blood spattering the cream-painted wall roused the demon inside him, now roaring for release. If he let it go, did a partial shift to invoke his extra strength, he'd kill everyone in the room within ten minutes. Every bone in his body screamed at him to do it.

What would Crys think of him if he did that? Would she hate him for it? Would she still want him afterwards? Grady would be incandescent with rage, probably rightly, too. The daisy who would lead him to the next PHR cell might be standing in this room. The only way they'd find out was to keep them alive. It burned him, but he'd do it. But Geoff wasn't that daisy, because they never used the same one twice. Geoff was the link between the cell they'd just closed down and this one. That meant another person was the link to the next cell in the chain. Geoff was fair game.

"You said you'd let her go if I came. I hope your word is at least that trustworthy."

Geoff sneered. "We are men of our word, but you're not exactly a man, are you?" He jerked his head to where Crys lay helplessly lashed to the table. As he watched, another man moved to the base, where he could see Crys in lurid detail. Bryn began to count silently. He wanted to kill them so much he could taste it. The man fumbled with the fastening on his trousers.

So the answer was no, they intended to kill him. After they'd all raped Crys and made him watch. He was aware of the tiny, tense presence of Domenici Serafini, boiling with all the rage he felt and realized what they were up to. *They want to provoke me into shifting, so the cameras get it all.*

*I know that, my friend. Otherwise they'd be dead already.*

Another voice entered their minds. Female, this time. *Vanessa Hart here, with a colleague. We're both Sorcerers with strong telekinetic ability. When we've scanned, we'll blow all the cameras in the building.*

*Blow the electricity, Bryn suggested. It's faster.*

*It's dark, you need the light. Don't worry, we're fast.*

Another male voice murmured softly. *I've got them. You take the direct ones, Van, I'll take the relays. We'll give them an electric surge.*

*In five.* Vanessa gave the count. The man at the table unzipped, freeing his long, hard cock. He leered at Crys who gasped and then fell resolutely silent. Geoff laughed.

*Five, four, three, two one...*

The simultaneous ping and pop of overburdened power circuits exploded into the atmosphere. Singeing and burning odors polluted the already stale air.

Before their captors could react, Bryn leaped across the small space between him and the would-be rapist, and grabbed his cock in one hand and his balls in the other, squeezing and twisting. Something inside him fed on the man's howl of pain. He dropped him with a knee to the balls, making sure he stayed down with a swift kick to the side of his head.

Already Serafini had shapeshifted, back to a large, angry, naked Italian, roaring as he

delivered a mighty punch to the side of Harry's head.

Bryn exulted, and went for Geoff, while one of the other men grabbed him, brandishing a large hunting knife. A quick chop to the wrist took care of the knife, and a twist of his hand delivered a hard blow to the side of his neck, felling him instantly.

Geoff brought up a gun, and Bryn opened his mouth. Serafini took one look at him and clapped his hands over Crys's ears, pressing hard.

Bryn sang.

Serafini's jaw tensed as he gritted his teeth, partially shifting against Bryn's attack. The others fell to the floor, if they weren't on the floor already. Bryn remembered in time to keep his song short of a killing note. If he did that, he'd kill everyone in the room. Including Crys and Serafini.

He lifted his foot to the now unconscious Geoff.

"Bryn."

The only thing that would have stopped him. Crys's voice, quavering but firm. "Bryn, don't do this. Don't put Geoff's death between us."

He put his foot back on the ground, gently, carefully, then turned his back on the mayhem and crossed the room to her. Serafini was already at the foot of the table, slashing at the ropes tying her feet to the table with a knife he'd found somewhere. He leaned over and passed Bryn the knife when he'd done.

Carefully, Bryn freed her and moved around the table so he could lift her into his arms. He'd never let her go now.

The thunder of feet on the stairs outside alerted him. Determined nobody else was going to see Crys in this state, he turned his back, shielding her from view.

The door burst open and he heard them enter. A low whistle showed someone's admiration of the devastation they'd wrought. Another, a wolf whistle this time, had everyone chuckling, and he turned his head to see Serafini blush mightily. Very strange for a shapeshifter, who were used to nudity in themselves and each other. It had been a feminine whistle, too.

He saw Kai who crossed the room to them. "Poor baby," he crooned to Crys, touching her gently on her arm. She flinched and moved closer into Bryn's body. A shadow passed over Kai's face and he turned away to pull off his jacket. "Here," he said roughly, draping the jacket over Crys's body.

Bryn turned to face the room once Crys was decently covered. Grady stood in the middle of the debris, watching the team assess the situation and secure the prisoners. "You did well." Grady was short with his praise, but what he said, he meant. "There's an ambulance waiting outside, one of ours. Get her checked out, then go home. I'll want you in for debriefing, but that can wait until tomorrow."

Bryn nodded and headed for the stairs. Kai stopped him, a hand on his arm. "I'll go to my flat after this. I think she needs you to herself now."

"Kai—"

Kai put one gentle finger over Bryn's lips. "Hush, love. You know I'm right. I'll stay with the teams, help Grady with the interrogations. I'm looking forward to it. I'll come and see you both, but later." He leaned forward and gave Bryn a gentle, closed-mouth kiss. "Look after her." He glanced down at Crys, who watched them gravely. "Look after him." He bent to kiss her too. This time she accepted his embrace, but when she opened her mouth, he hushed her gently. "No, don't say anything, sweet. Let Bryn look after you."

## Chapter Nine

She didn't want anyone else to see her, she'd been exposed enough already. While they'd waited for Bryn, they'd touched her, taunted her. Geoff had recounted in great detail some of the times they'd fucked—she wouldn't call it making love, that would desecrate the beautiful times she'd spent with Bryn and Kai. If only she knew how to use any telepathy she might have! Not that she knew where she was but they might have been able to find her by the direction? She didn't know. She wanted Bryn, but when they told her he was coming, she despaired.

"He's going to watch us all have you before he dies. And he will die. We know about him and his kind." Geoff spoke in a kind of icy detachment, more terrifying than the anger he must feel inside.

Hopefully, he didn't know enough. And he must know about the Department, surely. Bryn wouldn't come alone.

Geoff must have seen the hope in her face. "We won't be followed. We have scanners, and we told him, if he didn't come alone, you die."

"I'm going to die anyway."

Geoff flicked one of her nipples with his thumb and forefinger, watching the automatic reaction as it crinkled into a peak. "Not necessarily. If you perform well, I might let you live."

"You're a bastard, Geoff."

He laughed. "My parents might be surprised to hear that." He spent some time then, describing her body, touching her, making her feel violated although no one had actually fucked her yet. They might as well have done.

Then Bryn had arrived, seemingly alone, spitting defiance and she'd despaired, before the Department swung into action.

What she saw made her glad Bryn was on her side. The ear-splitting noise she heard made the naked stranger's hands over her ears shake, but he'd protected her, although he'd trembled. She wondered if the only reason everyone in that room wasn't dead was Bryn's colleague.

Now she nestled in Bryn's arms, and when they climbed in to the ambulance, submitted to the gentle examination of a woman doctor only if Bryn stayed in her sight. He smiled reassuringly through it all. The doctor covered her with a warm blanket and sat on the narrow bench next to Bryn. "She'll be fine. They haven't hurt her, although there might be a few bruises."

"You don't want to keep her in hospital?" Bryn sounded hopeful.

"No, not unless she wants it."

Crys shook her head. "I want to go home."

Bryn gave the address and the ambulance took off after a short delay to inform Will Grady what was happening.

Crys slept, and only woke up when Bryn lifted her out of the ambulance and headed for his front door. His face was unmarred by the wounds the duct tape had caused, but when she asked, he smiled and told her they'd given him some medicine. She decided to ask him later, too tired and happy to mar the tranquil mood he'd soothed her into.

Home. Yes, this was home, if Bryn and Kai wanted her.



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Later, after Bryn had bathed her, tucked her into the big bed and brought her a mug of hot, steaming tea, he asked her the one thing that had puzzled him. "Why did you open the door? Why did you let them in?"

A tear trickled from the corner of her eye. "I didn't. They let themselves in."

"Who called you?"

"Geoff. He wanted to plead with me, then they were just—there. Those skeleton keys you had, they used something like that."

His mouth settled into a grim line. "They're easy enough to come by, if you know where to look. But how did they not trigger the security devices?" He frowned, thinking. "Shit." He stared at her, horror in his eyes. "I'm so sorry, baby, I think it was my fault."

"How?"

"I dropped my mobile phone, I must have lost it when we went to Geoff's flat, but I thought I'd left it at the home. I'm always doing that, but one of the ways of disabling the security devices is using my phone. I put a code on it, they shouldn't have been able to break it, but—" He shrugged. "They have experts, too."

"What about the other barriers you told me about, the psychic ones?"

"Kai and I were—busy. Barriers down."

"Yes, you were."

He bit his lip. "I was stupid, careless. I'll never forgive myself."

She reached out a hand to him, and he took it, gripped it hard. "I'm here now. I forgive you."

"I guess that'll have to be enough, for now." His face lightened. "I'll have to think of a way to make it up to you."

She'd gone upstairs and started to pack, thinking the operation was over and she should resume her plan to go home to her parents. Geoff's call interrupted her when she went downstairs to find her bag.

Crys asked about Kai. "When's Kai coming back?"

"Baby, he might not come back. Not to live here, anyway."

She looked up at him, stricken, and he sat down on the edge of the bed and took her hand. "I don't want to come between you and Kai, Bryn. You took me in when I needed someone and I'll always be grateful to you for that, but you and Kai were a couple long before I arrived. It's not right."

Bryn smiled gently. "Let me tell you about Kai and me. Both of us are bisexual, but Kai only falls in love with women. For the past five years, he's confined himself to men. I don't know why, but I suspect he had an affair that hurt him very much."

"Have you ever been in love with a man, Bryn?"

"Kai was my first male lover." He grinned. "I'd wanted men before, but never quite taken the leap. But once Kai sets his sights on you, if you're willing, you have no chance." He ran his free hand through his close-cropped hair. "You know that."

"Do I?"

"He decided you'd be good for us, but for most of the time we knew you, you were part of a couple. But we saw how badly Geoff treated you sometimes. Both of us felt you deserved a lot more than him."

"It was good at first with Geoff. He was kind, and funny, and it seemed to be working. It was only the last six months or so when he turned really bad." She sipped her tea. "He'd always been prejudiced, but next to his parents he was a saint, which is why I

tolerated his seeming innocent obsession with mermen. Only it wasn't innocent, was it?"

Bryn shook his head. "Far from it. But you weren't to know that."

"I even bought him a Little Mermaid lamp for the bedroom. You know, the statue in Copenhagen Harbor."

"Yes I know."

She was struck by a sudden thought. "Did you know her?"

Bryn chuckled. "No more than you knew Cinderella. She's a legend, a story. No one knows if she really existed."

She handed him the empty mug and refused a second helping. "So you and Kai saw me as a charity case."

He laughed again. "Hardly. Kai saw I wanted you, and admitted he did, too. That was the first intimation I got that he was bi, not gay. You know some of the gay community look down on bi's?" She shook her head no. "Well they do. Kai had immersed himself in the gay community, and I didn't realize until he told me. He said it was safer for him."

"Oh poor Kai!"

"He's happy as he is, sweetheart. We were never in love. We made love, we enjoyed our relationship, but we both knew we'd move on one day. Don't think Kai will leave our lives, because he'll be back. We might not have fallen in love but we're lifelong friends."

"So he won't join us—" She found a corner of a sheet suddenly fascinating, coloring.

"If you want it, Crys, you shall have it. Nobody else, mind. Call me jealous."

"Of me?" She looked up, shyness preventing her making direct eye contact.

He tilted her chin up so she had to look at him. "Yes, of you. Crys, Kai loves you, but he isn't in love with you. I am."

He took her breath away. She loved him, too. She felt safe in his arms, happy and content, and yearned to touch him, to be with him, but she'd tried to suppress her feelings, knowing she shouldn't come between Bryn and Kai. What she saw in the depths of his blue-green eyes was perfect sincerity and love. For her.

"I love you too, Bryn. Very much."

He smiled, a gentle, heart-deep smile. "Then we're lucky."

"Come to bed, Bryn. Hold me. Let me hold you."

Willingly he stood and shed his clothes. When he'd bathed her he'd only taken off his t-shirt and donned a fresh one afterwards, making it clear he didn't intend to join her. But now he did.

She flipped the covers aside and he slid into bed, opening his arms for her. She went to him, feeling deliciously small against his large frame. "So what do we do now, Bryn?"

He kissed her hair, nuzzled her with his lips. "I thought we might get engaged. Perhaps even married."

She jerked back, shocked by the easy way he said it. "Bryn?"

"Yes, love?"

"We've only been together a short time!"

He smoothed his hands down her body. "We've known each other a lot longer. I've loved you a lot longer. When I discovered how good we are together, it only confirmed the way I feel about you. I know it's too soon, love, but please consider it."

"Yes, Bryn. I'd be honored to marry you."

He tilted up her chin and gave her a deep, loving kiss. When they parted, he gazed down into her eyes, not hiding the way he felt about her. She felt, actually *felt* his mind

enter hers, gently invading, pausing to give her a chance to reject him, then slid in. It was there to stay now. "Thank you."

She smiled. "No, Bryn, no thanks. I brought nothing but trouble to you."

"No you didn't. I think Geoff encouraged our friendship because he knew who we were. He might even have taken up with you because of us. That means *we* brought trouble to *you*."

"But I want to be independent and make my own way, I don't want to do nothing."

His hands settled on her bottom, gently caressing the smooth curves. "You won't. Grady will find you a job, if you want it, and I'll ask to come in."

"Come in?"

"Being a field agent is difficult and dangerous. So far, I've loved it, but I don't want to do it any more. I don't want to spend weeks, maybe months, away from you, I want to come home to you every night. So I'm going to take the promotion Grady's offered me. It means I'll run the teams, be at the office more, controlling the operations. We're MI6, so that does include some trips abroad, but not for long, and not for months without you knowing where I am or what I'm doing. You'll know where I am, I'll be able to call you every night. Tell you I love you."

"Oh Bryn!" It seemed odd she should be so happy now, after a day she'd thought bound to end in tragedy. Not that she was complaining.

Crys gave herself up to him, tired, but not too tired to enjoy his loving and to love him in return. He touched her, kissed her, and gently ran his tongue around her sore nipples, where the men had pinched and hurt her. He took all the ache away. He traveled further down, paused to dip into her navel, and chuckled softly when she flinched. His touch grew firmer, more determined as she sighed and murmured to him. "Bryn, oh Bryn, that feels so good!"

When he urged her legs wider and pushed her knees up, she gave herself up to him. His touch was so gentle, at first, she could hardly feel him, but his breath on her skin made her shudder. He sucked her clit into his mouth, caressing and rubbing, until she pushed up into him, silently urging him to do it more, but harder. He did it. She tunneled her hands into his hair, plucking restlessly at the short, silky strands as he sucked and kissed, sighing her name into her mind in an erotic communication the like of which she'd never known before.

When she came, it was a peak, but a relatively gentle one, like a fountain spraying high and dispersing its refreshing mist over her whole body. When she was still sighing in the aftermath, he came back up her body, caressing hers with his whole length, sliding in between her legs as if he belonged there. Which he did.

His entry into her body was a gentle, as inevitable as the rest of their movements that night, a culmination, a natural end and a beginning. He didn't stop until he was completely embedded inside her, then he lifted his head and gazed into her eyes. "I adore you, Crystal Miller. I want to love you, feel you loving me. This never felt so right."

"Bryn, oh Bryn!" She couldn't manage many more words, so full was her heart.

He loved her, sliding gently in and out, slowly building his thrusts to the unavoidable climax. They had made love in different positions, in more adventurous ways but somehow this missionary position, straightforward lovemaking meant more than anything had before.

They gazed into each other's eyes, never closing them, and he kept his mind in hers, sharing their love for each other, showing each other what this lovemaking meant.

They came together, crying out, but not closing their minds or their hearts. Not

taking their gazes away from each other.

Bryn lifted up on his elbows, his body still seated in hers. "I pledge you my life, my heart and everything I have to give, Crys."

"I pledge you the same, Bryn. I want everything you have to give, and I'll give you everything I have in return."

They kissed, long and sweet, his tongue tasting her, still slightly flavored with her essence.

"So," she said softly, when their lips finally drew apart. "When are you going to make me into a mermaid?"

"What?" He laughed. "How did you know I could do that?"

"I read the fairy tales, remember?"

He kissed her again. "I was hoping to leave that until another day. That's a whole new adventure, love."

**The End**