



VIVIAN AREND

TIDAL WAVE

FORCES OF NATURE

SADDHAIN PUBLISHING LTD.

Slippery when wet...

Forces of Nature, Book 1

From her first kiss to her first sight of dolphins dancing on the waves, Alexia Colten has always held a special place in her heart for Jaffrey's Cove. Now that she's back to help her grandmother settle into a home, she discovers this place has lost none of its remembered magic. In fact, it seems more magical than before—and more erotic.

After she's gifted with a beautiful, dolphin-etched medallion, she finds herself surrounded by the golden boys of summers past. Her body is filled with longings she can't explain and dreams of blue lights that turn into lovers.

Joshua Marley and his cousin Anthony are merfolk, a people capable of living beneath the waves as either dolphin or human. Alexia holds the medallion that marks her as the next in line to lead their people—if she can prove she can transform. Working in tandem, they're sure they can arouse her passion and protect her from those who would use her simply to gain power.

But their strength alone may not be enough to help her face the challenge of her new position...

Warning: This title contains a conniving granny, naked men in the surf and shifters who take fun in the water to new depths. Snorkels not required.

**eBooks are *not* transferable.
They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.**

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Tidal Wave
Copyright © 2009 by Vivian Arend
ISBN: 978-1-60504-629-7
Edited by Anne Scott
Cover by Angela Waters

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: July 2009
www.samhainpublishing.com

Tidal Wave

Vivian Arend

Dedication

To my hubby, who doesn't share my love of erotic romance but is amazingly tolerant of my newfound obsession with storytelling. I'm grateful to have you by my side, even if you're reading woodworking magazines.

To Sandie, who read my first stories without cringing and made me feel like I really was an author. You are a wonderful person, even if we don't know what to call you. CP? Beta? I think "friend" works the best.

To Anne, who has taught me more during the editing process than I learned in any English course. At some point I hope to stop tormenting you with word echoes and plot holes. Thank you for taking a chance on me. It's been a blast.

Chapter One

“Gram, where do you keep the rice?” Alexia rummaged through another cupboard in frustration. “Gram?”

Her grandmother stared out the window. Alexia wrapped an arm around her and led her back to the kitchen table. “We need groceries. I can’t find much of anything in the house right now.”

Gram waved a hand to the front of the fridge and a list of numbers tacked by the phone. “Get what we need delivered. Just call and they’ll come by. You need to be here, that’s more important than groceries. You need to be ready for it, Ally.”

Alexia poured some tea and forced the cup into her grandmother’s hand. She hadn’t been warned how far her relative had regressed in the past year. It was no longer an active senior who greeted her across the table. This was a frail reflection of the dynamo Alexia knew.

It broke her heart to see Gram lose herself.

“You need to be ready, my dear,” Gram repeated as she patted Alexia’s arm with fingers gone soft with time. The old lady sipped her tea and Alexia saw a flash of familiar eagerness as Gram’s gaze returned to the window. To the ocean.

Alexia sighed and held Gram’s hand. She was glad to get this last bit of time with the woman who meant so much to her, but it was hard to see her changed.

“You look lovely. The boys will all be fighting over you, but you make the decision. It’s your choice, no matter what they say.” The old lady chuckled. “I remember when your Gramps courted me. He wouldn’t leave me alone. I had my eye on him too, even though there were others who were supposed to be better for me. It’ll be the same for you. I know it. You’ll see him and he’ll be the one you want.”

“I’m not here to find a husband, Gram. I’m here for you.”

“Bah, what do you need with a cranky old lady? You need a nice strong young man with beautiful eyes.” Gram leaned forward and shook a finger in her direction. “Don’t you take any guff from them now. You’re stronger than they think.

“Fetch me the purple box, Ally, there’s something I need to give you.” Gram motioned toward one of the stacks of boxes and books scattered throughout the house like so many treasure piles. Every spare inch of the house was filled with the things Unca and Gramps had collected over the years, and Gram couldn’t seem to part with any of them. Alexia poked and prodded until she found the one Gram wanted and brought it back to the table.

“This has been in the family for a long time, and now it’s yours to care for and enjoy.” Gram’s eyes twinkled. Alexia smiled at her. Whatever was in the box had the power to energize the old woman. “Wear it for me now. I know it seems too fancy for everyday, but I want to see you two together.”

Alexia opened the plain box and gasped with delight. Inside lay an ornate medallion, the etching of a dolphin leaping out of the water bold on its surface. Strong leather straps looped around the open edge, bits of mother of pearl lining the border. Alexia scooped it off the satin cushion and laid it in her palm to admire. The metal warmed her hand, flickers of light from the sun shining on its surface. Sparks floated in the air, dust motes turned to fireflies in the reflection.

“Gram, it’s beautiful. I’ve never seen it before.” She stared into glittering gray eyes. “You said our family has had it for years?”

“Generations. Come, let me help you put it on.”

Alexia turned around and Gram lowered the beautiful object over her head. The metal warmed as it nestled intimately between the swells of her bosom. Alexia impulsively removed her ponytail holder to allow her hair to fall around her in a riot of brunette curls.

The necklace fit right. It felt right. It caressed her skin and she covered it with a hand, tracing her fingers down her body, a trail of heat following.

Buttery soft fingers patted her cheek and Alexia gazed into a face worn with years, lit with a beautiful smile. “It does look wonderful on you. I knew it would. Now, I want to hear all about what you’ve been doing and how long you can stay with me.”

Alexia forced herself to chat quietly for a while, stopping when Gram’s eyes rocked shut too often. After tucking Gram into her main-floor bedroom for the night, she returned to the kitchen to make a grocery list.

Then she stood and stared at the ocean, her arms wrapped tightly around her. Her grandmother was fading fast. The only constant in Alexia’s world and she was falling away. Alexia’s fingers drifted to rub at the medallion like a touchstone, the warm metal relaxing her, even as her heart was breaking.

Gram said she couldn’t live in the beachfront house any longer on her own. She’d called Alexia in a panic asking for help in selecting a new place to live where she’d get assistance yet still have some independence. Alexia wished she could care for her grandmother permanently, but it wasn’t possible. She’d taken all her vacation time to come and settle Gram into her new home. Beyond that she needed to make a living, returning to her position as a massage therapist at the hospital. She couldn’t stay, no matter how much her heart longed to remain in the familiar setting.

*

Shutters rattled in the stiff breeze off the water, the sound settling around Alexia like a familiar blanket. Distant memories rose as she hopped out of bed and opened the French doors to stare at the ocean waves, the crash against the shore growing louder as she stepped onto the balcony.

Moonlight shone on the water, the night air warm in spite of the wind that tossed her hair into her eyes. She dragged a hand through her curls and faced into the growing storm. It exhilarated her to think of the power building in the darkening clouds, the waves whipped into a frenzy of whitecaps and foam. Alexia stood near the railing, her gown pressed to her body as she leaned forward to look down. The row of flags placed in the sand that led out to the shore stood stiff and unfurled, the flapping fabric a beacon against the dusky sand.

She couldn't resist and raced down the stairs to follow the path to the water's edge. The sea danced before her, the crash and slap of the water echoed in her ears and she stepped into the surf. She stretched her arms and rotated slowly, eyes closed, head thrown back. It had been years since she'd been able to experience the night air, taste the salty spray on her lips, and it was a homecoming she'd longed for. The house on the rocks was Gram's, but the memories were all hers. Memories of endless summers, filled with quiet days of pleasure.

A lone gull cried and Alexia opened her eyes to watch it ride the air currents, the moonlight shining on its white body. It dipped low over the water and she could just make out the fins of dolphins in the distance as they played in the waves. Her heart leapt.

It was a good omen, it had to be.

The dolphins were always there when good things happened.

She remembered the first summer she'd gotten dumped at Gram's. At fourteen she'd thought it was a punishment to be abandoned by her mother to the old woman's care, but that soon changed. Gram was a hoot to be around. The house library was extensive and the beach... For a girl who had grown up in the city, all the water and sand was a playground to delight the senses. She'd spent every minute of daylight outside the first week, called in only for meals by her doting grandmother.

There were always other people on the beach, wandering from the wharf in Jaffrey's Cove looking for flotsam and other prizes. A large family holding a reunion picnicked nearby one day, and she'd spent the afternoon with the little children helping to build the biggest sandcastle possible. They'd gathered shells and had begun to decorate it before the little ones lost interest and left Alexia to complete the final details...

A shadow fell over her as she knelt in the sand, finishing the moat.

"It's a beautiful castle."

She glanced up at the unknown youth and froze. He must be there with the reunion, but he wasn't one of the safe little children she'd spent the afternoon with. He looked like one of the top ten boy-band singers,

blond and all-American. Tanned skin and bright surfer shorts completed the picture. He loomed over her and Alexia sputtered for a minute as she tried to find her tongue.

“Thanks.” She checked around for anyone nearby to hide behind. She wasn’t shy. Much. This good-looking fellow made her hot and cold at the same time, and she wished some of the seven-year-olds would return so she’d have a chaperone.

He sat next to her, blocking her path of escape. There was no retreat without destroying the castle. She was suddenly conscious of her old swimsuit. The tightness, the worn patches.

“You’re new here, aren’t you?” he asked, staring over the water.

She nodded before she realized he couldn’t see the motion. “Got here last Saturday.”

He turned brilliant green eyes on her and she hurried to grasp some more shells and place them on the castle. If she didn’t have to look at him she’d be okay. Maybe.

“You having fun on your holiday?”

His voice was quiet and she had to listen hard to understand him over the crash of the surf behind them. “It’s been great. I’ve never made a sandcastle before.”

He gave a startled gasp and she swung toward him. His jaw hung open. “Never made a...really? Where do you live?”

“Saskatoon. It’s in the central part of Canada.”

His eyes grew thoughtful for a moment before he laughed. “I guess you don’t have a lot of ocean in the prairies.”

She shook her head and resumed building.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Alexia.”

He held out a hand. “Joshua.”

They shook hands. Alexia cringed as her sandy fingers touched his clean ones and rubbed grit together.

“Alexia, would you do me a favor?”

She sat back on her heels. She knew her face was beet red and she hoped it would just look like she’d had too much sun. Talking to boys was so hard.

Joshua pointed toward the water and Alexia noticed a gaggle of other boys grouped together, all watching closely. “My brothers and cousins.”

She waited. Joshua was the one fidgeting now. She checked his ears and they were either burned to a crisp or he was blushing harder than she was. She understood about being embarrassed. “What’s wrong? What can I help with?” Alexia glanced cautiously toward the boys. “Wait, you said they’re your family. All of them?”

Joshua gave her a wry smile. "I'm the youngest of five and I've got seven more cousins. And yup, it sucks big time."

Alexia laughed and he smiled, like there was finally a common bond between them. She screwed up her courage. "What do you need help with?"

He mumbled something too low for her to hear, his face turning even redder. He met her eyes and must have seen her confusion. He took a big breath and let it out in a slow, uneasy stream before speaking louder. "Can I give you a kiss?"

She collapsed onto the sand as her legs gave way in surprise. "What?"

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude and I know it's strange for me to pop up and ask something like that when I don't even know you and I can understand if you say no but..." His gaze swung back to the boys who whispered behind their hands and slapped each other on the backs. Joshua squared his shoulders and looked Alexia straight in the eye. "They've been teasing me about being the baby of the family and one of them said I'd never even kissed a girl and before I knew it, they were daring me to kiss someone on the beach and they don't think I will and..." He shook his head. "Man, it *sucks* to be the youngest."

Alexia felt for him, even as blood rushed through her and made her squirm. She heard one of the brothers give a catcall and suddenly her embarrassment turned to anger. She knew what it felt like to be teased, and she wasn't going to let the fact he was gorgeous stop her from fixing his jerks of brothers. She crawled to her knees and faced him.

"Okay."

Joshua stared at her, then his eyes widened. "You mean it?"

She nodded slowly. "Just a quick kiss, right? Nothing else?"

He shook his head in denial so fast she smiled. He cleared his throat a few times before holding out his hand to her again. "You are a true friend, and if I can ever come to your rescue, I would be honored to repay the favor." His grin went from ear to ear.

Alexia smirked back at him as they shook hands, conspirators together against the bullies of the world.

She closed her eyes. That was about the extent of her knowledge when it came to the kissing deal. She waited, barely breathing. His lips brushed hers, cool like an ocean breeze, before he pulled away quickly.

Alexia opened her eyes. Her cheeks were hot and flushed, but she was still there and hadn't melted from embarrassment. The hooting and hollering faded away in the distance, and she turned to see the rest of the boys retreating down the beach.

"Thank you."

What was she supposed to say? "You're welcome. Will they leave you alone now?"

He nodded. "I know it seems silly to let them get to me, but they are family and I guess I figured..." He gave a wry smile. "Anyway, thanks for helping me. They'll stop teasing me, for a while at least."

He rose to his feet and Alexia stood too, feeling strange to remain kneeling at his feet. Joshua shyly passed her a shell. "Here, for your castle. Or to take home as a memento of the holiday."

She dropped her eyes to see a perfect shell, the edges intact and the spiral tracing counterclockwise to a fine point. "Thank you, it's beautiful." Alexia lifted her gaze to his. She caught a glimpse of something in the water beyond his shoulders and sucked in air. "*Look!*"

Fins surfaced in the water near shore. Suddenly a smooth body rose into the air, somersaulted and dove back in nose first.

"You've never seen dolphins at play before?"

She shook her head, refusing to take her gaze off the beautiful creatures. "They are so amazing. Do they plan it in advance? Are they playing or is it something they do to hunt or—"

Joshua laughed as two of the creatures leapt into the air and passed each other at the height of the arc. "It's just play. Dolphins don't have much work to do and lots of time to play."

They stood shoulder to shoulder and watched until he squeezed her hand. "I have to go. Thanks, and I hope to see you again."

Alexia watched until he disappeared from sight before making her way back to Gram's remote beachfront home. Walking the steep stairs up to the main house, she stopped again and again to admire the dolphins as they frolicked in the waves.

Her first kiss. How very strange.

A wave broke high enough to splash her knees, bringing Alexia back from her wandering thoughts. Water soaked the bottom of her nightgown, making it cling tighter, clammy against her skin. Alexia debated only for a moment before she plunged into the next wave and let it soak her to the waist, the salt water crisp and cool. She felt light, and every inch of her skin tingled in the wind, her hair whipping around her face. The moonlight bright on her body, the storm ready to break, a deep longing rose within her for something unknown.

A place?

A person?

Alexia sat in the crashing surf, the wildness of the weather calling to her core, chaining her to the shore like a siren's cry. She lay back, the grit of the sand under her shoulders delighting her with the coarse texture. A wave broke over her, soaking her to the skin.

The medallion around her neck flared and light exploded from within its depths. Motes danced, light swirled, sparkles flew around her and caressed every inch of her skin. Heat wrapped around her, stroked her torso, lapped at her neck like the touch of a lover.

The sky disappeared.

Chapter Two

Alexia opened her eyes to find she lay on fluffy cushions set on a thick mat of sea grasses, the rough roof of a cave overhead. A few feet away down a sandy shore there was ocean water, the surface smooth and unbroken, the storm's madness calmed by the shelter of the cave. Darting moonlight sparkled through the entrance, dancing lights changing the hanging stalactites from fearful objects to ones of beauty and peace. She tasted salt on her lips, the scent of something ripe and wonderful filled her nostrils, and she turned to follow it.

The back of the cave was a solid rock platform. A low wooden trunk was set like a table with a bowl of fruit and a flickering candle. Suddenly ravenous, Alexia picked a ripe strawberry from the offering and bit down, its flavor exploding in her mouth. She sat amidst the cushions and ate. Slowly, deliberately, each sensation peaking higher and higher on her taste buds. She watched the water lap at the shore.

It must be a dream. She'd seen this place so many times since she'd started to come to the coast. Ever since she'd fallen in love with the ocean, she'd had dreams involving this cave. Dreams of dolphins and blue lights and endless need that had her waking dazed, restless and aroused.

The cave filled with the brilliant blue glow she'd seen around the medallion earlier. It swirled past the entrance and poured like liquid silver through the air, flowing throughout the cavern. It touched her in passing and paused, frozen in midair like a bit of the Milky Way torn from the sky and tossed into the small cave.

The light brushed her feet, swirled around her ankles and twisted its way up her legs. Touching, caressing. A tingling sensation moved with the light as it floated over her skin, and Alexia froze as her body was momentarily enveloped before the light shot to the far back corner and bounced down to form into the solid body of a man.

His skin was smooth. Blond hair fell to his broad shoulders, muscles well defined in his arms and torso. Brilliant green eyes smiled at her and her heart leapt.

"Joshua?"

He paced forward, long limbs eating up the distance between them, and Alexia sucked in a gasp of air. He was naked, his skin shimmering with a warm light like the haze of a hot summer's day. She debated retreating to the water, but there was no time before he knelt at her side, his hand reaching for hers.

“Alexia. I’ve waited for this day. It’s been far too long in coming.” He lifted her fingers to his mouth and kissed her knuckles lightly, his eyes staring into hers. Her body responded to his presence, her nipples tightening, her passage flooding with moisture. She was no blushing fourteen-year-old, he was no youth.

It was a dream and she was so ready for it.

He lowered their joined hands to brush his knuckles over the metal of her necklace, his smile warming her even more.

“It looks marvelous on you, my lady.” His voice was low and husky.

Alexia frowned. *My lady?*

He wrapped his other hand around her neck and drew them together, and all her concerns washed away as their lips touched.

Heat. All-consuming heat filled her. His lips branded her skin as he stroked his tongue into her mouth, salty and sweet and addictive. Alexia trailed her hands over his shoulders, his back, tracing his muscles while their mouths connected. He pressed them closer, rotated her in his arms until she cuddled in his lap. His cock pressed into her buttocks, moisture painted on her skin. Its rigid length lit a fire within her she wanted stoked. She wanted to be touched and petted until all the need filtering from her core had been met.

She pulled back slightly, her lips still brushing his skin. “I’ve seen this cave before. You’ve been in my dreams but we’ve never—”

“We’re together, as we should be. You don’t have to figure out every detail. You know it’s right, let go and enjoy.”

“But—”

Joshua lowered her to the mat, his long body stretched beside her. “You are the Keeper. You hold the medallion and the heart of the people. But you are still Alexia. You still choose for yourself what you want, what you desire.”

He ran a finger down her torso, slipping the nightgown open as his gaze feasted on her body. Alexia shivered. His words echoed her grandmother’s, that it was Alexia’s choice and decision. Whatever that meant.

“What do you choose, my lady? Do you want me to leave and you can enjoy a retreat here in the cavern by yourself?” He rolled over her, his body firm, his erection pressing into her belly. Joshua lowered his head and kissed her collarbone, his tongue lapping along the delicate line and back up her neck. He whispered into her mouth. “Or do you want me to stay and keep you company? We could visit. Build a sandcastle. Play a game.”

His mouth descended again and Alexia wrapped her arms around him, pulling his torso into contact with hers. She swept her tongue into his mouth, needing to taste his unique flavor, needing him to touch her intimately. They kissed, teased, wrapped around each other until he rolled away, breathing hard.

His eyes glinted like emeralds and Alexia raised a hand to his cheek. Should she say what she really wanted? “This is a dream I’ve longed for, Joshua. I want you to stay and make love to me.”

The answering flash in his eyes delighted her, as did the smile that was quickly hidden as he dropped his mouth to her skin, his tongue tracing designs as he cradled her body closer to his, fingers smoothing her shoulders.

Joshua held her tenderly in his arms, unable to take his mouth off her skin for more than a moment. He’d watched her furtively when possible over the years, never again coming in contact with her after that first unexpected touch on the beach.

His brothers had gotten in so much trouble for provoking him into asking someone for a kiss. They’d never dreamed Joshua would pick the one girl on the entire beach who would cause a tidal wave of trouble. When the Keeper found out her granddaughter had been touched by one of the people without permission, the ensuing storm had taken weeks to calm. Finally convinced it was nothing but an innocent prank, Victoria had kept much closer tabs on her charge. Alexia returned home before Joshua had found a way to meet with her again. Something had drawn him to her in the first place, and he had been intrigued by their short interlude.

Every summer afterwards when Alexia had come to visit, Joshua had found himself shuffled off to distant relatives. He knew his parents were keeping the two of them apart but at the time he hadn’t fully understood why. His brothers weren’t banished, only him. The torment grew as he aged and upon his end-of-summer return, he’d had to listen to the stories praising Alexia’s quick wit, caring heart and maturing body. She had memories of activities with all his family yet none with him but that one sweet, brief interaction. The past few years she hadn’t visited Jaffrey’s Cove, as she worked to earn a living.

No more. She had haunted his dreams for too long. She was a woman grown, and he was tired of waiting for official permission to court her. When the medallion had touched her skin today, he’d felt it, a warning beacon preparing him for the summons. When she’d dipped it into the salt water of the ocean, he’d been hiding nearby, already shifted into the form of his body people called St. Elmo’s fire. His lightning-quick response of surrounding the trigger eliminated all others from hearing and answering her call.

She may not have been aware she had summoned lovers to her side but he knew it, and his actions ensured he alone was available for her to choose this time.

He stroked her cheek, watched the blood rise to flush her skin. It wasn’t proper etiquette to deny her a choice of partners for her first encounter with the merfolk, but tradition be damned. He wasn’t going to let any of his randy brothers or cousins near her tonight. Unless he was mistaken, she had no idea that the single men of the pod would have surrounded her, overwhelmed her, as the magic of the medallion opened her to the cravings of her merfolk blood. He was certain that being taken by more than one lover before she

understood where the need came from would have caused her mental anguish, if not now, in the clear light of the morning.

Instead he chose to protect her, and if that meant he gained in the process, so be it. He would be the first to bring her to the heights of passion, make her skin glow, hear her cry in delight.

Joshua leaned in and cupped one tender breast, his palm rubbing the nipple to bring it to a hard peak. Her skin warmed him and he pressed another kiss on her mouth, the feel of her tongue stroking his sending a tingle down his spine.

Her big brown eyes danced with mischief when he pulled back, his thumb continuing to brush her nipple as he stared into her eyes. Alexia responded, molten with need as she slipped one leg between his to press their hips together intimately. Moisture from her pussy smeared his thigh, hot and sticky.

“Hmm, Joshua.” She rocked her hips and dragged her core over his raging cock, rubbing like a cat in heat. His blood pounded painfully through his groin and he fought back the urge to flip her and mount her right then and there. He slipped a hand down to cup her mound, his fingers parting the short curls to slip into her scalding heat.

Alexia purred in his arms, her hips rising to thrust against him. Joshua smiled with delight at how responsive she was, how intensely sensual her every move. She cast a spell over his heart as well as his body, and he wanted nothing less than to please her completely.

Joshua stroked slowly in and out of her passage, curling his fingers to touch the sensitive spot deep within her. He lowered his mouth to her breast, took the enticing tip into his mouth and gave it a soft lap. He rolled his tongue around the tight peak before suckling. Alexia shuddered under his touch.

Continuing to thrust his fingers into her sheath, he kissed his way down to her belly. She had gotten a piercing sometime and a deep blue stone glittered against her warm skin. He tugged it with his teeth before pressing another kiss to her body. Under his lips, her breath quickened as he approached the sweet nectar between her legs. Alexia waited for him to touch her, her heartbeat erratic as he slowed and took a deep breath. The scent of her body filled him, the aroma of sex and woman and heady desire. He kissed the delicate inner thigh on either side of her core, his fingers barely moving now, simply filling her. She squeezed at him, her pussy trying to pull him in, make him pump into her. He chuckled.

“Your scent is driving me wild and I can’t wait anymore. I need to taste you, Alexia.”

Her answering moan made him grin madly as her fingers threaded through his hair and attempted to drag him closer to her wet opening.

Joshua removed his fingers, and she complained briefly before he tucked in tight and covered her with his mouth. He exhaled, hot and slowly over the moist tissues, making them open further under him. His tongue dipped into her core then swirled around the hard little nub peeking from its protective hood. She tasted wonderful, sweet like the strawberries in the bowl he’d prepared for her. His tongue laved her slit from the very base of her body to the quivering tip and her hips shook.

It took incredible effort to continue at the slow taunting pace, but the sounds of delight Alexia made were all the reward Joshua needed to continue. He pressed his erection hard into the mat to resist rising over her and driving himself like a spike into her warmth. The tip of his tongue thrust deep in her sweetness, lapping at the honey pouring down on him. His fingers curled around her clit and caressed in circles until Alexia gasped and her core pulsed in waves around his seeking tongue. He continued to feast until her body relaxed. Rising above her, his erection nudged her body as he kissed her deeply, his tongue penetrating her mouth as it had her pussy moments before.

Alexia was the one to adjust her hips to let him slip between her wet labia. She was the one to wrap her legs around his body and pull on his shoulders to encourage him to press into her passage until he was buried to the hilt, his balls solidly against her.

She felt so good. Hot, wet, welcoming pressure. Joshua's whole existence centered on the amazing sensation experienced by his sensitive cock as he rocked his hips, sliding back and forth between her legs. Nothing had ever felt as good.

Nothing had ever felt like Alexia.

She hummed with approval as he pumped. Joshua caught one breast between his teeth and nipped at the tip. Between them, the scent of sex rose, the heat of their bodies mingled and a sheen of sweat made them glide skin over skin with greater ease.

Joshua stared into her eyes as he adjusted their position, lifting her legs higher to fill her more completely on each thrust, unable to keep the speed slow as his body demanded he take her harder. He dropped a hand to her core, wet his fingertips in the combined moisture of their bodies and then stroked her clit in time with his penetrations.

Time stood still. Joshua had no idea how long they'd been making love, only that his mind never wanted him to stop. His body couldn't hold out much longer. His balls tightened, pulled into his body, and he quickened the pace again, pounding hard into her heat.

Alexia cried out, a flush of red spreading over her chest, and her sheath grabbed at him, squeezing tightly as she reached another climax. Joshua let out his own cry of relief on the next thrust as he released his control and let them join together in the ultimate of physical pleasures.

Bodies united, pleased, sated.

She tugged at his shoulders, pulling his torso over her to bring them together, hearts beating wildly, chest to breast.

"Hmm. That was lovely." Alexia sighed, her hands running lightly over his skin.

"*You* are lovely." Joshua kissed her delectable mouth one more time before rolling off to the mat, twisting their legs together to keep in as close contact as possible.

Alexia closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensations thrilling through her. Her pussy still felt him inside, stretching and rubbing the sensitive tissue. Her breasts buzzed and her skin tingled.

It had been wonderful.

She hoped she would remember this dream in the morning. There had been so many involving Joshua, and yet all she ever recalled were images of bright eyes, the feeling of soft caresses, and the haunting sounds of dolphins calling to one another over the ocean waves.

Perhaps this dream would be different. She rested her head on his smooth chest and relaxed as his arms wrapped her close and she faded off to sleep.

The shutters slamming made her sit up with a start. She raced to the window and closed it tightly, forcing it against the harsh wind that rocked the house. The storm was in full swing, the waves churned to harsh whitecaps and the crash on the shore deafening in its volume. Alexia leaned into the window to stare at the madcap ocean, surging like a live creature struggling for freedom.

It was cold in the room. She glanced down to see she stood naked and barefoot on the hard wooden floorboards. Alexia puzzled for a minute. She was sure she'd thrown on a long nightgown before bed in case she needed to rise and comfort her grandmother.

She turned to where her suitcase rested in the corner of the room, and spotted the gown. It hung from the wardrobe, the shimmery material draped over a hanger.

A trace of memory flitted past. She reached and touched the fabric. It was damp to her fingers, and when she sniffed, the scent of salt water was strong. A trace of strawberries lingered as well.

Alexia turned back to the bed and took a slow careful look over the whole room. There was a faint trail of sand and water leading from the French doors to her bed. She had gone to the shore tonight, hadn't she?

She couldn't remember.

She pulled a dry gown from her suitcase, dressing quickly before crawling back under the covers and snuggling deep beneath the quilt. The familiar sound of the storm was reassuring in spite of feeling there was something she needed to do.

The last thing she remembered seeing was the glow of St. Elmo's fire dancing on the railing outside the house.

It made her smile.

Chapter Three

“I don’t want to sell, you know.”

Alexia nodded. Again. Gram had started at the breakfast table, insisting that even though she wanted to move out, there was no reason Alexia couldn’t simply take over the house.

“I don’t need to sell, either. I can afford to give you the house.”

Alexia rubbed her fingers along her forehead and pulled into the nearest available parking spot. “Yes, you’ve told me that. But I don’t have a job here, and even if you did give me the house, I would need a way to support myself.”

“Tosh. You could arrange to do massage therapy at the clinic in Jaffrey’s Cove, or you can sell the things Unca stashed all over the place. There’s more than enough for any girl to live on for a good long time.” Gram was out of the car awfully fast for an old-timer and Alexia raced to catch up.

“But they’re your things, Gram, and if we sell anything, it goes to paying your expenses. Where are you hauling me? And what’s the hurry?”

Gram dodged through another group of tourists, pulling Alexia by the hand at breakneck speed. It obviously wasn’t because she’d grown too frail that grandmother wanted to abandon the house. Alexia was led up a short set of stairs and dragged through a beautiful metal lattice gate into a refined business-like setting.

“We have an appointment with Mr. Marley to complete some estate forms that are due. Tell him Victoria and Alexia Colten are here. We’ll wait in the parlor.” Alexia goggled to hear her soft-spoken Gram issue a statement with such command. The old woman seated herself comfortably and thumbed through a magazine as she waited, and Alexia looked her over with a critical eye. This didn’t seem like the same frail, broken woman who called in a tizzy crying for help with settling into a new home. Not even the same woman as the one who had shuffled around the house the previous evening and gone to bed early.

“What are you up to?” Alexia asked, sitting in the plush chair facing her.

Her grandmother peeked around the edge of the magazine, her gray eyes twinkling. “Hmmm? What’s that, love? Oh, I meant to ask you before we left. Are you wearing the necklace I gave you?”

Alexia pulled it from under her blouse and Gram gave a satisfied nod. “Very good.” When Alexia started to put it away she got a hurried response. “Just leave it out, dear, I like seeing it on you.”

Okay. Maybe this was why Gram needed to move. She was acting far stranger than Alexia could ever remember.

“Mrs. Colten? Miss Colten? Mr. Marley will see you now.”

Alexia rose and turned to help her grandmother to her feet but found Gram’s nose still buried in her magazine. “Gram, the lawyer is ready for us.”

Gram lifted her head and glanced around the room. “I don’t see him.”

Alexia shook her head. “No, we have to go to his office. He’s waiting for us there.”

Gram snorted. “Whippersnapper. He can come here and be polite enough to greet us properly.” She turned back to her reading, muttering something about young people and manners, and Alexia exchanged helpless looks with the receptionist.

“Victoria?” The rich sound of a dark-chocolate voice brushed Alexia’s skin and she shivered.

Gram rose on the arm of a rather dashing man in an exquisite three-piece suit. “Michael. Good to see you. Do you remember my granddaughter, Alexia?”

Michael turned and his eyes lit up. Alexia remembered him. He was one of the Golden Boys of Summer on whom she’d had a mad, insane crush year after year.

“I certainly do. Alexia, welcome. It’s good to see you again.”

“Thank you.” She took his extended hand and shook it briefly, the warmth of his fingers rushing up her arm. He raised an eyebrow at her and Alexia realized she’d been staring. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. I didn’t realize you were a lawyer. I was expecting your father or uncle.”

Michael gestured for her to lead down the hallway as he escorted Gram on his arm. “No problem. I can imagine it was a surprise. You haven’t spent a summer at home for almost four years now.”

Alexia held her tongue but wondered at his wording. While she’d always felt like the beach house was her home, it was only feelings. Her real home was hundreds of miles away in the middle of the prairies.

Finally settled in the office, Michael pulled out various forms for Gram to sign. He simplified all the legal jargon, handling everything with such competence Alexia relaxed and her mind wandered. She found herself staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the beautiful view of the ocean across the beach.

“Invigorating, isn’t it?” Michael asked.

Alexia shook her head and tried to remember where she was. For a minute she’d been daydreaming about dolphins and riding the waves far from the shore. She turned to give him her full attention, and there was a flash as sunlight hit the medallion around her neck.

Michael froze, his skin flushing. His gaze flickered between her and her grandmother before a huge smile broke across his face. He bowed his head slightly to Alexia before facing Gram.

“Victoria, I had no idea you planned on this so soon.” Although he spoke to Gram, his gaze kept returning to the medallion and Alexia herself.

Gram made an imperial hand motion. “It was time and you know it.”

“When do you think—?”

“It’ll happen when she’s ready. Now hush, and finish with the silly papers you said I needed to sign.”

Alexia sat back in her chair, narrowing her eyes at her grandmother who was noticeably avoiding her gaze. By the time they were finished, Alexia was ready to shake someone. Anyone.

Except when Michael took her hand in farewell and kissed her knuckles, a flash of desire shot through her that removed the need to find answers.

She simply needed.

"It's been good to see you again." He squeezed her fingers smoothly before letting them go, his deep blue eyes staring into hers. "I would be honored if you would join me for a drink. A chance to catch up?"

Alexia stuttered like the blushing teenager she'd been all those summers ago. "I'd like that, but..."

"I'll pick you up at eight and we'll go to the Beachshore Inn. There's live music tonight."

Alexia was ready to decline. She was here to care for Gram, not gallivant around the neighborhood—

"I think it's a wonderful idea, Michael. I planned on visiting with your mother tonight. I'll stay over and then Alexia won't have to fuss with me for the evening." Gram used her bossy tone of voice and Michael snapped up straight.

"Mother will be pleased to see you, and you know you are always welcome in any of our homes." Michael nodded politely again as he took Gram's arm deferentially and guided her to the main doors.

They were halfway down the boardwalk before Alexia finally found her tongue and could speak again. "I don't believe what just happened."

"Hmmm, love? What's wrong?" Gram pulled her into another building, this one a restaurant. Alexia waited until they'd been seated, rather quickly, on the deck before she voiced her concerns.

"Gram, I'm here to take care of you, not to let you stay with neighbors while I go dancing with someone I'm never going to see again after this holiday is over."

"Meh." Gram leaned forward and patted her cheek. "I told you all the boys were going to be after you." She gave a contented smile as she turned her chair to better see the ocean. "He won't be the only one, I guarantee it."

The morning passed in a blur, and Alexia grew more and more confused. Gram hauled her from location to location, insisting there was something she needed at each stop.

Yet Gram purchased nothing but coffee and cake at the restaurant, and even that had been "on the house" once the manager, another of the Marley brothers, came to the table to give his personal greetings. By the end of the morning, Alexia had been reintroduced to at least a dozen of the playmates she'd gained over summers past. Now they were all sensual men who watched her with their bright eyes and more than a passing interest. Alexia felt the heat of their stares as they examined the necklace hanging between her breasts, their gazes lingering on her body.

They all found an opportunity to touch her casually in passing, her arm, her shoulder or they kissed her knuckles as they bent low over her hand. Part of her rebelled and wondered why she was being fawned

over. Part of her grew hot and bothered and wondered what she could do to make them never stop. A low buzz of anticipation grew throughout her body and by lunchtime it was enough.

“Time to go home, Gram.”

“But there’s a couple more—”

“No.” Alexia rubbed her temples with her fingertips. “They will have to wait until tomorrow. Since you insist I go out tonight, I suggest we spend some time at home this afternoon. We can go through some of the things you want put aside for the research fellow who’s supposed to contact us soon.” She glanced at her grandmother to see Gram staring back with a great deal of surprise on her lined face.

Alexia gave her a gentle smile. “You’re not used to anyone telling you ‘no’, are you?”

Gram turned her face away to stare out the window but not before Alexia caught the small pout on the older woman’s lips. It was clear from the morning outing everyone in the small beachside community went out of their way to spoil her grandmother. She reached across the car seat and squeezed Gram’s hand for a moment. Alexia wasn’t displeased with the knowledge, but she was in dire need of a cold shower before attempting to accomplish anything of value in the afternoon. Her whole body was edgy and raw. Tight. Like she was being drawn thin and taut, and needed to be poured into before she could find release.

Joshua glanced up from his workbench to see a group of his brothers marching rapidly down the boardwalk, heads close together as if they shared some great secret. He fought the impulse to call out and instead waited to see if they planned to include him. A flash of pain shot through him as they passed the window with barely a nod and a wave in acknowledgement.

Why it had become okay to ignore him, Joshua never understood. The “when” had started the first summer he’d been sent away, but as to the “why”, there was no rhyme or reason he could see. As the youngest he had a lot in common with the mob, even though he had chosen a more artistic line of work.

He wiped his fingers on his apron, removing a trace of the glue that clung from his latest project. The mirror surrounded by an intricate mosaic made of shell fragments was nearly ready for shipping, and he admired it once more before being distracted by passersby.

Joshua puzzled over what he saw. There were more people than usual headed to the Beachshore Inn this evening. More of his relatives. The male relatives.

He wiped his hands carefully and removed his work apron. He ran upstairs and as quickly as possible showered and changed into a clean shirt and jeans. He deliberated whether he should place his hair in its usual ponytail but decided to let it swing loose over his shoulders, like Alexia had seen him most recently. The memory brought a smile to his lips and an ache to his body. It was past time for this to all shake down.

The music of a band playing at the inn carried over the water toward him as he approached. So. There was dancing to be had tonight. Joshua was never sure when the social events were taking place, preferring to spend his time creating his art.

He wasn't lonely.

He already knew he would share his life with Alexia. Last night had confirmed it. He just needed her to claim him publicly and the rest of the family to acknowledge it.

Entering the building, Joshua stuck to the shadows and let his eyes adjust to the dim lighting. Alexia sat perched on a tall stool surrounded by a crowd of his siblings. Michael leaned on the bar counter beside her, his hand casually draped over her shoulder, and Joshua fought the urge to slam his fist into his oldest brother's face.

"I'm glad you're here, Joshua." Anthony spoke quietly in his ear, his nearest cousin in age and his closest friend of the bunch. "Although I didn't expect to see you. I thought you were banned from any event that included the new Keeper."

Anthony was the only one of the family who had ever made him feel welcome and Joshua was glad of his company now. He let his gaze wander the room as he counted relatives. Damn, he *was* the last of the boys to arrive. Anger flared as he thought of how they tried to cut him out. Any remorse he might have felt at blocking the call and making love alone with Alexia washed away.

"Never been officially banned that I've been informed." Joshua leaned closer and asked quietly, "Has she shown any favorites? Michael looks like he's trying to make some kind of point already."

Anthony snorted. "You know Mike. Dashing and in charge. He spotted the medallion and immediately made his move. Thinks he can influence her decision since he was the one who brought her out tonight."

His cousin looked flushed and Joshua laughed softly. "You excited about the thought of the call? Looking forward to trying to convince Alexia you should be one of her lovers?"

Anthony shook his head violently. "It was one thing to be involved in group activities when we were teens, but it's another altogether to become a consort to the matriarch of the pod. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy her company. She's got a mischievous sense of humor, and a wicked temper when she thinks someone's being mistreated. Making love with her would be amazing, but she's going to be leading the people for the next fifty some years. I'm not cut out for leadership, or to support leadership. I'm content to teach in the winters and take part of my summer holidays to play in the Mediterranean Sea."

Joshua smiled and clasped a loose arm around Anthony's shoulders. It was good to know there was one less obstacle in his quest for Alexia.

Loud laughter broke across the room, and he saw Alexia shrug off Michael's hand and take to the dance floor with the oldest of the cousins. Braden held her a tad too close for a moment, and Joshua readied to defend her when he realized there was no need. She spoke firmly and the space between the dancers opened to a polite hand's span.

Joshua grinned and bought Anthony a beer. It was going to be a great show tonight, watching Alexia in action. He expected nothing less of the new Keeper, the soon-to-be-leader of their merfolk pod.

His lover.

His life partner. Even if she didn't know it yet.

Alexia danced with yet another of the harem of men who had surrounded her the entire evening. It was gratifying to be the center of their attention, but there was a part of the shy little girl who still wondered why. Why they were being so attentive? Why every time another one of the Marley brother's grasped her hand, her heart raced with anticipation only to calm within the first few minutes of their time on the dance floor?

It wasn't that she didn't find them attractive. Her whole body pulsed with need and her panties were soaking wet. Yet each thrill that shot through her faded from the peak so rapidly she wondered what was wrong. Her gaze swung around the room, seeking someone who hadn't arrived yet.

Michael rose and took her into his arms. "You look like you've almost had enough dancing for tonight."

"I never realized so many of Jaffrey's Cove would be here. It's like another Marley family reunion, isn't it?" Alexia smiled briefly at the thought of the first reunion she'd participated in, no matter how unknowingly.

His grasp tightened around her waist as he pulled her closer. Alexia hesitated. She'd rebuked others for trying the same thing earlier, but she was too damn horny to stop herself anymore. His arms felt wonderful around her, though a little niggles of doubt remained. He wasn't the one she really wanted.

But at this point she didn't give a damn. Every nerve in her body screamed to be touched. He was gorgeous, attentive and available, that had to count for something. Michael slipped his hand lower on her back, caressing through the fabric. His touch eased her and she relaxed in his arms. It felt so good to be held and petted. Alexia dropped her head onto his shoulder and closed her eyes as they danced.

"Would you like to go for a walk on the shore before I take you home? Or would you like to walk back to your house?"

Alexia's heartbeat sped up. Gram wasn't at the house, and this beautiful man was going to escort her home. All the pent-up sexual frustrations of the day screamed at her to seize the offer. The blood flow to her breasts increased, and her nipples tightened as their bodies rubbed intimately together.

But she needed not to get ahead of herself. Perhaps he was only planning on taking her home as a favor to her grandmother. It was obvious the town folk bent over backwards to make her Gram happy.

She tried to be nonchalant. "That would be nice. If you have time. I don't want to keep you from anything. You've been very giving already this evening."

Michael erased all worries he'd offered a mercy date as he pulled their bodies even closer, his erection a firm statement of need against her belly. He lowered his mouth toward hers, lips inches away, and she was ready to lift her mouth and accept the homage when a husky voice broke in.

“I think it’s my turn for a dance.”

Alexia shivered, her skin lit on fire as Michael’s hands tightened further on her body. She twisted in his arms and stared into the brilliant green eyes she’d dreamed about for years. A shot of adrenaline flew through her.

This was what she’d been waiting for. Who she’d been waiting for. Automatically she reached a hand toward him.

A sudden jerk stopped her fingers inches away from Joshua’s, and her head whipped around to see Michael glare daggers at the new arrival.

Joshua grinned back, a cocky expression meant to offend.

Both men had their backs up and Alexia couldn’t believe her response. The thought they both wanted her took her beyond excited. Her womb clenched, moisture flooded, preparing her to join intimately with the one she chose. A laugh rose from her throat, sultry, demanding. Impulsively she clasped Joshua by the hand and pulled him close.

Michael huddled at her back, Joshua at her front, and she let out a purr of contentment. Surrounded by hard male, her senses went on overload as Joshua lowered his mouth to cover hers. His taste sparked her arousal even higher, her hands pulling him closer. Behind her Michael nuzzled her neck, and she let her head fall to the side as his lips and teeth traveled over the tendons and muscles.

Alexia’s body throbbed with the need to be filled, to be satisfied, and she reached back with one hand to hold Michael close, his cock pressed to the crack of her ass. Joshua’s erection dug into her thigh, heat branding her body.

The voice of reason interrupted. What the *hell* was she doing? She opened her eyes and glanced around the room. She stood on the dance floor, groping two men while their brothers and cousins watched. Her face flushed, her mind incredulous that she’d lost all control and behaved in such a risqué manner. There was not a censorious eye in the room, but her temperature elevated and her embarrassment rose three hundred percent.

“Holy crap. I’m sorry, I need some air.” She pushed hard on Joshua, thrusting him away from her, twirled out of Michael’s arms and fled the room.

Chapter Four

Joshua ducked as Michael swung at him.

“Whoa, tiger. You want to save the he-man routine for later? We’d better go after Alexia and try to explain to her what’s happening. I think you freaked her out.” Joshua motioned toward the open door Alexia had raced out.

Michael tugged his shirt to straighten it, his eyes dark as he glowered at Joshua. “She wouldn’t have gotten upset if you hadn’t come on so strong. What the hell were you thinking? She has no idea about merfolk traditions yet you acted like she was ready to take us both on.”

Joshua stood his ground. “Oh, the two on one wasn’t my idea. It was hers, and it was a natural reaction to the testosterone dump she got from having every single one of the unmated males in the pod here tonight. You don’t think that was a bad idea? Alexia was just given the Keeper’s necklace, and you go and stoke her fires to an inferno without even taking the time to explain anything.”

“Back off. You know you’re not allowed near her,” Michael spat out.

Joshua laughed. “Victoria didn’t warn me off and unless she does, or Alexia, I have as much right as any of you to court her. I’m going after her. I suggest you and I go alone because she really will freak if she sees a gang coming after her.”

An uneasy truce between them, the brothers headed out the door toward the shoreline. Alexia sat huddled on a recliner in the distance, her arms wrapped around her torso. Anthony’s jacket lay over her shoulders and the wiry blond squatted in front of her, his hand resting on her knee as he spoke to her. Joshua nodded to himself. Anthony was the perfect one to help explain the mess.

“Oh hell, Anthony too?” Michael complained through clenched teeth.

“Relax, you know it will take at least two of us to help her make the change. She seems to have already picked you and me, judging from her reaction on the dance floor. As much as I dislike it, having Anthony available as a third will only ensure she completes the transformation safer and quicker.”

Michael glared at him, his nostrils flaring. He appeared far rougher and on edge than the smooth and relaxed lawyer about town he liked to portray. “Don’t be so sure you’re going to be a part of anything. I have no intention on sharing with you unless I have to. And then it would only be for the one time to help change her and never again.”

Joshua grabbed his brother by the arm and whipped him around to stand face to face. He forced himself to relax his clenched fists. The thought of anyone, especially Michael, touching Alexia made him crazy, but he had to trust she'd make the right decision. "I remind you again, it's not your choice."

"Victoria brought her to me first. It was a clear sign of approval," Michael bit out.

Joshua shook his head in denial. "From what Anthony told me, Victoria had an appointment with you already, and she made sure to go and visit all the rest of the family immediately afterward. That's beside the point. It's not Victoria's decision. The Keeper chooses, and since Victoria passed on the medallion, Alexia is the new matriarch."

Joshua softened his voice as he tried to let go of the anger and frustration that had haunted him for so long. Tried to let the sincerity of his desires come through in his message. "In some ways you seem the most logical choice to partner with Alexia right now. You're very successful in your human business, and you're one of the strongest merfolk in our pod. You would be able to help her make the first transformation better than any one of us.

"But *she's* the leader. She needs to be supported. And I'm a far better candidate for that than you are. I have no fancy career to be hurt by the time it'll take me to help her in her duties. I have no long list of outside contacts who will wonder where I've gone if I disappear for extended periods of time. I've been alone for so long—set apart from the rest of the family—but it's prepared me to put my own desires aside and simply be there for *her*." He urged Michael to understand, to feel the need that had driven him to wait all these years.

Michael stared at him unblinking for the longest time before nodding, briefly. "You're right. It's her choice in the end and I will honor that decision. But I remind you of the same thing. If she turns you down then I expect you to leave. There are others who could support her as well as you."

Joshua motioned toward the beach and they resumed their walk. The warmth of the night air surrounded them, stars sparkling overhead. The few lights of the business area faded behind them as they approached the two already on the beach. Joshua tried not to think about all the things still needing to be dealt with. He ached for Alexia, but even the tension and ritual of this part of the joining met a need deep within him. She would be the one to let him truly be himself. Let his desire to serve her and care for her finally be met.

The men slowed their pace as Anthony looked up, cautioning them by his expression.

"Alexia?" Joshua asked quietly. "Are you okay?"

She lifted her chin and took a deep breath before answering. "I don't believe I did that." She shook her head and shrugged in confusion. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine what you think of me right now."

Uncharacteristically, Michael chuckled, and it was enough to make Alexia lift her head to flick her gaze between the two of them. "I'm thinking you are about the hottest thing I've ever held in my arms, and I'm trying to decide what I need to say to convince you to go back where you were."

Crimson spread over her face, visible in the moonlight. “You’re not disgusted with me?” She cursed softly. “I’m disgusted with me.”

Michael joined Anthony to sit on the sand facing out to sea. They watched the waves rise and fall gently, so different from the storm that had whipped out of nowhere the previous night. Anthony spoke for them all. “None of us are disgusted with you. There’s more to the story than you know and once we explain a bit, I don’t think you’ll feel so embarrassed. We need to tell you about Jaffrey’s Cove. About your grandmother.”

Joshua took a seat at the foot of the recliner where he could easily see the three of them. He was within arm’s reach of Alexia, and he wanted to touch and reassure her she’d done nothing wrong. She stared at Anthony and seemed to have calmed, the tension in her body easing.

She sucked in a quick breath. Joshua followed her line of vision and spotted them. The rest of the single men of the pod had left the dance floor, shifted and were playing in the waves not far offshore.

“The dolphins. There are so many of them tonight.” Alexia spoke in a whisper, the sound of a zephyr across the water. “They’re beautiful.”

Joshua smiled. “They are.”

He raised his gaze to hers and she shook her head in confusion. “Why do I feel like I know you so well? I haven’t seen you in years.”

He hesitated.

Anthony broke in. “Alexia, we need to tell you something pretty unbelievable. Have you noticed anything different about your grandmother over the years?”

Alexia wiped at her eyes then gave a wry smile. “You mean other than she’s a conniving old lady? She has the whole town eating out of her hand. I knew she was bossy but never noticed before today just how much. Plus she’s talking about giving up her home, and I don’t see why she needs to do that since she’s still mobile and strong. A little forgetful at times, but definitely lucid enough to be alone.”

Anthony nodded slowly. “Victoria is well respected and loved by all the town folk, but not because she’s a nice old lady. Victoria has been our leader for many, many years and—”

“Your leader? What kind of leader? She’s not into politics or anything I know about.”

Anthony took a big breath. “Oh boy. This is tougher than I thought it would be.” He rubbed his chin for moment before he caught sight of the dolphins at play.

“A demonstration?” Joshua suggested. It would be the easiest way to explain.

Anthony nodded and the three men exchanged glances.

“Umm, guys? What does this have to do with how I behaved tonight?” Alexia rose to her feet. “I think I’ll just go home—”

“Wait. There’s something you need to see.” Anthony took her by the elbow and led her to the shoreline. He gave a long piercing whistle, and Alexia visibly shivered. Joshua stepped behind her, slipped his arm around her waist soothingly, calming her when she tensed.

“It’s okay, Alexia. Do you see the dolphins? In the surf?” he asked.

She nodded. Joshua lowered his chin to her shoulder, breathing in her sweet scent as her breath quickened. The dolphins approached, leaping over the waves until they were in chest-deep water. A couple of them chattered at the gathering on the shore, their placid smiles showing as they turned their heads to the side to watch with bright eyes.

“Raise your arms in the air, Alexia. Tell them you want to see them.”

She turned her head to the side and her lips brushed his cheek before she pulled back slightly. “Tell them what?”

Joshua lifted his hand to caress her neck, delighted as she relaxed back into him so naturally. She might be mentally overwhelmed by her behavior, but her body knew him. Knew what she needed.

“Tell them to change.”

She snorted softly. “Maybe I’m not the one who’s acting crazy.”

“Trust me.”

Alexia elevated her arms into the air and the dolphins stilled, rising and falling in the swells of the water. “Okay, dolphins, change!” she shouted. She giggled for a second then the sound froze on her lips. Joshua tightened his hold on her as the increase of tension spread throughout her. She sucked in air, her pulse racing wildly.

“It’s impossible.” She whipped around to stare at Michael and Anthony who shrugged and gestured back at the ocean.

“If it was impossible you wouldn’t have seen it,” Anthony pointed out. “Improbable is a better word.”

“Thank you, Mr. English teacher,” Michael groaned. “You want to tell the rest of the story now?”

“Wait,” Alexia cried, her finger pointing to the sea where a dozen hard male bodies all stood in the chest-deep water. “How did they get there?” She leaned forward slightly and squinted. “Holy cow, is that Braden? And Jake?”

“And the rest of the guys from the dance floor. Yes, it’s them, and you saw how they got there,” Anthony said. “You saw them change from their dolphin forms.”

Alexia’s heart beat rapidly under his hands, and Joshua tried to soothe her, rubbing his hands up and down her arms. His touch seemed to help and he moved even closer, his torso snug against her. He whispered in her ear. “We’re shifters, Alexia. Some people call us merfolk. We can live on the land and in the ocean in our human forms, but we can also change into dolphins for longer journeys. Plus we like to play as dolphins.”

“Are you telling me you’re mermaids? With tails and stuff?”

Anthony laughed. “Umm. Do they look like maids out there in the surf?”

Joshua turned her in his arms and kissed her forehead briefly. “It’s just a name, Alexia. But yes, mermaids exist, not as sirens luring sailors to their deaths. We’re human, but we’re more than human. There’s a chemical in our blood that allows us to change forms and even breathe underwater.”

Anthony spoke over his shoulder. “Some merfolk have the ability to shift into another form as well, St. El—”

Joshua interrupted, “You’re one too.” He didn’t want to confuse the issue any further by mentioning things better left unsaid for a while longer. Things like he had a form that looked like St. Elmo’s fire. That he could travel over the water and track her medallion.

Things like the fact he’d already made love to Alexia. He’d tell her soon enough, just...not yet.

Alexia’s eyes grew huge, the moon making her brown irises glow with an unearthly light. “I’m a merfolk? But how?”

Michael shook his head as he came to take Alexia by the arm. His dark eyes flashed his irritation at Joshua. “Nice diplomatic announcement.”

“First, my lady, you should let the rest of the boys go back to playing.” Anthony pointed to where the men still stood in the moonlit sea. “Wave goodbye and they’ll know you don’t need them any longer tonight.”

She hesitantly shook a hand and the group in the ocean disappeared, some shifted back to dolphin, some dove into the waves in their human forms. Alexia watched until they faded from sight, the final hand waving from far out at sea. She closed her eyes and shuddered.

Joshua scooped her away from Michael, disregarding both their protests. “We’ll take you home to finish the story there. The night is growing cooler and you’re shaking.” He pressed his lips to her forehead again, his gaze meeting with Michael and Anthony. In silent agreement they turned from the shore.

It was time.

Chapter Five

Alexia opened the door and wandered into the empty house. Lost in the swell of emotion raging through her mind and the sexual tension racing through her body, she made her way blindly to the living room not even checking if anyone followed her. She occupied herself with trivial things. Lit the kindling in the fireplace, added wood until it blazed and a warm glow filled the room. Sat back and stared into the flames.

The day had gone from strange to stranger.

Gram didn't need her help. Instead the conniving old sweetheart seemed to be trying to set up Alexia with one of Jaffrey Cove's finest eye candy. And Gram was the leader of people who could turn at will into dolphins.

Alexia gave herself a shake. She needed a drink.

She startled as a hand pressed on her shoulder, momentarily forgetting anyone was there with her. Wordlessly, Anthony handed her a wine glass before he sat nearby on the floor and leaned back against the couch. Alexia stared into the ruby depths, the scent of the smoky liquid rising to her nose, mixing with the other scents in the room that teased and tickled.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Beside her a strange sense of emotion flowed from Anthony, desire and nervousness overlaying each other in equal amounts. He worried about how she was taking the revelation that legends existed, astonished to be in the same room as her, near enough to touch her. He wanted her. A pure, sweet emotion full of adoration and longing.

Alexia looked into his face and his eyes darted away from her direct gaze. How did she know what he felt? His emotions were as clear as if he had spoken. She remembered Anthony as the stalwart peacemaker during her summer visits. He was the one who'd calmed the storms that constantly erupted among the volatile Marley clan. He'd never given any indication that he'd been attracted to her, never flirted like some of his older kin. She brushed a hand over his arm and he shivered. His eyes closed and his body leaned closer to her like he couldn't help himself.

A snarl rose behind her. Michael. His scent darker, richer. Powerful and compulsive, filling the room with strength. She felt how hard his body was, knew he wanted to bury himself in her softness and possess her. He slipped to the floor on her other side, his blue eyes watching her carefully.

"We need to explain the rest. Are you warm yet?" Michael's gaze dropped over her body, sweeping up her torso to land on the medallion.

Was she warm? She was melting. Taking a deep breath, she not only smelt the men in the room, she felt their heat. Felt the pulse of their hearts loud enough to vibrate the walls of the room. Felt the sexual intent in their glances and the tightness in their bodies.

The arousal that had built through the day fought to surface, sensitizing her skin, knotting her stomach, pulsing in her core. She sipped at her wine, letting the rich flavor swirl on her tongue and burst in her mouth. This was insane. Here she sat in Gram's living room, a man on either side oozing sex appeal, and she soaked it all in. She wanted to flirt, to broadcast back to them just a bit of what she was feeling. Flicking a glance at Anthony, she licked her lips. His nostrils flared in response, his gaze locked on her mouth. She smiled and took another sip, watched him as she swallowed, the corner of his mouth twitching.

Alexia couldn't see him but sensed Joshua was in the room as well. He stood farther away, leaning on the glass doors separating the living room from the kitchen. His hard body called the loudest and she swung her head to look at him.

His emotions rang the clearest. He wanted her most of all. To touch her, hold her. Be claimed by her. His outward calm was a façade, his easy stance denied by how hard his body throbbed with need, how his jaw clenched when he glanced at his brother and cousin.

He wanted her alone. He was willing to offer her everything.

Alexia stopped and took a deep breath. However she was able to sense these things, they were real. Her fingers rubbed the medallion and a strange peace descended on her.

They were hers. All of them. She was due their homage. It was only right Michael and Anthony knelt on the floor, close enough she could touch them at will, whenever she desired.

She looked at Joshua again. Why was *he* not at her side as well? She wanted him there. Lowering her lashes, Alexia considered for a minute before she rose to her feet and strolled to him. His blond hair glowed in the reflected light of the fire. Golden flecks she didn't remember shone in his green eyes. Alexia offered her wine glass, and he wrapped his fingers around hers, trapping them between his warmth and the cool crystal. He brought the glass to his lips and took the final drops into his mouth. This time she couldn't stop staring at the moisture that clung to his firm mouth, and his beautiful smile that followed. She ran a fingertip over his bottom lip. His tongue flicked to wet it, the smell of the wine heady around them, joining with the salty scent she recognized as his.

Her womb clenched, wanting his intimate touch, and his eyes flashed, like he'd sensed the spike in her arousal.

"You need to let us tell you the rest of the story, Alexia," Joshua whispered as he took the glass from her and placed it on a side table. Linking his fingers through hers he led her back to the couch in front of the fire. She tugged at him when he would have joined the others on the floor, instead drawing him onto the couch and curling up at his side. One hand slipped behind his back to nestle her body into his.

Heat flared between them, exquisite and exciting. Alexia couldn't resist. She slid her other hand under his shirt and rubbed her palm against the bare skin of his firm abdomen.

"Hmmm, that's good. You feel so good, Joshua."

"Alexia. Stop touching him now. We have to explain things before you move too fast and make a mistake you'll regret," Michael barked at her, a tone of command in his voice, and she hesitated before turning to face him. His desires had shifted and something didn't feel right.

"You've seen the dolphins change. You're one of us, Alexia, like Joshua said. But you're not a commoner." Michael pointed to the medallion. "That represents your position in our pod. For years your grandmother has been our matriarch, our leader in much more than political matters. Giving you the medallion signifies her will for you to take over."

"What do I know about leading mythical beings?"

Joshua's fingers brushed her shoulder and she shivered, intense pleasure breaking over her. She wanted to turn around and throw herself on top of Joshua. Strip him bare, ride him, and she didn't care who else was in the room. His caress was light but it was enough, and she stared into his eyes. Longing reflected back. Heat. She didn't want to stop and have to think about what this meant.

She just wanted.

Alexia wrapped her hands further around his torso, palms tight to his skin, and Joshua made a quiet noise deep in his throat. A powerful shot of lust hit her, and her voice was husky when she managed to speak. "What does this have to do with my hormones being on overload?"

"Joshua, stop touching her!" Michael demanded, hands tightening to fists.

Alexia narrowed her eyes. The waves of anger rolling off him doused her libido like ice water.

"Please, everyone. Perhaps I should be the one to explain." Anthony held out a hand to Alexia and led her away to the massive windows overlooking the sea. The sight relaxed her, gave her back her center. Anthony stood beside her with a soothing calmness. When she impulsively linked her fingers with his, he gasped.

"You're the teacher. Teach me." Alexia smiled in reassurance. "The SparksNotes version if possible."

He nodded and thought for a minute. Alexia wondered if he realized his thumb was massaging her knuckles.

"As the Keeper, you have an innate sense of your people's needs. You can use it to help them, whether it's in their work or play or family life. You'll know your duties instinctively, guiding the pod and keeping us strong. Keeping us safe." He turned her face him, his deep green eyes dark in his tanned face. "Along with the abilities come needs of your own. You need to be supported and cared for. Until you select a consort, any time you have a need all the eligible males will respond. We'll care for you as best we can—"

..

“Every time I get worried or upset, there’s going to be a throng of guys surrounding me?” Something was still missing, she knew it.

Anthony shook his head, his face flushed with embarrassment. “You know, I could write you a nice essay on this, explain it all in great detail...”

Alexia laughed and he smiled wryly before continuing. “You have the merfolk genes, but you don’t have the blood. Yet. You need additional chemicals to change to a dolphin form or to be able to survive underwater in your human body. If you’d grown up around Jaffrey’s Cove, in a family of merfolk, you’d already have them, just from environmental exposure. Most merfolk, boys and girls, build up enough of the chemicals by their early teens to shift.

“You gained a few during your summer holidays, but all the various components are required to produce the final compound. Your hormones are on overdrive because as the new matriarch, you want the chemicals immediately. We have them in a form you can easily absorb. That’s what’s causing your strong desire for the males of the pod.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You have this chemical?”

He nodded.

“And I get it from you, how?”

Anthony’s gaze flicked to the others as he flushed harder.

“Sex. You need to have sex with us.” Michael stalked forward, his hand reaching to pull her to his side forcefully. Anthony protested but Michael ignored him, slipping his hands around her head and forcing his mouth on hers. A shiver of disgust shook her body and she clawed at him, tried to detach herself from his clutches. He ignored her attempts to push him away, his hands scrambling at her dress, his stronger body overpowering hers. Loud voices rose in anger around her. Joshua yanked his brother off her and she was free, cradled against Anthony’s solid chest. Joshua slammed his fist hard into Michael’s jaw. He flew backward to land flat on the floor, limbs flailing. Alexia hid her face, Anthony’s arms closed around her as he attempted to lead her away from where Joshua stood menacingly over Michael.

She needed to stay. She needed to finish this. Alexia forced herself forward to Joshua’s side, dragging Anthony with her.

“You will not touch her again unless she asks. Do you understand me?” Joshua’s icy cold tones sent a shiver of pure lust shooting through her. “She selects. *She* decides. Not birth order, not some fancy piece of paper on the wall. The Keeper alone knows who she needs, and manhandling her is not going to make her transformation any easier.”

Michael attempted to stand and Joshua swept his feet from under him again. “Do you understand?” he demanded.

“I understand. Damn it, Joshua, let me up.”

“Yes, let him up.” Alexia stepped forward just in time to see Michael exchange his expression of avarice with one of deep concern. Alexia’s stomach churned. He might have tried to mask his outward appearance, but Michael’s emotions gave his intent away. He was far too delighted in the thought she was going to select him and rebuff Joshua. As Michael rose to his feet she took one more step forward.

She let it him have it with a right jab to the same spot Joshua had nailed him.

Michael staggered back, catching himself on the dining room chairs. Alexia followed, righteous indignation filling her stronger than her previous arousal. She didn’t know all the rules yet, but whatever was happening she knew one thing—Michael had crossed a line and she didn’t like it.

“Thank you for the evening, Michael. You were very gracious to extend an invitation to welcome me to the community. Let’s pretend that was your motivation all the time and leave it at that.” Alexia crossed her arms over her chest, watching as he wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand. His eyes glinted coldly for a moment and she saw red.

He was defying her?

She shot her arm out in time to stop Joshua from racing past her to attack Michael again. “Stop.”

Joshua froze immediately, body clenched tight as he waited for her direction.

“You need me to be able to change,” Michael warned softly, his gaze flicking over his kin. “I doubt you can gain all the chemicals you need from either one of them. Neither is strong enough to help you make the first change. Don’t throw this away, Alexia. We’d be good together, leading the pod as a team.”

Behind her Anthony hissed. She glanced at him, surprised at his response.

“You lead the pod alone, Alexia. Not your partner. They support you. Michael offering to lead together... It’s not possible. It’s not right.” Anthony spat the words with disgust.

Joshua said nothing, standing beside her like a rock.

“Joshua, is it true? Do I need him?”

Joshua stared at Michael, his body remaining alert. “It will be harder but not impossible. He’s very strong. Still, the tradition of the pod demands he provide what you need, no strings attached. You can order him to assist in your first change, and he will or face banishment. To stay in the pod he must support and respect you as you are due.” Joshua hesitated and turned to the side so she couldn’t see his face. “If you select him you might not need us.”

The thought of sending Joshua away sent an ache to the pit of her stomach and she couldn’t stand it anymore. She turned her back on Michael and threw herself at Joshua, wrapping her arms around his neck to cling to him. Their mouths met and once again his taste exploded through her. He supported her tenderly and she wanted to shake him. She didn’t want tenderness right now.

She wanted to be possessed.

A loud crash behind them made Joshua spin her behind him protectively as they turned to face the sound. Michael was once more on the floor. This time it was Anthony who hovered over him, fists at the

ready. Joshua would have moved to swing at Michael and continue the battle, but Alexia had had enough. In spite of the rollercoaster of emotions sweeping through her, she finally knew what she needed to do.

“Michael, you aren’t welcome here. We’ll have a civilized discussion about this sometime in the future, but I want you out of my house immediately.” Alexia laid a calming hand on Anthony’s shoulder, soothing his anger.

“I just want what’s best for you,” Michael insisted.

“Go!” she ordered in the same tone she’d heard her Gram use earlier in the day.

He scrambled to his feet and straightened his clothing with dignity before he bowed slightly in her direction. The menacing look he threw at his younger relatives was less respectful but Alexia let it go. She wanted Michael out before she lost all control.

Chapter Six

The click as the door shut behind Michael echoed in the room, Anthony's agitated breathing loud in the silence. Joshua swept a hand through his hair and took a calming breath himself. He'd never thought Michael would resort to violence to try and claim the Keeper.

Delicate fingers slipped into his hand and his heartbeat doubled. Alexia was here, he was here.

Anthony was still here.

His cousin's expression held a mix of anger and awe, and Joshua empathized deeply. With Michael's departure, the sexual tension returned, a heady sensation that tangled Joshua's limbs and clouded his mind. In her every move and glance, Alexia sent a clear message of arousal and need, one he wished nothing more than to answer immediately.

Completely. Forcefully.

He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed it lightly, tonguing the tender flesh between her knuckles.

"You have a good right hook, my lady," Joshua said, soft and low, his voice gravelly as lust raced through his body.

Alexia's eyes were huge in her pale face. She moistened her bottom lip with her tongue and a flush covered her skin.

"Now what, Joshua? Now what do we do?" He had to strain to hear her quiet voice, embarrassment coloring her prettily.

He raised a brow, his fingers stroking hers. "Anthony explained. You are the one who must decide what you need. We will do whatever you ask, whether it's a walk on the beach or a game of cards. We could sit by the fire and tell you stories about what it's like to travel underwater."

As he spoke Alexia pulled away from him to stare out the window at the ocean. Her body sagged and she hugged her arms around her body tightly. Her head dropped to the cool glass for a moment and Joshua hesitated. Perhaps it was all too much too fast.

She *knew* what she needed to demand of them. It was a part of who she was, the heritage in belonging to the line of the matriarch. Now that the medallion had begun to awaken her body to the change, there was no turning back. Her longing for transformation would drive her need for sex higher and higher to the point of overwhelming lust.

Every inch of Joshua's body urged him to step forward and take her into his arms, but he held back. He had to let her be the one to decide. "We could say good night, and let you sleep and think about things until the morning," he said, attempting to keep the reluctance out of his voice.

Anthony cleared his throat. "We could..." His gaze flicked to Joshua as if asking permission. "We could..."

"Hold me?" Alexia whispered. She turned her back to the windows and squared her shoulders.

"Ummm, yes."

"Kiss me?" she breathed as her head tilted to the side.

Anthony swallowed hard before nodding.

Alexia smiled, a mischievous expression crossing her face. She stepped closer to Anthony but looked at Joshua. "Make love to me?" she purred.

Groans tore from both their throats as she reached for them. Joshua stayed back, letting Anthony take Alexia into his arms first.

The anger he expected to flare at seeing anyone touch Alexia arrived, but far more tempered than he'd believed possible. Anthony's tender adoration for her was so clear in his every movement Joshua felt a tentative peace as he watched their lips meet. He didn't want it to happen. He'd give anything to be all she needed.

But he wasn't. Not yet. Perhaps not ever.

Anthony kissed her again, a hesitant caress. Joshua watched a trickle of blue shoot from his cousin to brush Alexia's skin. The magic of St. Elmo's fire would make her strong. Along with the chemicals from both of them, she would be able to transform and survive underwater and lead their people.

What Joshua could give alone wasn't enough.

This night had to happen. He would share, for her sake, this one time.

Please let it be only this one time.

Joshua moved to stoke the fire higher, pull cushions to the floor and open the curtains to let the ocean witness their lovemaking.

Alexia wondered briefly what she was doing in Anthony's arms while Joshua wandered the room behind them. It was so different from anything she'd experienced before, the need welling from deep within calling her to keep these two men at her side. More than called, demanded. She longed for Joshua, a heady all-out desire that shocked her to the core, but she wanted Anthony as well. Alexia had never been one to fool around indiscriminately, always keeping sex in the context of long-term relationships. But there was no denying the urges sweeping through her now, harder and hotter than she'd experienced before.

It had to be something to do with the medallion, with the dolphins.

Did she want to be out of control like this? She'd accepted the medallion as a gift from her Gram. A trinket. Not some life-changing "now you are one of us" commitment. Yet here she stood in Anthony's arms. Her hand throbbed from the smack she'd delivered to Michael's face. Her body tingled from head to toe with the need for...something.

Kissing Anthony felt right. Sweet, tender kisses that turned her inside out. Anthony's touch teased. Tentative at first, his lips on hers like a brush of the ocean on the shore at its very calmest. She stroked his lips with her tongue, and he drew a hand around her neck to adjust the angle of their mouths to bring them closer together. He nibbled on her lips, along her cheek to the V of her neckline and a shiver ran through her. Anthony was softness and intimate caring.

Then Joshua returned and the heat skyrocketed. Twisting her in his cousin's arms Joshua took possession of her mouth and controlled her. Tongues met, teeth bit. This was what she'd been longing for and she urged him on, her lips hot and moist on his. She wrapped an arm around his neck to lock him in place, the fingers of her other hand still tangled with Anthony's.

Three bodies close together, the rough fabric of their jeans brushed the bare skin of her legs and made her want more of their touch everywhere. Joshua's hands held her hips firmly to his groin, his erection a hard ridge against her belly.

Anthony nipped the back of her neck, then lapped to soothe the pain away. He pulled the zipper on her dress inch by inch to release the garment from her body. A trail of kisses flowed downward, laving her bare skin with his tongue.

"She's not wearing a bra," Anthony whispered in awe as a finger brushed softly over the exposed skin of her back.

Joshua pulled away and Alexia restrained herself from following him, chasing his addictive taste. His hands pushed the straps of her dress aside and the top pooled around her hips. Anthony stroked her shoulders and down the curve of her breasts. He cradled her in his palms, lifting the firm globes to Joshua like an offering. The heat of Joshua's stare hit her full on, and she forced her eyes shut to avoid going up in flames.

Then she was covered with caresses as her dress was lowered to the floor, and lips and hands touched her body again and again. She didn't know who kissed her neck, didn't care who caressed her breast. Skin to skin, moist kisses after searing hot touches. One of them flicked the pearled tip of her nipple, and her womb flooded with moisture.

"We want you, Alexia. All of you," Joshua said before his tongue slid along the edge of her soaking wet undies. She opened her legs voluntarily, wanting more. Offering more. He pressed a kiss to her heated core, his teeth snagging on the fabric covering her. Hot breath on hot moisture combined and whirled together into a flammable danger zone. He leaned in harder with his lips, licking the length of her slit over her panties and she shivered.

Take them off, please.

She wanted his mouth on her, no barriers. Joshua sucked the fabric again, the crotch sopping wet between her juices and his mouth. Alexia tilted her hips, attempting to make him touch her more intimately, and he laughed. His hands traced over her thighs, thumbs rubbing along the inside toward her tender core. He pushed into the material, his fingers probing her pussy ever so slightly.

“Oh sweet mercy,” Alexia moaned. It was torment, the lightness of his touch on super-sensitized tissues.

Her panties slid away, and she rocked on suddenly shaky legs until Joshua’s hands steadied her. One hand reached behind her to clasp her ass, his fingers dipped into the crease between her cheeks. The other stroked her slit, fingers dragging through the moisture to settle where her clit pulsed in time with her heart.

Then his mouth descended and his tongue claimed her again.

All this time Anthony worshipped her breasts, his fingers rolling the tips between thumb and forefinger before he suckled, one side and then the other until both tingled with need.

“You’re beautiful, Alexia.” Anthony pulled back, his eyes glittering with golden flecks. She watched in fascination as he palmed her, lowering his mouth slowly to suckle. She was quivering with anticipation before the moist heat of his mouth lit her on fire. He raised his head to stare at her again. Stars swirled in the depths of his gaze.

“Your eyes. They’re alive with lights.” Wonder and delight filled her heart.

Anthony rose and moved to the side, allowing Joshua more room to settle intimately closer as his tongue lapped at her. Sensation built, pleasure rising. One man between her legs and one caressing her torso became an exquisite form of torture.

“You see the fire rising in my eyes, don’t you? It only shows in our human bodies when we feel extreme emotions,” Anthony whispered, dropping a kiss over her heart tenderly. “I’d do anything for you.”

A sensation like an electric shock hit her, pure energy settling on her body like a winter coat. Heavy, but comforting. She closed her eyes and still the haze of blue light surrounding them lit her vision. It was familiar and reassuring even as it sent her arousal through the ceiling.

Joshua flicked her clit with his tongue, two of his fingers buried in her sheath. He slid them in and out slowly compared to the extreme pace of his tongue, the contrast forcing her further toward nirvana. Anthony sucked a nipple into his mouth and his touch sent her over the edge. Her pussy convulsed, another flood of moisture dropped to cover Joshua’s fingers. She moaned, a long, low satisfied sound, and Joshua chuckled. He planted a final kiss on her pussy before he rose to drop one more on her lips. He tasted of her juices and his own unique flavor, his mouth firm against hers before he stepped back and stroked her cheek.

A thrill shot through Alexia as she watched Joshua’s expression. His face reflected the things she felt in her heart. Desire, hunger, yes, but also a deeper longing for companionship, for love. She lifted her hand

to touch his face, letting her own emotions show. Their gazes locked and something sweet passed between them.

Anthony settled her carefully on the pillows and cushions gathered in front of the fire. The hard edge of desire that had ridden her all day had dulled slightly with her orgasm, but her body still called for them. Needed them intensely. She stared in amazement at the pale blue light hovering around the men, not so much above them but a part of them.

“We’ll take care of you, Alexia.” Anthony lay by her right side, Joshua reclined on her left. Their hands flicked her skin like shooting stars to leave trails of scorching heat in their wake. A part of her mind warned she should feel embarrassed with two men touching her. Should feel guilt over the urges pushing her to take control and demand their bodies worship hers. Anthony continued, “Merfolk don’t get STDs and you’re not fertile right now. We’re not going to use any kind of protection because it’s not needed.”

She glanced at Joshua. He nodded. “You need the chemicals, and they’re in our semen. I swear you’re safe.”

She shouldn’t be willing to agree so quickly. It was outrageous, but so were the emotions flaring through her body and mind. She stared into Joshua’s eyes. Whatever the connection was between them, she was never going to let him go. He was tied to her, whether he knew it or not.

But Anthony? He was the companion of her youth, a friend, not someone who’d made her hot and bothered. Why did she want so badly to start chewing on one end of him and not stop until she’d reached the other end? Her mouth watered at the thought of his naked skin under her tongue.

They said she would know what to do. She found her fingers wrapped tightly around the medallion that was all she wore. Magic pendant or merfolk blood, there was little she could do at this point but let the instincts drive her.

And instinct told her to taste Anthony.

“Why am I naked and you still have all your clothes on?” she teased, playing with the front of Anthony’s shirt. He stilled his body and let her undo the buttons one by one, her knuckles stroking his smooth skin as he shrugged the fabric over his shoulders.

Blue light floated away into the air like a fine powder under her fingers, but it never grew less. Behind her the rustle of fabric told her Joshua had stripped as well, but she ignored him for a moment to let her hands and mouth do what they longed for. She crawled on top of Anthony and straddled his torso, her wet curls heating to scalding against his skin.

Anthony smiled at her, his eyes glowing even brighter as his gaze traced her body. She leaned over and kissed him, his mouth tender and soft, his tongue touching hers in brief flicks.

Then she gave in to her longings and licked his jawline, tasting the sweet salt of his skin. The burst of his scent filled her head and her nipples tightened again, her breasts tucked against his firm chest.

As she kissed her way down Anthony's body she became aware of Joshua again, his heat rolling over her, calling to her. She sat and reached for Joshua. Their mouths met and she feasted on him, biting and attacking. Demanding his passion in return. They devoured each other until she broke away, gasping to drag air back into her lungs. Anthony's hands caressed her breasts and she laughed out loud.

They worshipped her and it felt so right. Joshua's hand stroked the swell of her hip, Anthony fondled her breasts. Both of them spoke quiet words of love and honor that met her needs as much as their touch did.

The blue light grew more intense and she sucked in air. Her arousal spiked and the room faded away. Suddenly there was nothing she needed more than to taste the erection that swelled under her hips. She shuffled back, scrambled at the buckle of his belt, tearing at the fabric separating her from Anthony's cock.

"Hush, love. Wait." Joshua lifted her away so Anthony could open his jeans and pull himself free. The head of his heavy shaft glistened with moisture and she groaned, her whole body on fire.

"You want to suck him, don't you?" Joshua held her back, letting Anthony finish undressing. Her naked body rested in Joshua's lap, his rigid length pressed against her ass cheek. She slipped a hand back to touch him, thrilled to hear him gasp.

"I need to taste. I want to feel him in my mouth and taste his seed." Alexia turned her head and captured Joshua for another nuclear kiss. She held a cock in either hand, throbbing under her fingers. Smooth strokes followed as she learned the differences between their erections. Anthony was longer than Joshua, but not as thick. She hummed with pleasure watching blue light dance over her fingers while they circled Anthony's cock.

Joshua's tongue slipped along her ear, dipping into the hollow and a chill shot up her spine. "And what would you have me do, my lady, while Anthony enjoys your sweet mouth?" Alexia shivered as he brushed his lips down her neck, grazing his teeth along the tendon.

All her longings and unvoiced needs became clear. She threw back her head and laughed, stroking hard and fast over both of them until they were muttering and groaning, near to losing control.

She let go and spun to face Joshua, clutching his face in both hands and kissing him furiously for a moment. She pulled back and let her hunger show. "You are going to be in my pussy. Hard. Fast. I want you to fill me as I take from Anthony. I need you, Joshua. Will you do this for me?"

Joshua's answer was to kiss her, his hands sliding over her body, building her passion to a higher level still. He maneuvered them in front of the fire so she knelt, Anthony before her, Joshua behind. Joshua's cock nudged her ass cheeks, and for a second she flushed, imagining him taking her there. Then she breathed in Anthony's scent and nothing else mattered.

His cock rose from a bed of tight curls, the hard length bowing to meet her. Alexia leaned forward. Her cheek brushed his belly as she snuck out her tongue to lick along the heavy vein on the underside. Touching him satisfied something deep inside her and she hummed with delight. Lapping the moisture

pooled in the slit on the crown, she heard Anthony groan and felt his fingers thread through her hair to direct her motions. She moistened her lips, getting them as wet as possible before slipping the velvet head into her mouth.

Joshua's hand caressed her hips, his erection between her legs. He shifted and the head of his cock bumped her swollen clit bringing her closer to orgasm. He rocked slowly, each movement pressing her farther over Anthony until she accepted as much of his length as she could. Her lips stretched around him, her tongue lapped the sensitive curve under the head on each retreat.

Behind her Joshua stroked his fingers in and out of her slit, drawing the moisture from within her pussy over her clit and up to the seam between her cheeks. He placed his cock between her labia, the hard crest skewering her in one smooth motion until his groin rested tightly to her butt. The sensory overload of being filled completely broke her limited defenses and she closed her eyes to contain the energy ready to burst out.

They took control from her. Anthony rocked his cock into her mouth, supporting her head in his hands as he slid nearly all the way out slowly then possessed her again. Light shimmered around them. She swore she felt stars tingle on the tender skin covering the steel in her mouth.

But as good as it was to hold Anthony in her mouth, as good as the sweet liquid stealing from his body tasted, Joshua filled her whole being. His cock split her in two as he thrust in, his hands clutching her hips and dragging her backwards to slam them together. Hard fingers dug into her skin, hard cock stretched her, pounded her.

Light continued to build around them, a startling blue-white brilliance with flickering hot spots that flew like sparks through the air. Joshua's fingers slipped to her clit and he rubbed in time with his thrusts. She would have screamed but Anthony filled her mouth, his cock growing even harder.

Alexia exploded. Her mouth filled with Anthony's semen as he cried out, his cock jerking. Her body tightened, attempting to lock Joshua in place as wave after wave pulsed through her channel, her climax rocking her so hard her arms gave way and Anthony caught her by the shoulders.

Joshua continued his assault, stretching her even further as he swelled within her. The friction between them set her off on another climax and she called out his name. He froze and the flash of his seed bathed her within, stars painting her world inside and out.

Long moments passed before Alexia stirred. Cuddled against Joshua's warm body, contentment covered her. Anthony lay in front of them, his dark green eyes locked on her. The room around them filled with the light of a million fireflies, darting on silent wings.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

"You're beautiful." Anthony leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "Thank you, my lady." He sat and Alexia wondered why he seemed to be withdrawing from her.

She snuggled into Joshua's arms. That was where she belonged, but she didn't want Anthony to leave either. "Stay," Alexia pleaded.

Delight flickered across Anthony's face but he looked over her shoulder to where she knew Joshua watched.

"You only have to ask, my lady, and he will remain." Joshua hesitated as he spoke.

"Only if you're sure," Anthony offered.

Alexia sighed with contentment. "I want you to stay." She twisted until she faced them both, suddenly realizing she was naked between two men she barely knew.

Aware of her nakedness and completely fine with it.

She shook her head slightly, trying to get the rest of the picture to settle into place. As strange as it seemed, she knew the right thing to do. "I don't understand what is going on. But I'm not willing for either of you to leave." Alexia smiled at Anthony. "Please, stay." She rested a hand on his arm then reached the other hand to cup around Joshua's neck to pull him close for a kiss.

Long, slow, sweet.

Coming up for air she gave a contented sigh and tried to cover a yawn. Anthony laughed softly. "You should be tired. Come, we'll put you to bed."

It was Joshua who lifted her and carried her boneless body up the stairs. Joshua who laid her in the middle of her big bed in the master bedroom. And it was Joshua who crawled in and cuddled her tightly to his body, tucking her head under his chin as they wrapped arms around each other, legs twined together.

But it was Anthony who crawled in on her other side, his warmth reaching out to cover her back and let her relax completely, safe and cared for.

Nestled in a bed of shimmering blue stars.

Chapter Seven

Blessed warmth covered her from head to toe. Hard bodies surrounded her. The whisper of a touch feathered her nipples and Alexia hummed with delight. The hand that cupped her pussy from behind tightened slightly and one finger brushed her clit.

Alexia rolled a little farther onto her stomach to allow more room for his fingers to play, and the men cradling her on either side laughed.

“She’s insatiable,” Anthony said.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing. I don’t mind at all.” Joshua’s hand stroked harder, his thumb slipping into her sheath.

“Who’s insatiable? I’m just lying here, minding my own business. Oh yes, right there, Joshua.” She felt too good to even break into a blush, her head resting on Anthony’s bare chest while her other lover primed her body yet again.

After retreating to the bedroom, Alexia had slept for a while, only to wake shaking with lust. Three times during the night she’d attacked Joshua and Anthony, demanding they service her until she fell into another exhausted sleep. She kissed Anthony’s chest while he ran his fingers through her hair.

Anthony had gone down on her and spilt his seed on her skin twice, but he’d never entered her pussy. In a possessive manner, Joshua had directed their lovemaking. Even now as Anthony lifted her high enough to be able to kiss her, Joshua slipped his cock between her legs, the heat of his morning erection flaring into her.

A twinge of doubt rocked her for a second. She was in bed with two men. Then the pleasure racing through her drove everything else away. Joshua pumped slowly, his cock stretching her, the sensation familiar and yet still new, while Anthony made love to her mouth. She built to a peak quickly, her climax rolling in long drawn-out waves, leaving her relaxed and sated in their arms.

“Hmmm. Again, that was wonderful.” Alexia planted a final kiss on the corner of Anthony’s mouth before letting her head fall face first into her pillow between the two men. She reached behind her, fingers linking intimately with Joshua’s, their bodies still entwined. The sheets had fallen away and they lay naked in the pale light that snuck through the curtains into the room.

“How do you feel?” Joshua asked, his tongue tracing lazy circles on her shoulder blade, kisses brushing her lightly.

How did she feel? Her body hummed with pleasure because of what they'd done. Her mind spun over the same thing. "I feel like a sex maniac. I can't believe last night." Alexia dropped her voice to a whisper. "I can't believe I'm in bed with the two of you."

"This is not a typical experience for me as well. I can't believe I'm here, either." Anthony cupped her face and let her stare into his eyes. His emotions trickled over her so pure and sweet it nearly brought her to tears. His wonder at being a part of loving her was humbling.

"You're a good man. I needed you," she said.

He nodded. "But you need Joshua more, don't you?" His expression showed no remorse or jealousy as he spoke, simply acceptance. Behind her Joshua's hold tightened, his love for her covering her entire body.

"Ally?"

Alexia stiffened at the brisk knock on the door. She scrambled at the sheets and yanked them to her chin to hide her lack of clothing. It was harder to disguise the two men in her bed, one just withdrawing from her body.

Before she could reply, the door swung open and her grandmother waltzed in. "Good morning, dear. Good morning, boys. I've got breakfast cooking and—"

"Gram! Please..." Alexia watched in disbelief as the curtains were briskly thrown open to let the bright morning sun fill the room with light. Gram deposited a duffle bag on the bureau next to Alexia's suitcase and walked to the edge of the bed. Alexia gasped for air, embarrassed beyond belief.

Gram flicked a glance at the men on either side of Alexia, and her eyes grew wide for a moment. "Well, that's a bit of surprise. Hello, Anthony, Joshua. Now, I need one of you nice boys to take me into town. I forgot I promised—"

"Gram," Alexia choked out. "Please, oh Lord, can you not stand there acting like there's nothing strange with finding...with seeing..." She couldn't take anymore and twisted around until she had buried her face in Joshua's chest. Maybe if she didn't look Gram would go away, or this would turn out to be simply a bad dream.

The old lady chuckled and Alexia felt Joshua's hands smooth her hair.

"Lady Victoria, you're upsetting Alexia. Do you mind if we meet you in the kitchen in a few minutes?" There was a trace of laughter in Joshua's voice.

"Whatever would she be upset about?" Gram asked. "Fine, I'll take the hot plate out of the oven in thirty minutes. I really do need to get to town this morning or I'd let you stay in bed longer." Alexia listened until the soft footfalls left the bedside and there was a click as the door closed.

Anthony and Joshua started to laugh, low at first then louder, their bodies shaking the bed. Alexia sat and stared at them in confusion and rising anger.

“What is so damn funny about Gram catching us in a ménage à trois? I can’t believe she didn’t have a coronary or scream. What the heck is going on?” Alexia hit Joshua as he continued to laugh, his shoulders shaking as he spun his legs to the side of the bed. On her other side Anthony rose as well, planting a parting kiss on her cheek.

“You can relax, Alexia. Victoria was the Keeper for years. She understands more about merfolk sex than you do. I’m sure she’ll explain at breakfast, but rest assured she was not upset to see us with you.”

“She was surprised,” Alexia snapped. She crawled off the bed and gave the bathroom a longing stare. Did she have time for a shower? She craved one after all the action of the night.

The door to the bathroom was already open and Anthony winked at her before prepping the water. “I think she was surprised to see you spent the night with Joshua and I, and not some of our older relatives.”

Alexia stepped into the shower and shivered in spite of the warmth. “I feel uncomfortable with my grandmother knowing I had casual sex, let alone her thinking about who I would be with for a one-night stand.”

Suddenly Joshua was there, crowded against her body in the shower stall. He leaned into her and caged her between his firm body and the tile wall. “There was nothing casual about last night. And it wasn’t a one-night stand either.” Anger rolled off him as he kissed her hard, his hand trapping her wrists and lifting them above her head. Her body responded to his aggression by melting under him. She kissed him back, trying to appease with her tongue and lips, offering her neck and body to him. In spite of her embarrassment, she understood why he was upset. It sounded like she had denied her response to them, and that wasn’t what she meant at all.

Anthony’s voice swept over her, his chastisement gentle but clear. “You felt more than sexual need for us. Don’t cheapen what we gave you.” Alexia was ready to break in two. So many strange and unusual things had happened in such a short a time.

Joshua’s hands softened as he released her wrists. He kissed them, one by one, his tongue stroking the tendons before he dropped to his knees in front of her. “I’m sorry, Alexia. I shouldn’t have overreacted.”

He pressed his forehead into her belly. His breath warmed her stomach, his hands wrapped around her torso like he would never let her go. Water cascaded down their bodies, cleaning some of the cobwebs from her mind. Alexia looked at Anthony, standing outside the shower stall, his beautiful face clear and smooth as he waited for her with a towel in his hands.

In one day her world had turned upside down. Men waited to serve her every need, sexual or otherwise. They said they needed her to lead. In the midst of all the confusion, she knew one thing. She touched Joshua’s head tenderly, brushing the wet strands back from his face until he looked up at her.

“I don’t understand what is going on, Joshua. Why I feel so attracted to you, why I had sex with you and Anthony all night long. I don’t understand at all, but I’m not sorry I did it. That’s all I can give you right now.” Alexia brushed his cheek, watching his fire-flecked eyes glint at her. She reached her other

hand to Anthony and smiled as he brought it to his lips and kissed her knuckles, his expression adding to the fire in her belly.

Joshua forced her clean body into Anthony's arms for his cousin to dry, resisting the urge to ravish her. His cock was more than ready to enjoy her again, even after their incredible night. He couldn't get enough of touching her and wondered if her need for the chemicals spilt over to them, increasing their ability to provide for her.

Clean clothes, toothbrushes and his abandoned things from downstairs were in the duffle bag Victoria had brought to the room, and he chuckled for a moment.

"Stop that," Alexia complained. "It's not funny, really, it's not."

Joshua turned to admire his lover. She wore a pair of pale blue slacks and was pulling on a matching blouse. He moved closer, unable to resist running a hand down her delicate skin, stopping to cup a lace-covered breast in his palm. He leaned close and kissed her before closing the buttons one at a time, his eyes staring into hers.

The realization she had chosen him over Michael sank in hard again, and his heart leapt. One more step toward reaching his desire of being with her permanently. She needed to understand it all. They needed a long, blunt talk, even though it was going to embarrass her even more.

"I'll be nice and stop laughing. Let me know when you want to go downstairs," Joshua brushed a final kiss to her lips, soft and tender.

By the time they were both ready, Anthony was out of the shower. "Go ahead, I'll join you in a few minutes," he encouraged them. Alexia watched him shyly from the corner of her eye as he dropped his towel to dress and Joshua grew still. Her continued interest in Anthony was clear, and he wasn't sure what he thought about it. Hadn't last night been enough?

Walking downstairs with Alexia on his arm, Joshua felt warmth pour through him. Being with her was so right, now she needed to come to terms with the facts. "Your grandmother is not going to be embarrassed or upset by what we did last night. I suggest you act however you would when you normally join her for breakfast."

She clung to his arm tighter and spoke barely above a whisper. "That's easy for you to say, but a lot harder for me to do. She may be your leader, but she's my Gram. I'm feeling more than a little uncomfortable."

"Did she think you were a virgin?" Joshua asked.

Alexia shook her head. "I doubt it, but the whole two-of-you, one-of-me thing, it's not normal, Joshua."

He stopped them at the foot of the stairs. “Alexia, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. Amongst the merfolk, it is normal, especially for the matriarch. While you might be uncomfortable, you don’t need to be embarrassed. Trust me.”

She nodded but there was still doubt written on her face.

The table was set for four, wonderful smells floating on the air from the kitchen. Gram blasted through the door carrying a plate of something steaming hot, and Joshua rushed to take it from her and place it on the table.

“What a nice young man you’ve turned out to be. Thank you, Joshua.” Gram grabbed a chair and patted it. “Come, Alexia, you sit here. I’ll get the drinks.” She disappeared in a whirl of motion.

“She’s supposed to be some kind of decrepit and lonely old lady who desperately needs my help. Bah, what a bunch of baloney.” Alexia glared after her grandmother.

“Old and decrepit?” Joshua kissed her cheek before heading to the kitchen to help bring in the rest of the food. “Not Victoria. Maybe you misunderstood.”

In the kitchen, Victoria had piled a tray high with tea, coffee and juice. He reached for it but before he could leave the room he found his way blocked.

“Did you do something to influence her decision?” Victoria asked, her lined face scowling up at him.

Joshua paused. He didn’t think making love to Alexia alone would have that effect, but perhaps it had. Still, he didn’t want to admit to anything, not to the woman who had been his matriarch for his entire life. Not before he’d talked to Alexia and explained the dream hadn’t been a dream. It was definitely time to change topics. “Do you think I’m not good enough for her?”

Victoria waved a hand at him. “Whether you are or not isn’t my concern, but hers. You’ve been such a mouse over the years, you’re the last one I expected to see with her.” She picked up the loaf of bread and shrugged. “You and Anthony are among the youngest of all the available men. I hope you’re aware you might have a fight on your hands to keep her interested in you.”

Joshua nodded slowly and followed her back to the table. A mouse? Is that how people had interpreted his patient waiting, his willingness to put aside his own desires? His stomach tensed. If only they had any idea of how much control it had taken to follow the rules all those years and not chase after Alexia on his own. Waiting until the time was ripe to step in and be there for her.

He placed the drinks on the table, briefly acknowledging Anthony’s presence as his cousin pulled out a seat for Victoria.

“Anthony, you’re on summer break right now, aren’t you?” Victoria asked as she served breakfast. “You teaching again in the fall?”

“I’ll be back at the high school in September,” Anthony passed the coffee tureen to Joshua.

Victoria nodded. “I hear positive reports about you. You manage to walk the fine line between making learning enjoyable and still insisting they accomplish their goals. Good for you.”

Anthony flushed and Joshua hid a smile. His cousin was far too tender hearted. It was amazing the older students didn't eat him alive.

"And, Joshua, did you get the commission for the mosaic at the museum?" Victoria asked sweetly.

It was so like her, acting like she hadn't just verbally chastised him. Fine, he could play the game too. "I finished last week and it will be installed by the end of the month." Joshua was pleased with the results and could hardly wait to take Alexia to see his work. He knew she'd appreciate the intricate design he'd created.

Victoria eyes opened wide. "You finished it already? Well done!" She gave him an approving nod before turning her attention to her granddaughter.

"Now, Alexia," she said. "Today I thought we could—"

"Why didn't you tell me?" Alexia interrupted.

Joshua and Anthony froze at the tone of her voice. She sat far back in her chair, arms crossed, her plate ignored. Her whole body screamed with tension, and it was difficult for Joshua to not take her in his arms and comfort her.

"Tell you what, Ally?" Victoria stirred her tea and blinked innocently at them.

Alexia lifted her hand and ran it through her hair, messing the scramble of curls even further. "Don't play games with me. Not anymore. 'I have something I want you to have, Ally. It's been in the family for generations.' Ha! Does that give you a clue? Or do you need me to show you this?" She grabbed the medallion and held it up, a blue light sparkling noticeably around the silver.

"Ohhhhh!" Victoria clapped her hands with delight before squeezing Anthony's arm. "You boys must be the right ones for the job. The fire didn't show for me until at least four days after I—"

"Gram!" Alexia slammed her hands on the table. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, releasing it slowly before she turned to Joshua. Her dark eyes flashed with anger, and he placed a reassuring hand on her arm. The connection between them flared and Joshua's heart leapt. Even furious she was beautiful.

"Perhaps this is a conversation I should have alone with my grandmother," Alexia said.

"Nonsense." Victoria snorted. "You slept with them, they can certainly listen to a little conversation about the merfolk. In fact they might be able to help me answer your questions."

Alexia's cheeks flushed red, but with embarrassment or anger Joshua couldn't tell. "Fine, we'll do it your way. Why did you not tell me about merfolk before now? You've had plenty of opportunities. That's question one. Number two, why didn't you at least tell me before you gave me the damn necklace what I was accepting instead of shanghaiing me into a position I might not want to take responsibility for?

"And three, after giving me the thing why in the *hell* did you not tell me you were pimping me out when you dragged me around town yesterday? It would have been nice to know I was going to have the sudden urge to throw myself at anyone with a...a penis and...screw them senseless."

Anthony's jaw dropped and Joshua bit back a laugh. Sweet little Alexia had sharp teeth and Victoria wasn't used to being bitten. The older woman opened and closed her mouth a few times before deliberately taking a bite of her breakfast and chewing slowly. Victoria patted her mouth delicately with her napkin before smiling all around the table at them.

"Well, I guess I don't have to mince words if you're already swearing at me. I didn't tell you about the merfolk because your mother asked me not to. Karyn's a sport—unable to shift or take a change—and she felt there was no place for her in the pod. That wasn't true but she decided to reject us completely. It took years to convince her to let you stay summers with me in the hopes you would someday come into your heritage and take over. Give you the opportunity to gain a few of the merfolk chemicals."

"Mom knows about merfolk and she never told me?" Some of the color faded from Alexia's face and Joshua reached for her hand, holding it under the edge of the table. She squeezed him tight, hanging on like he was anchoring her in place. "She sent me on the yearly vacation to you but when I went home, Mom never wanted to hear a word about what I did during my holidays. Everything else about our relationship is fine so I figured you two had some kind of falling out." Alexia shook her head as understanding slowly spread over her face. "My dad wasn't a merfolk, was he?"

"Your father was human. No merblood. Your mother accepted the medallion from me at one point and tried to transform but she never managed. Karyn returned the medallion and I had no choice but to resume leadership of the pod. Since then I've waited years for you to grow up enough to be able to take over." Victoria poured herself more tea before calmly sipping it.

This version of the story was new to Joshua. There had been rumors floating around for a while when he was young, but he'd never really wondered about the situation. "Why was your daughter unable to change? I've never heard of such a thing."

Victoria shrugged. "It's very rare. She never desired to lead and I think that made a huge difference. Plus she had already been making eyes with Jeffrey, Alexia's father, and with her heart committed, she couldn't accept the way of the merfolk and enjoy more than one lover. I'd hoped when they got divorced she would return to Jeffrey's Cove but she refused."

Alexia's hand jerked away from his. "More than one lover? You knew I'd..." She dropped her head into her hands. "Holy shit, I don't believe I'm having this conversation with my grandmother."

Another imperial wave of the hand followed. "Then stop thinking of me as your Gram and accept I led an amazing group of people and I have passed on the privilege to you. As the previous leader, I will advise and give you guidance about any area, including sex." Victoria leaned forward, her gray eyes sparkling. "But, Ally, you *know* what you need to do. It's built into you, I can tell. I need you to trust yourself because I *am* done. I stayed twenty more years than I planned. I loved being matriarch, but the past while I've lost many personal opportunities. Perhaps I've become selfish in wanting to move on. That's why I gave you the medallion with no warning."

The tension around the table ebbed and flowed as Alexia considered Victoria's words, nodding slowly. "Then I ask you this, as past leader, can you tell me what I have to do to make sure I can transform? I do feel a connection to the dolphins and Jaffrey's Cove. I have since my first summer here. It's deeper than simply a love for the area and wonderful memories. I've dreamed about dancing in the waves, not as a human. I've dreamed about a beautiful cave and bright blue lights that turn into lovers—"

"The cavern?" Victoria sat straight and Joshua tensed. Perhaps he should have made sure to speak sooner to Alexia about their lovemaking. "You've seen the cavern already?"

"Often, but only in my dreams." Alexia's hand touched lightly on his shoulder. "The last time, the most vivid, was two nights ago and I met Joshua there. That was after you gave me the medallion."

Victoria's face screwed up in confusion. "I don't understand. How could you see the cavern before I even gifted you? Even after you had the medallion, you would have had to drop it in the ocean at night, and Joshua would not have been the only male merfolk to respond." She turned toward him and Joshua stilled.

Everyone stared at him.

He refused to feel guilty regarding the wonderful experience he had shared with Alexia. It had been right for them to be together, he was sure of it. "I stopped the call from going out. Alexia did dip the necklace but I didn't let the others hear the summons." It stuck in his throat to make the confession but it needed to be said. "The time will come when she will need to make an open call, but it wasn't appropriate then. We've been so connected over the years, I decided we needed time alone."

Victoria sat back in her chair, shaking her head. She stared at Joshua and he returned her gaze evenly. He would not apologize anymore for doing what he felt was right.

"Joshua, what are you talking about?" Alexia asked, her voice tinged with her confusion. He turned to face her, his hand reaching out for hers again. "What is this business about dipping the necklace and the cave? Did you have the same dream I had?"

He paused for a minute, squeezing her fingers reassuringly. "I'm not sure how, but I sensed when Victoria gave you the medallion, and I came to talk to you. You went to the beach and I watched you approach the water. I didn't think you understood what would happen if you got the medallion wet in the moonlight, so I waited nearby in my fire form.

"The medallion has the power to call the unmated males of the pod to you, to let you select a consort. You set it off, Alexia, and I chose to block the call so you wouldn't be surrounded before you even knew what was going on."

Alexia's expression shifted from confusion to something darker, and Joshua hurried to reassure her. It wasn't how he wanted to have this conversation, but he had no choice to wait. "The cavern is real, Alexia. Two nights ago I carried you there and we made love."

"It wasn't a dream?" she whispered, withdrawing her hand from his, her eyes wide. "How did... No, never mind. It doesn't matter right now."

Alexia glanced uneasily around the room, her body tightening and growing rigid. Joshua's stomach fell as he recognized the emotional turmoil flashing through her. She was ready to lay down the law and it wasn't going to be pretty.

"I've fallen into a fairy tale but no one is following their proper lines. 'Your world is not what you think it is, Alexia, but I'm sure you'll be fine with us ordering you around.'" She rubbed a hand over her neck, glaring at them. "My Gram is a manipulating tyrant, my lawyer date tried to force himself on me, and my dream lover is a liar. Of all of you, Anthony is the only one behaving like the gentle person I remember."

"Calm down, dear," Victoria soothed, her weathered hands fluttering in the air.

Alexia laughed, a harsh, ragged sound. She shook her head, "Calm down? I am calm, Gram. I'm so calm the boats are all sitting dead in the water right now. You have a lot of nerve sitting there and expecting me to be calm about having two lovers in my bed and you traipsing in like it's normal."

Joshua spoke softly, his guilt at adding to her burden making him attempt to be a peacemaker. "She's not trying to upset you, Alexia. None of us did anything—"

"Shut up, Joshua." Her head whipped around and her mouth tightened to a thin line. "What was all that shit you shouted at Michael last night? About it being my choice, not his? I seem to remember you saying something about the Keeper knowing what she needed." Alexia pushed herself away from the table violently, her chair flying to the ground behind her.

"I didn't do anything to hurt you. We've got this connection already and I thought it would make things easier. To have someone familiar come to you in the midst of —"

"Who gave you the right to organize my life?" Alexia demanded, cutting him off again. Her eyes flashed at him and his stomach clenched as she stomped from the dining area. "Bloody arrogant bastard."

Alexia paced to the windows and stared at the water. "I've had to do a lot of things over the years to prove myself to people, but this is the strangest situation I've ever found myself involved in. I might accept the challenge of taking over leadership, if I have the ability. I need to think about it for a little while before making a decision."

She turned back to face them, her fists on her hips as she glared at her grandmother. "But you were wrong to force this on me without asking, Gram." She turned and pointed at Joshua. "We have been connected, in some strange way I can only begin to understand. What you did was lie to me, Joshua, and it was wrong. I have so many questions I want answered, but I can't ask either of you because I don't trust you."

Alexia dragged her fingers through her hair, her body shaking with her frustration. She threw one last disappointed look at Joshua before rushing up the stairs and disappearing from their sight.

Chapter Eight

Anthony watched Victoria calmly finish her tea, placing the cup delicately back on its saucer before rising from her chair. She clicked her tongue a few times as she straightened her dress and checked her hair in the mirror.

“That girl has entirely too much on her mind. Come along, Joshua. You can take me to town and we’ll let Alexia get over her mad. She’s a nice girl, really. I’m sure she’ll forget all about this very soon and we’ll be back in her good books in no time.” She gathered her purse and held a hand to Joshua.

Joshua stared into the distance, his face reflecting his agony at receiving Alexia’s wrath. He reluctantly took Victoria by the arm and led her out the door, his haunted eyes taking one final glance up the stairs.

The quiet in the house echoed and Anthony wandered for few minutes, uncertain what to do. He’d never expected to be involved with the politics of the pod at this level. It was far outside his comfort zone.

He spotted the messy table and began clearing the half-eaten meal, the familiar task easing some of the strain. By the time his hands were buried in the soapy water, he felt better. It would work out in the long run. Alexia had every reason to be angry and she didn’t like being tricked, but she was a smart woman. She’d see the big picture shortly. Whether or not he was a part of it, it would be for the good of them all to have a strong leader like Alexia. Someone who wouldn’t be pushed around, even by well-meaning relatives or lovers.

He couldn’t help but wish he could continue to be a part of caring for her. He may have told Joshua he wasn’t set up to support leadership, but this had nothing to do with Alexia being the matriarch. Anthony closed his eyes and remembered what it felt like to touch her during the night. Her kisses were enough to make him hot and ready, the brush of her skin under his hand more erotic than sex with another woman. Yet he hadn’t made love with her. Joshua’s obvious attachment held Anthony back when what he wanted was to bury himself deep in her body and possess her as well.

He jerked as a soft pair of hands circled his waist and Alexia pressed into him. She rested her cheek against his back, her breath warming him. They stood like that for a few minutes, Anthony’s hands splashing in the soapy water, the low sounds of the ocean coming in the distant windows. He would have washed plates all day if she kept touching him.

“Such deep thoughts. Will you share with me?” Her voice stroked him and his body reacted, hardening in an instant.

Anthony paused. His desire would be an open book and he didn't want to lie. Not after learning what a trigger that was. But he had no right to her permanently, nothing special to offer her. He took the easy way out and told her the safe truth. "You are going to be very good for us all, my lady."

Alexia sighed, a long drawn-out sound that made his heart ache. "That's not the answer I want. I don't want to know what you think of me as the new leader of your pod." She ducked under his arm to slip between him and the sink, sliding her belly against the erection pressed hard into the front of his jeans. Her hands rose along his body to clasp his neck, drawing them closer together. "I want to know what you think of *me*. Right now I need to know someone still wants Alexia just because I'm me."

Anthony gave up the fight. He had to kiss her again. Their lips touched and her taste raced through him like a fine wine, going straight to his head and making it spin. Her body snuggled in tighter as she rubbed along his cock and his pulse rose. He lifted her, his wet hands soaking her blouse. Alexia wrapped her legs around him, the heat of her pussy burning him even through the layers of material separating them.

"I want you. Oh Lord, I want you," he admitted, staring into her big eyes. An expression of delight crossed her face and hope rose within him.

"Then take me. Now."

She rocked her hips and they both groaned at the sensation. Anthony set her on the island countertop, burying his head in her neck as he tried to control the lust raging through him. He'd never felt the urge to join with anyone hit so hot and insistently before. But this was Alexia, she deserved more than a rutting fuck in the kitchen. He clenched his teeth together and took a long, deep breath. Hands tugged on his hair, bringing them face to face. She kissed him, softly, then harder, her tongue slipping over his lips, teeth nibbling on him. He joined in, memorizing the feel of her under his hands, the taste sweeping through him. When they pulled back, they were both panting.

Alexia separated his T-shirt from his jeans and her warm hands roamed his body. Anthony let his head fall backward as the lightness of her teasing touch pushed him beyond his control. It wasn't enough, not nearly enough. He yanked off his shirt and reached for her buttons, his fingers shaking as he tried to undo the tiny fastenings. Frustrated, he ripped the sides of her blouse apart, the sound of the small pearls bouncing as they hit the floor, barely heard under the roar of blood in his ears.

Reaching behind her, he unsnapped her bra, brushed it from her body and fastened his mouth on one rigid nipple. Alexia cried as he suckled, his fingers rolling and pinching her other breast. Anthony couldn't slow down, couldn't temper his need to know her intimately. He scrambled at the button on her pants, and she laughed, her hands pushing his aside. They shed their remaining layers and finally touched, skin to skin. Anthony leaned over her, his cock hard against her curls. He dragged it up and down her clit again and again, and she shivered, leaning back on the counter, her breasts thrust at him.

His fingers dipped into her warmth, finding her already wet and ready for him. Dropping to his knees he covered her with his mouth, his tongue lapping her slit and the sweet taste of her cream sent another jolt

of lust through him. The noises Alexia made drove him crazy and he ate at her hungrily, his hand squeezing the base of his erection to hold off exploding before he even slipped into her body.

“I’m ready. Oh please, for pity’s sake, now.” Alexia pulled his hair roughly, trying to bring him up to her level.

He couldn’t wait any longer. Rising he pushed her legs open wide and lined up his cock, the swollen head glistening wet against her opening. He cupped her head in his hand and stared into her eyes. “This is because you’re Alexia,” and he thrust into her body in one smooth stroke.

The tight squeeze of her muscles around him nearly set him off, his balls granite rocks pressed against her ass. He waited, enjoying the sensation of being in her body for the first time, watching the way her eyes sparkled at him. The room glowed with blue light, and he sent a trace of fire over her breasts. Her passage shivered around him and they both cried in delight. Anthony slid his cock out slowly, deliberately, until the tip hovered barely sheathed before inching back in even slower.

“No, not slow. Oh hell.” Alexia dragged at his shoulders, attempting to pump her hips faster over his erection. “Fuck me harder.”

Anthony laughed quietly, “But I’m the gentle type, don’t you know?” Her words had hit him hard before. She’d meant it as a compliment, but she didn’t know what was buried within him that he restrained.

She slapped his shoulders and swore, taking her own hands and lifting them to her breasts to tease and pinch as he watched. Anthony shook his head and took control of her wrists, binding her with his grasp so she couldn’t touch herself. A pulse beat rapidly in the hollow of her throat. He licked the spot, humming with approval as she squirmed under him.

“My choice. This is how I want you. Slowly, aching with desire. I want you so aroused you’re begging for me to let you finish.” Anthony dropped his mouth and nipped at her breasts, then laved the sting away with his tongue. He leaned back to watch his cock enter her body, moisture glistening from their combined juices on each stoke. Slow pumps of his hips followed, his fingers dropping to trace the apex of her mound. He circled the hard nub of her clitoris as it peeked from under the folds of skin. Alexia hummed with pleasure as the speed of his fingers rose, the entire length of his cock filling her on each plunge.

Her passage tightened around him, a feathery caress, and he froze, suspending himself in one spot in order to stop her from slipping into her climax. Alexia cursed and he leaned over to kiss her protesting lips. Whispered words followed, intermingled with more kisses until Alexia was shaking under him.

“Beautiful, wonderful Alexia, you make my heart sing. You make my body ache at the thought of holding you close. Your touch undoes me.” His cock was so hard he swore it had doubled in size. Fisted tightly in her sheath, he was a breath away from breaking himself. But she needed him to be in control and he was going to be.

Even if it killed him.

Anthony pressed in and clasped Alexia by the chin, forcing her to look at him. “You’re not begging yet, you must not need to come.” He rocked his hips, brushing his pelvis hard on her clit, and her eyes rolled back in her head.

“God, yes! I need to come. Please, damn it, don’t...” She dropped her head and let loose a long, low keening of need as Anthony resumed his slow assault. Forcing her legs to the side he penetrated a little farther on each stroke. She slipped a little further into his heart as well, the line between his body’s needs and his emotions blurring. He was never going to be the same after this.

The sounds rising from her throat drove him higher, hotter than before, and he knew he was lost.

Anthony lifted her in his arms, his cock settling even deeper into her passage as she tightened her legs around his body. Cradling the cheeks of her ass in his hands, he plunged her down on his shaft. She cried out, asking for more, begging for completion. It was too much to resist, he was too far gone to continue to torment her. Anthony swung around to face the wall and pressed her shoulders back into the solid support. He thrust into her body, his forehead dropping onto her shoulder as the room faded away and all he felt was the hot slick of his cock driving into her body. Faster and harder he fucked until she cried his name, her nails biting into his shoulders. One last thrust and he came, his cock jerking within her as her pussy squeezed him tightly in the continuing aftershocks of her orgasm.

It took him forever to be able to move again, to peel her off the wall and into his arms, their hands continuing to touch and caress, lips brushing skin that was hot and sweaty and satisfied. They cuddled together in the big armchair by the fire, naked and completely at ease.

Joshua stood impatiently beside Victoria as she chatted with a group of young women from the pod, dispersing advice and admiring the babies. The morning had been a particularly painful form of torture for him as his former leader seemed determined to completely ignore the issue of Alexia’s anger. Victoria made him drive her all over town, finally ordering him to stop so she could visit with the young mothers watching their children at the park.

There were plenty of things to occupy his mind as Joshua jiggled on the spot, cursing old women and young children who kept him from returning to Alexia and begging for forgiveness.

She was right, he should have at least told her it wasn’t a dream. It didn’t matter he’d had her best interests at heart, he’d behaved no better than Michael. And that was what stuck in his throat. For all his disdain over the way his family had treated him throughout the years, he had turned out to be no better than them when it came to making assumptions.

He felt the strange sensation that alerted him Alexia had entered the water. She and Anthony must have decided to go for a swim, and he swore at missing the opportunity to be with her the first time she entered the water aware of the merfolk.

He stilled his body and his mind, using the relaxation methods he'd learned over the years when things had gotten too difficult for him to ignore the need that filled him. His dreams of Alexia had been more than ordinary, more vivid and compulsive, ever since he'd touched her on the beach the very first time. They had been linked together since that moment.

"Come, Joshua. I want to go—"

"Enough, Victoria. I need to return to the house. Anything else you have to do can wait until later."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Aren't you the demanding one all of a sudden? Don't think I've forgotten you have some explaining to do, young man. You seem to know entirely too much about things that were supposed to be private matters."

Joshua nodded politely to the ladies who stared curiously at him, wondering what he'd done to earn Victoria's rebuke. He escorted her back to his truck a little forcefully. She might like discussing private things in public places, but that was not a mistake he was going to make twice. She could be curious but there were things she no longer needed to know. Not if she had relinquished leadership to Alexia.

He waited until she settled herself into the seat, all buckled and safe. Victoria waved goodbye to their watchers before turning her shrewd gaze on him.

"The cavern's location is a secret known only to the matriarch and her consorts."

Joshua paid attention to the road and waited.

"Well, young man?" she asked more imperially than before.

Joshua cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Lady Victoria. I didn't realize you were asking a question. I thought you were making a statement and there's not much I can add to what you said."

Her gasp tickled him for a moment. She wasn't used to anyone rocking her boat. Still, she was his lover's grandmother and his former leader. He relented and took it down a notch.

"I *was* shown the cavern by one of the matriarch's consorts. Back when I was eighteen, Unca took me aside and showed me both the water and human accesses. And before you ask, I don't know why he did it.

"He knew I'd had dreams of the cave since meeting Alexia when we were teens, but I never sought the information until Unca volunteered it."

There was an uneasy tingle in the back of his neck, and Joshua glanced toward the ocean. The sight of a man walking fully dressed into the water made him hesitate before swinging the vehicle around into the nearest parking spot. Something was wrong. The man disappeared from sight, and the uneasy feeling in his gut increased to the point he shut off the ignition and removed his seat belt.

"What in heaven's name are you doing? I thought we were headed home." Victoria's touch on his arm distracted him.

He turned and handed her his cell phone. "Press star one seven and Braden will come and get you. I'm sorry I can't escort you home, but I think Alexia needs me." He looked around carefully to make sure the area was clear of tourists and locals not aware of merfolk. He had intended on following the example of the

man before him and wading clothed into the tide, but the sense of urgency rose to a feverish pitch, and he made the radical decision to change right then and there to St. Elmo's fire, his clothing falling to the seat of the truck.

"Joshua, you are the most impulsive boy I've ever met." There was a trace of amusement in Victoria's voice along with the concern. "I can believe Unca shared secrets with you. He always did march to the beat of a different drummer." She flung open her door and gestured out. "Now go help my granddaughter."

Joshua heard no more as he streaked across the beach and over the water toward where he sensed Alexia's presence.

Chapter Nine

Alexia stood in the water next to Anthony as the tide tugged them toward the open ocean. He removed his shorts and threw them far up the sandy shore, above the high tide line. She stared in admiration at his firm body, muscles glistening in the reflected sunlight off the water.

“I said I’d take you for a ride, but if you keep looking at me like that I can’t guarantee it will be on my dolphin.” He caught her in his arms, his erection pressed hard against her thigh.

“Why isn’t the water too cold for...?” Alexia shimmied her hips against him and giggled. It felt good to relax and enjoy his company, the warmth of their lovemaking still clinging to her heart. His hand brushed her breast and Anthony wrapped them closer together, their bodies touching intimately, the thin material of her swimsuit all that separated them.

“Are you cold?” he asked. “The water feels fine to me.”

Alexia considered for a moment and decided he was right. The water did feel slightly warmer than the air against her skin. She could also feel warmth radiating off his skin as he stood close beside her. The urge to touch was irresistible, and she wrapped her fist around his cock and watched Anthony close his eyes and moan. She stroked him firmly, her hand slipping easily over his shaft. It amazed her how he and Joshua seemed to always be either hard or at half-mast, and she wondered if it was a merfolk thing.

Anthony reluctantly pried her fingers off him. “Even though I’d like you to continue, you need to see something other than how much I desire you.” He pulled her deeper until they were treading water, floating up and down with the ocean swells.

“Can you show me your other two forms?” Alexia asked. “The dolphin and the merman?”

“I have three other forms, remember? The merfolk one is hard to show—the changes aren’t very visible, we pretty much look like our human forms—but I’ll try. Trust me?” He did a back float, pulling her on top of him.

“Of course.” How could she not? A constant stream of emotions flowed from him. Anthony’s confidence in the water rested on her like a warm blanket. His pleasure in being able to teach her about her pod swirled around them, sweet like a favorite dessert. His desire for her was there as well, present in every move he made.

He ran his hands down her sides and dragged her even higher, their mouths inches apart.

“Kiss me,” he said.

Mouths touched, his passion flowing over her as he slanted her mouth to the side and sealed them together. He stopped kicking and let them drop beneath the waves, the blue light of St. Elmo's fire meshing together with the new blue tones of the sky as seen from underwater. Her vision was hazy as she looked past Anthony's cheek, the sandy bottom blurred as she blinked in the salt water. His kiss distracted her for a moment but she needed to breathe soon and tightness began to bind her chest as she waited for Anthony to release her to the surface.

Alexia delayed as long as she could before struggling, pushing away to reach the air she needed as stars appeared in front of her eyes. A tinge of fear shivered up her spine. Why was Anthony not helping her? His hand cupped her neck, keeping her mouth open on his and suddenly her cheeks puffed out like a balloon.

If it were possible she would have laughed. It took a few tries to coordinate the timing, but eventually she realized if she breathed normally, her mouth sealed to Anthony's, his body provided the oxygen for them both.

They dropped to the ocean floor, the current wiggling them back and forth gently. It was awkward to look around plastered to Anthony, so she took a deep breath and pulled away. Her fingers clung to his arm to keep him near enough that as soon as she needed more air it was simple to touch mouths and breathe in.

Alexia wished she had a pair of goggles. The blur of the water continued and her eyes stung from the salt. Suddenly she blinked and the watery world around them turned crystal clear. She faced Anthony and carefully examined him. His eyes twinkled back at her from behind a thin membrane, like a set of clear eyelids and she realized her body had changed.

Shit, it was true. She was going to be able to turn into something not human. She pointed toward the surface and Anthony nodded. He gave her a final breath of air and swam them upward with an easy dolphin kick, his strong body holding her close.

As their heads broke the surface Alexia let out a shriek, threw her arms in the air and splashed the water around them like a little child in a puddle.

"Holy *fuck*, I could see you! As clearly as if I were above water. I could see you!" She hugged him hard and they both submerged under the next wave as it broke over their heads. Alexia surfaced sputtering and spitting. Anthony supported her to let her catch her breath. "You asshole, stop laughing at me."

He brushed a hand against her cheek. "I'm thrilled for you, Alexia, but it seems you still need to work on the breathing-water bit."

She stuck out her tongue before lying back on the surface, her heart pounding. It was really true. Her mind spun with excitement. She pulled up to tread water again, grabbing Anthony's arm. "Show me your dolphin." He raised a brow and she bit her lip. That must have come across like a bossy child, and that's not what she intended. "Please?"

He nodded. “Remember, the best way to ride is to hang onto my dorsal fin. And don’t go sticking your fingers in my blowhole—that’s kind of like sticking your finger up my nose and it’s not very polite.”

Alexia splashed water at him.

“Be careful, sweetheart. I have a bigger water pistol than you do.” He kissed her one last time, his lips clinging to her mouth before he backed up to tread water from a short distance away.

She watched closely, but she missed the actual moment of his change. One minute she stared at his sparkling green eyes and beautiful smile, the next—he was a sleek gray dolphin, his head hovering at the surface of the water. His smile had changed appearance but still warmed her heart.

He moved forward, bumping carefully into her side. Alexia slid her hands over his skin, marveling at how soft he was. She took a slow swim around him as he bobbed up and down in the water, her hands brushing his wide torso, rubbing his fins. She treaded water in front of him and stroked his nose and up his sloped forehead, all the while marveling that this was Anthony. She swam to the side to look into one eye, seeing there the intelligence and patience she’d seen in the man.

He lifted his head and dropped under the waves, returning to her side slowly. Alexia reached for his dorsal fin and hung on. The smoothness of his swimming made it easy to cling to him as he kept her head above the water.

Together they flew.

Minutes passed as they swam together. Occasionally Alexia let go and Anthony would circle around and rejoin her, stopping to jump high over her head or flip beside her, splashing her hard with the spray.

Alexia laughed every time he showed her something new. It was like Christmas and every birthday she’d ever had all rolled into one, satisfaction and joy filling her heart.

Suddenly there were more dolphins around her, all dancing in the waves. Anthony shifted back and together they floated, watching the pod play.

“It’s the youth. I teach them at the high school, and there are a few of the younger students here as well. For some it’s their first summer to be able to transform to their dolphin form and they’re pretty excited.” Alexia watched in fascination as the sleek bodies wove around them in circles, chasing and leaping over each other in play.

“They’re so beautiful. Are they part of the pod?” Alexia stroked the flank of one of the dolphins that swam by slowly on its side, showing off with one fin waving in the air.

Anthony snorted and pulled her in for a quick kiss. “Part of your pod, you mean? Yes, we’re territorial so any dolphins you find in these waters belong to Victoria’s pod. Now yours.” He kissed her again, more possessively this time and she was gasping for air when he released her. “He was too young for you.”

Alexia frowned. She must have missed something. “Who?”

He turned her in his arms and snuggled her butt to his groin, letting her feel his erection along the crack of her ass. He rocked his hips and fire shot through her veins. Damn it felt good.

“The dolphin you were rubbing. He’s just a teenager,” Anthony said, his voice deep and dark.

Alexia hid a smile and snuggled closer. Anthony was jealous. “I didn’t even know he was a boy, you silly man.”

She lay back into his arms letting him support her. There must be changes occurring in her body. She didn’t feel cold, even after being in the water for over an hour. Her fingers were still smooth and unwrinkled. In fact her skin was very slick, like there was a protective coat covering her.

Alexia rubbed a hand along Anthony’s thigh and felt the same texture on her fingers.

“Lubricant. We have a higher oil content on our skin to stop the salt water from damaging the tissues.” His fingers slipped along the edge of her bikini bottom, briefly brushing her mound. “Another adaptation is an increase in body fluids. We can safely make love in the water. Full humans have troubles with lubrication and also with the danger of air and water pressure. Our merfolk bodies don’t have those same issues.” His fingers stroked her belly, rubbed lightly up her arms. His body supported her as they floated together on the water’s surface. Alexia closed her eyes to enjoy the massage when a splash soaked them and tossed them underwater. They rose to the surface and she coughed a few times to clear her mouth and nose of the stinging liquid.

“Alexia, come here,” Anthony warned, his hand snaking out to pull her close.

She looked around warily. “What’s wrong?” The teens circled them, a tight protective ring. One of them raised his head above the water and made a series of clicks and chatters, clearly warning of danger.

“Could be a shark, it’s not usual in these waters, although I don’t sense anything close by but the pod. Let me change and go see, I can swim faster that way.” He kissed her quickly. “Don’t worry, you’re safe. If it is a shark, they’re afraid of a dolphin pod. I’ll be back as quickly as possible.”

He dropped under the water, transformed, and Alexia lost sight of him as he swam from the circle. The motions of the youth grew more frantic, more concerned, if Alexia read them right. She tried peering underwater while she held her breath. The longer she practiced the more easily her clear eyelids flipped into place. A couple of the dolphins opened the circle and through the gap a larger body shot toward her. She reached out with her awareness to see what his intent was, what his emotions told her.

Before she could register more than a blur of anger and bitterness, the young male she’d touched before dashed in and she grabbed his fin, letting him drag her away from the path of the new arrival.

A wild chase ensued. Alexia held on for dear life as her ride darted from side to side, trying to avoid the pursuing male. In the flying bodies and splashing waves, she lost sight of details. There was nothing but brief flashes of images, bursts of emotion that brushed her mind. The youth she clung to was determined to keep her away from the larger, older male, driven less fear by for Alexia’s life than a deep sense of commitment to Anthony. Whoever the newcomer was, the youth sensed he wasn’t trying to kill her.

Recognition hit as she caught a stronger trail of emotion. It was Michael who chased them, routing through the pod like a demon-possessed entity. A shock of fear raced through her and she fought down the

urge to scream. Her mind suddenly recognized the fact the emotion wasn't hers. It was a projection from Michael, a false emotion he was sending her way.

She gasped for air each time her protector rose high enough for her to breathe. Her legs and arms were wrapped as far around him as possible to avoid being thrown apart. Anthony reappeared, his sleek body racing toward them. How she recognized him in the group of similar shapes and colors she didn't know, but she rejoiced he had returned. He slammed into Michael hard, forcing his cousin away. Alexia attempted to watch the action, to reassure Anthony she was all right.

A sharp pain hit her side and arm, and the youth beneath her fell away. She tumbled through the water, a brilliant light surrounding her, cradling her as they drifted toward the bottom. She held her breath, her body shuddering with pain from the hit. Looking upward she watched the pod surround Michael, their interplay clear against the sparkle of the water's surface and reflected sky.

She needed air but the surface grew farther away, the familiar blue of St. Elmo's fire pulling her instead to a large outcropping of rocks on the ocean floor. Then she was in Joshua's arms and he touched their mouths together, passing her life-giving air as he held her close and hid them in a cleft in the rocks.

It took a long time for her heart rate to drop to anywhere near normal, pain and fear shaking her body as she thought through the attack. The adventure had been so wonderful and then so terrifying. She was tempted to throw the medallion back at her Gram as soon as she reached the safety of the surface.

Then the reality of what she was truly experiencing broke over her. She was underwater, breathing air from a merfolk, her body warm and safe in his arms. She knew that Michael had deliberately tried to frighten her. It was another attempt to turn her from the path she needed to follow, manipulating her situation to make her fear the world she was being introduced to.

It was dangerous in the water, especially with her being so new to the experience. Michael wasn't lying about that, even if he was a bastard for trying to scare her away. What he didn't realize was that she knew the air world was a dangerous place too. Car wrecks, lost jobs, broken hearts and broken families. There was no guarantee rejecting the world of the merfolk would mean she was safe.

A dolphin approached and she slid behind Joshua, farther into the protection he offered. How he had been able to appear right when she needed him was a miracle. That was another thing she'd throw away if she rejected the position her Gram offered. She and Joshua were bound together in some magical fashion. She peered around his shoulder to see Anthony resume his merfolk form and join them, taking her into his arms and kissing her softly.

He began to pull her to the surface but Joshua protested, his hands pointing to a hidden path behind them in the rocks. Taking air as she needed from them, the three passed from the sunlight into a tunnel lit with glowing blue phosphorus.

Chapter Ten

When their heads broke the surface of the water Joshua waited for a response from Alexia. It didn't take long.

"My God, this is the cave. This is the place I've dreamed about for so many years." Her voice rasped from a throat that must have been salt scorched.

Anthony reached for the large bath sheets hanging on the wall at the far side of the cavern, and Joshua stripped off her swimsuit before wrapping Alexia tightly in the warm fabric. He held her close until the shivers rocking her body stilled. Tucking his chin into her neck, he inhaled her scent, letting her nearness calm him until he could give back what she needed.

Seeing her attacked had shaken him to the core, and the anger under his fear burned in his belly like hot coals. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. So sorry I wasn't there for you the whole time." Alexia whimpered when he touched her arm, her breath coming in little shaky spurts. "Damn it, he hurt you."

"No, I'm fine," she denied, even as she shifted away from his touch. He pulled the towel aside and cursed at the blue rising on her arm and waist.

"I'll kill him," Joshua swore under his breath, his hand skimming her body as he checked the extent of the bruising. The blow must have glanced sideways off her torso, luckily for them all or it would have been a lot more serious. Dolphins could kill with a direct hit to the right spot on a human body.

"Get in line," Anthony spat out. "I'm going to take the bastard apart with my bare hands the next time I see him."

Alexia shook her head and stepped away from them. "Stop it, both of you. Michael won't try anything like that again. He's not going to stop me from taking my place as the matriarch, which I plan to assume without his help."

Joshua caught Anthony's eyes and the shock he felt reflected back at him. Had she just said what he thought she said? "Alexia, are you sure? Are you really accepting the position?"

She twisted her neck from side to side, massaging it with her good hand. "Why do you sound so surprised? I thought that's what you wanted all along."

Anthony pulled her onto his lap as he sat on the low trunk serving as a table. He tugged at the towel until it loosened and used it to dry her hair. "It's what we knew you were meant for, but we've thrown a lot of new information at you in a short time. If you needed longer to come to terms with it, everyone would

understand.” Placing the towel aside, his hands smoothed her skin intimately, his thumbs pressing hard on the muscles. Joshua watched his cousin drop a kiss on Alexia’s spine, his tongue flicking her skin.

“Does it look like I need more time? Shit, Anthony, I’m sitting in your lap in a room I’ve seen in dream, both of us naked, while another naked man watches us, and I’m not in the least embarrassed. I got attacked by a lawyer in dolphin form, and I spent more than an hour underwater sucking air from one or the other of you.” She glanced over her shoulder and snorted. “Either I come to terms with it quick or you need to call the little men with the white coats to come and take me away. Ouch, that hurt.”

Another shiver raced along her skin and Joshua dropped to his knees in front of them, pressing his body to hers to warm her. “You need to get dressed, you’re shaking with cold and shock.” Her arms surrounded him, trapping him when he would have pulled back.

“It’s not cold that’s making me shiver, it’s need.” Alexia’s hands cupped his face and she drew his mouth to hers, licking his lips. Her sweet flavor stole into him again, setting his heart pounding and his body tightening with desire. She tangled her legs around his hips, opening her body farther, and the aroma from her pussy rose into the air. Behind them Anthony choked back a groan but continued to massage her back.

Softly, gently, Joshua kissed her, trying to let her know what he felt in his heart with his tongue and lips and teeth. His whole world narrowed to the slide of their tongues together, her hands running into his hair, anchoring their mouths in place. Kisses and nips, strokes and caresses, her sweet body melting under his. Alexia moaned and he inhaled the sound, the small hairs on the back of his neck standing erect.

She was all he needed. All he’d ever need, and he’d been a fool not to be honest with her from the start. No matter that his intentions were good, no matter he’d been blinded by his own panting desire.

He pulled back enough to rest their foreheads together. “I love you, Alexia. How or why it happened, all I know is that it’s real. I never want to be sent away from you again, wondering if you’ll forgive me. God, I felt like such a fool, but I’d gladly have suffered more to have been able to stay with you and keep you from harm.” He dropped kisses on her eyelids, stroking away the tears hovering there. His heart ached the longer she remained silent, even though her eyes sparkled at him.

She kissed him. On the forehead. On the nose. On his lips. She dropped her mouth to his throat and her warm mouth suckled at his skin. The blue of St. Elmo’s fire flashed over them, igniting his passion higher, and it was all he could do to restrain from lining up his cock and driving into her until there was nothing separating them ever again.

She let her lips caress up his neck until she whispered against his ear, her voice soft and intimate, just for him. He was aware of Anthony mere inches away behind them but it felt like they were all alone. “Joshua, I was angry this morning, but more with Gram than with you. We may never understand why we’re connected but the truth is we belong together. That’s why it hurt to know you weren’t honest with me.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Hush, I’m not looking for you to apologize anymore. I’m trying to tell you I understand why you did it. Anthony and I talked this morning after you left, and the depth of the whole emotional connection between water shifters is, well, it’s not like anything I’ve ever heard of in the human world.”

She touched his mouth tenderly, her thumb rubbing at his lower lip. He let his tongue touch her skin, licking at the salty and sweet essence that was Alexia. “You and Anthony...talked?” He glanced over her shoulder to meet his cousin’s gaze. Understanding, longing, passion for the special woman in their arms passed between them.

“Among other things.” Her body shook again and Joshua cursed, grabbing at the towel on the floor. Alexia laughed as he tried to force Anthony’s hands away to wrap her up. “Joshua, I’m not cold.”

“Bullshit. I’m taking you upstairs and you’re getting into bed. There’s a tunnel connecting the cavern with the shed outside your house.” Her giggles continued and Joshua worried it had all been too much, that she was growing hysterical.

“Now you’re talking sense. Bed is exactly where I want to be. With you. And Anthony. But I don’t want to leave the cave yet.” Her lips were on his neck again, hot moisture igniting his blood to boiling.

Anthony waited impatiently as they spoke. There was nothing he could have added to their conversation, other than wishing he too could share with Alexia how much she meant to him. It wasn’t his place, and he wasn’t going to assume anything.

But right here, and right now, he knew what she needed. And he was more than willing to make sure it happened.

He rearranged the cushions to form a nest on the grass mat, and Joshua deposited Alexia, trying to cover her with the heavy comforter. She continued to laugh and resist his attempts, Joshua wrestling with her.

“Alexia, you need to rest. Lie back and we’ll warm you up. It’s all been too much, hasn’t it, sweetheart? Maybe a nap would be good,” Joshua said.

His cousin’s heart was in the right place, but his brain must have melted from too much time in his fire form. Anthony planted a hand in the middle of Joshua’s back and shoved, knocking him to the surface of the bed next to Alexia who willingly wrapped her body around him like an octopus. “Stop fussing. She’s not shaking from the cold or from shock. Listen to her, she’s telling you what she needs. I don’t think it’s a nap, is it, Alexia?”

“Hmmm, no nap. Just you.” Alexia licked the side of Joshua’s neck as she forced him onto his back in the middle of the bed. She straddled his waist and turned to face Anthony. “And you. Both of you.” She reached out for him and Anthony went willingly to her side, taking the kisses she offered, giving back his own worship of her lips and tongue.

The woman had him tied up in more knots than he'd ever believed possible. He was someone who tried to walk the quietest route possible most of the time. Alexia released all the darkest and most passionate parts of his psyche. Emotion swept him along, needy and deep, and he knew he could no more stop the next events from happening than he could stop the tide from turning.

His kisses grew hotter as Anthony took control and plundered her mouth. The fear that had covered them during the attack transformed into something more earthy and primitive as Alexia raked her fingernails down his shoulders and he growled. "God, yes. More. Give it all to me, to Joshua and me. Light us on fire. Burn us with your fire."

Alexia's eyes flashed blue within the brown, hunger and lust spilling over like a tangible force.

He lifted her, pushing her legs to the side so she knelt above Joshua's body. Anthony looked at his cousin and saw the barely controlled heat in his eyes, the same dark desire rocking his own body.

"Joshua is going to go down on you, love. He's going to eat your pussy until you're not able to move." He watched Alexia's eyes grow wider and wilder as he spoke. What she needed called to him, but she wouldn't say it. He sensed it, knew the words were impossible for her to say even after knowing them intimately.

So he said it for her.

"When you've come so many times you're ready to collapse into a puddle he's going to fill you with his cock and I'm going to take your sweet ass and together the two of us are going to give you what you need. We're going to cover you inside and out with everything in us. Our seed, our bodies and our hearts." Anthony leaned in and kissed her open mouth as she gaped at his words. Just a touch, then he drew back and watched her eyes flutter shut as Joshua closed his mouth over her.

As heat swept through her body, an innate sense of rightness came with it. Joshua lapped at her tender labia, his fingers separating her to let his intimate caresses reach where he directed them. With her eyes closed, all she felt were sensations, tingling and electrifying every nerve in her body.

Anthony rubbed her neck, his fingers dragging into her hair the only warning before his mouth descended and took the very air from her lungs. Any of the slow tenderness he'd shown her through their lovemaking the previous night was erased as his body vibrated with sexual tension next to her. Something dangerous that had been caged within him was loose, and she was the one who would be the hunted, the one his passions took to the next level.

Mouths joined, tongues mated, Anthony adjusted her head to another angle and drew her closer, all the while making sure she stayed suspended above Joshua's talented mouth. Her heart swelled as she received from them, took what they wanted so badly to give her. Anthony's words describing what he planned for them had brought her to the edge of orgasm, and a ripple of satisfaction started to flow through her body, the thrusting of Joshua's tongue against her sensitive tissues enough to make her come.

Anthony growled and tore her from her position, his green eyes dark with restrained passion as he arranged her to his liking on her hands and knees, her bottom thrust into the air.

“Enough. I can’t wait to taste you. To feel you around me.” His voice scratched at her ears, low and husky, and another shiver knocked her off her hands to her elbows, opening her even wider to where Anthony waited behind her.

A soft chuckle in front of her made her open her eyes to see Joshua smirking at his cousin. “Changing the game plan in mid-throw, are you? Damn impatient asshole, I wasn’t done with her.”

Anthony’s warm hand covered the cheeks of her ass, his fingers tracing the open seam between them slowly until he slipped one thick digit into the wetness of her pussy. “Sorry, Joshua. Deal with it.” His concentration was completely on her, and she swore his gaze burned into her backside as one hand caressed and one hand dipped into her depths again and again.

A gentle touch landed on her cheek, and Alexia looked up to see Joshua smiling at her, his cock in hand. She turned her head to lick at the moisture beaded on the swollen crest, and he rewarded her with a primal groan. She willingly opened her mouth and sucked him in, his flavor bursting over her tongue and relieving some of the dire need she’d felt build and rebuild ever since taking the medallion.

Joshua cradled her head, supporting her as he rocked his hips forward and back, his heavy cock stretching her lips wide. She sucked as he withdrew and his hiss of pleasure echoed in the room.

Behind her, hot moisture covered her pussy as Anthony feasted on her. His tongue laved the entire length of her slit rising to the puckered hole hidden between her cheeks. He brought her to another climax with his tongue and fingers on her clit, the pressure high and hard, while Joshua fucked her mouth with his cock. The tremors were smaller this time, the pressure within her continuing to rise instead of releasing. Anthony lapped at her, rimming the sensitive tissue of her ass until she was shaking hard enough to fall over.

Anthony moved her again, this time returning her to the original position she’d taken straddling Joshua. Wordlessly she gyrated over him, rubbing like a cat in heat over his cock, dragging it over her erect clit and purring with delight at the sensations.

“Put him inside you, Alexia, and let me get you ready. You’ve done this before, haven’t you?” Anthony’s hand stroked her ass and she had to concentrate to be able to respond.

“A few times. I like it, but...” She stared at Joshua. “Not while I had another man in my pussy. It’s going to be too much.”

Joshua ran his hands up the sides of her body, avoiding her bruise, skimming the rounded edges of her breasts. “You’ll be full, but it won’t be too much. It’s going to be wonderful. Anthony’s right, you need this to be able to make the transformation.”

“Screw that.” Anthony barked and he clasped her neck and planted another barely controlled kiss on her lips. He pulled back leaving them both breathless. “This isn’t so you can transform, Alexia, it’s because

I fucking need you. I need to be buried inside you so far you forget we've ever been apart. Ignore Joshua. He needs you too, but the bastard is too stupid for words and can never manage to say it properly. Did we tell you I let him copy all my test papers in school so he'd pass?"

Alexia's heart soared as she laughed at the expression on Joshua's face.

"Damn, Alexia, I didn't mean for it to sound like—oh fuck!"

Alexia and Joshua both gasped as Anthony pushed on her shoulders, spearing her down on Joshua's cock. "Holy shit, that feels wonderful. You're so hot and tight around me. Arghhh." Joshua let his head fall back on the mattress.

Alexia lifted and lowered a few times, loving the sensation of the hard crest stretching her passage. A firm hand stopped her motion, pressing her breasts into Joshua's chest.

"Kiss him, and let him know you forgive him for being an idiot. Besides, if he's kissing he can't talk and say stupid things."

Alexia giggled and nipped at Joshua's lower lip.

"I do need you, you know that, don't you?" he whispered, his hand brushing her cheek. The love in his eyes spoke better than his words ever could. They had a deep connection but she really didn't know the man yet. She'd fallen in love first and would have to get to know him better afterward, the complete opposite of what she'd imagined.

Get to know *them* better. She sucked in air as Anthony probed her back passage, one finger slipping into her and pumping slowly. Joshua kissed her cheek and distracted her for a minute as she savored the sensation of being filled in her pussy and her ass at the same time.

Something wet dropped on her skin and more pressure opened her. It stung a little at first but the pleasure of Anthony's touch increased quickly as one hand pumped in and out, one hand rubbed the soft skin of her hip and ass.

"Two fingers, Alexia. I'm adding a third." Pressure increased again and she moaned into Joshua's mouth. He pulled her tongue into his mouth and sucked it. He rocked his hips a few times, rubbing his hard abdominal muscles over her clit until there was nothing but pleasure everywhere.

Anthony stretched her as he wiggled his fingers. It felt good but suddenly it wasn't enough.

"Now, I want you now." She pressed back, trying to get him to fill her more and he laughed out loud.

His cock was at the ready so quickly she had no time to take a deep breath. Moisture, warm and slippery, covered her and when he pressed the rigid head of his shaft into her there was no burning friction. Only hot, hard pressure that stretched and pulled at her. His cock was far larger than his fingers had been and with Joshua in her pussy there was no room to move. No room to retreat as pain flared for a second before the fat head of his cock popped through the tight ring of muscles and her body hummed with delight.

Slowly, an inch at a time, Anthony entered her, his cock firing the nerves within her to an extreme pitch. She knew she made noises, sounds of passion escaping her lips as there was nowhere for her to go but deeper into the men around her, accepting them into her body and her heart.

Finally he was all the way in, his groin a brand against her butt. Anthony stroked her ass cheeks, his touch light and tender before he withdrew from her body in one smooth pull, stopping with the head of his cock tucked behind the band of tight muscle.

Joshua joined the movement and Alexia lost control. One cock at a time thrust into her as the other retreated, the filling and emptying, both as erotic and intoxicating as the other. The electrifying pressure of orgasm that had hovered for so long tripped the switch as her sheath tightened around Joshua, squeezing him closer than before. He swore and adjusted his pace, joining with Anthony's thrusts.

Alexia was overwhelmed with the pleasure that raced through her body, nerves pulsing with delight. Her body clenched around their thick cocks as Anthony's fingers dug into her hips. He thrust into her, words of love pouring from the two men even as they skewered her apart with passion. A blue glow lit the entire room, fire raged outside and within.

Anthony cried out and stilled, buried deep in her body, shooting his release. His climax triggered the others and Alexia shook as both cocks jerked within her, the scalding fluid coating her insides. Joshua dropped a kiss on her cheek and pulled her tighter into his arms. His hips gave a final involuntary thrust, like he was reluctant to leave her warmth.

Boneless satisfaction covered her like a blanket as she lay on top of Joshua, their pounding hearts synchronizing, bodies relaxing together on the mattress. Anthony kissed her shoulder and pulled slowly from her body, the loss of his presence leaving an ache behind. Emptiness she wanted filled. By the time he was back with a cloth to clean her up, Alexia was on the edge of sleep, resting in the arms of one lover, waiting to be joined by the other.

Everything would work out fine. It had to. Alexia kissed Joshua, then rolled to cuddle in Anthony's arms as she basked in the glow of the love of two.

Chapter Eleven

Peace settled over the house momentarily when Gram returned at dinnertime and apologized prettily. Then she threw them all for a loop, hauling a prepacked suitcase from the closet and announcing she was headed on a week-long shopping spree with her friends.

Three other gray-haired ladies, giggling like schoolgirls, waited outside in a sturdy SUV. Gram waved off Alexia's protests and queries, dropping a noisy kiss on her granddaughter's cheek, before hopping behind the wheel and peeling out of the driveway. Alexia made a few choice comments to her lovers about meddlesome and manipulative relatives.

Over the next days, they were inseparable. It became clear to the community that the three of them were an item, and Alexia worried about her reputation until her men managed to soothe her fears.

"It's not like they haven't seen it before," Anthony insisted when they sat to talk through all the pertinent issues in the privacy of the house. "The merfolk members of the community expect you to have at least two consorts, and the others will simply think it's the same set-up as Gram had arranged. You know, poor relative moving in to help with chores and housekeeping when you travel."

Joshua snorted. "I get the poor-relative label, right? Starving artist and all that?"

"I still can't believe Gram was sleeping with both Gramps and Unca. I never suspected a single thing and I stayed with them for how many summers?" Alexia shook her head as she snuggled in Joshua's lap on the couch.

"Where did you think Unca slept?" Joshua brushed a loose curl behind her ear. He couldn't get enough of touching her and wondered if the need would ever diminish.

"He had the room at the top of the stairs to the side of Gram and Gramps, and I guess I never twigged to the fact it not only has a connecting door to the master bedroom, but it was also usually immaculately clean." Alexia dropped a kiss on Joshua's mouth before rising to her feet and stretching like a cat.

She turned and stared hard at Anthony. "Did you say at *least* two consorts? Do you mean they expect me to...?" Her face grew bright red and Joshua squeezed his lips together to stop from laughing out loud.

This one he'd let Anthony answer. His cousin had turned out to be rather adept when it came to taking charge of their lover. She was the one who would guide the pod, but she seemed to enjoy the rather dominant behavior Anthony exhibited in the bedroom and in their personal life. Joshua watched contentedly as Alexia was surrounded by Anthony's arms and swept into a passionate embrace, the two of

them losing track of time and location as they kissed. Anthony tugged her hips hard against his, rubbing her intimately before letting them up for air.

“Merfolk follow our dolphin cousins in our sexual habits. It’s not like werewolf legends where there is one predestined mate for each of us. You might want another lover at some point. Your Gram married Gramps, and it wasn’t until years later that Unca joined them on a semipermanent basis.”

Alexia’s mouth opened and closed a few times soundlessly before dropping her head onto his shoulder. “Thanks, Anthony, that’s just not the mental image I needed to have.”

“Sorry, love. The fact you have the two of us in your bed doesn’t necessarily mean you’ve made a lifetime commitment to us.” Anthony lifted her chin so he could kiss her again but Alexia pushed him back, her expression shocked.

“You don’t think this is forever? What we’ve been sharing?” Alexia asked, her gaze darting between the two of them.

Joshua rose and went to comfort her as her tension rose. “You’re not hearing what he’s saying correctly.” Damn if Anthony hadn’t misspoken this time. It appeared even wordsmiths could blow it. “He’s saying *you’ve* made no formal commitment. He’s not saying anything about what we feel for you.”

Alexia shook her head violently. “We started fooling around because I was craving chemicals and was on a hormonal high. Do you think I’d still be having sex with you if I hadn’t made some kind of emotional commitment?” She slapped at Joshua’s hands as he tried to hug her close.

A loud laugh rang through the room. “Alexia, stop it. You’re getting upset over nothing.” Anthony trapped her in his arms. The anger and tension in her body slowly receded as Anthony stroked her hair, kissed her softly, murmured words in her ear. “I love you, Alexia. I’m always going to love you. Joshua told you he loved you as well. That’s what we feel for you. It’s not caring for you as our matriarch but caring for the woman you are.”

He sat on the couch and pulled her into his lap. Joshua sat beside them and lifted her feet onto him so she lay covering them both.

“If you want to make it official that we’re your chosen consorts, you need to announce it in public before the pod,” Anthony said.

“I simply call a meeting and tell everyone I’m the new leader and I’m sleeping with both of you?” Alexia dropped her head on Anthony’s chest and Joshua marveled at how quickly she could relax after getting upset.

“Almost. You’ll need to prove you can change as well.” Joshua scratched his chin. “Anthony, how long does she have until she has to make an open call?”

“An open call? Is that what you blocked the first time I went to the ocean with the medallion?” Alexia asked.

Joshua nodded. "You go in the water under the moonlight, and the unpartnered men of the pod will arrive hoping that you'll select them as a lover, if not your consort." She wiggled uncomfortably and Joshua soothed her. "They'll show up but all you have to do is select us. It's that simple and it will be enough to claim us as well. Not everyone eligible will even come since you've shown a preference for Anthony and me. Only those who want to challenge us."

She grunted in disgust. "Michael."

Anthony nodded. "Probably, but being shut down in front of the rest of them will be the final time you have to worry about him. Once you deny him publicly, the rest of the pod will defend you and ostracize him if he even breathes wrong in your direction."

"What about the attack the other day? How in the hell did he get away with that one?" Alexia asked.

Joshua sighed and rose to his feet. Work commitments were finally forcing him to the shop for a few hours to finish packaging and shipping some orders. "He said it was a misunderstanding and an accident. In fact he accused Thomas of trying to hurt you and said that he was coming to your defense. Since you're not officially matriarch yet, it's one of those 'he said she said' situations. "

"Thomas? The one who pulled me out of the way so Michael couldn't hurt me? What a bunch of crap," Alexia snapped. "I am bloody sick of Michael and his plotting. Fine, I'll let it go this time, but I mean it, the sooner we take care of him the better."

*

Anthony parked in front of Joshua's shop, hurrying to open the door for Alexia. She slid past him, her sweet scent making his mouth water as she planted a quick kiss on his cheek.

"Hey, Teach."

Anthony turned to see one of his students leaning against a post outside the shop, his hand wrapped in a light bandage. The youth approached and dipped his head respectfully to them both. "Lady Alexia. Good to see you weren't hurt the other day."

"You're Thomas, aren't you?" Alexia asked. "Thank you. If it weren't for your quick thinking, I would have been badly hurt." Anthony smiled as he heard the same tones of authority in Alexia's voice that had always been present in Victoria's. It was becoming clearer and clearer Alexia was ready to lead.

Thomas smiled and bowed slightly, then turned to Anthony. "Can I talk to you for a minute? Privately?"

Alexia squeezed his hand and winked before disappearing into Joshua's shop. Anthony watched her hips sway as she left, his body aching to take her home and bury himself in her again. He turned to see Thomas grinning from ear to ear.

"So it's true. You've got the hots for her, don't you?" the youth asked.

“Shut up.” Anthony thumped him good-naturedly on the arm and pointed down the boardwalk. They walked as he asked, “What’s the news?”

Thomas cleared his throat. “Two things. Did you know Mr. Marley, the big-shot lawyer, is spreading the rumor Alexia is unable to change and unfit to be matriarch?”

Anthony cursed under his breath. “Where in the hell did you hear that?”

“I work at the Pub and Grub as a dishwasher, and no one notices who’s clearing tables. A bunch of the old farts were debating if Alexia had enough merfolk blood, what with being half human and her mother never able to change. Then someone wondered if the fact she grew up away from Jaffrey’s Cove and the rest of the pod would affect her ability to gain what she needs. One old-timer brought up the rumor you had to live at the shore for ten years straight before absorbing enough of the chemicals. You know how those men gossip like grannies. Soon the whole place was discussing it, and Marley *happens* to mention that without the strongest consort possible he feared Alexia will never transform and the whole pod will end up in chaos.” Thomas kicked a shell from the side of the boardwalk. “He’s such an asshole.”

“He’s still your elder. Don’t call him that in public,” Anthony corrected, although he agreed one hundred percent with the sentiment. Michael was nothing but a dick and Anthony was getting thoroughly sick of him.

Thomas sighed and rolled his eyes. “Yes, sir. Anyway, we wanted to let you know we don’t think it’s going to be an issue. All the kids who changed for the first time this summer, they say Lady Alexia is nearly ready to transform. When we tracked you the other day, she was definitely showing signs, and they’re pretty observant about that kind of thing since they just went through it.”

Anthony nodded. “I thought Alexia was nearly ready, but it’s good to know others see it as well. Anything else?”

Thomas grinned. “We all think she rocks. It’s going to be great to have a new matriarch who’s not a fossil. Not that Lady Victoria wasn’t cool, but with Alexia and you and Joshua as consorts, things will be sweet around here.”

As much as he knew he should reprimand the youth, Anthony couldn’t find it in him to lay down the law, especially when he agreed with every word. “She hasn’t accepted us publicly yet, you know.”

“She will.” They were back at the shop and Thomas stared in the window where they saw Joshua and Alexia snuggling close. “Crap, she’s a babe. I wish I was old enough—”

“But you’re not, Thomas, so chill, or whatever the current lingo is. Keep your eyes in your head and your wits about you. You’ve done a couple of good things for her now, and she won’t forget it.” Anthony moved in closer to the youth and let his possessive feelings for Alexia rise to the surface. “Don’t push it any further or I’ll give you reason to regret it.”

Thomas swallowed hard for a minute. He backed away, dropping his eyes respectfully.

“Is your hand okay?” Anthony pointed to the bandage, letting the youth off the hook. Heck, he remembered what it felt like to be seventeen and around Alexia.

The youth’s chin flipped up and he grinned maliciously. “This? Just a scratch. Got it when a bunch of us decided to knife Marley’s tires.”

Holy shit, the kid was a handful. Anthony snorted. “I never heard that, Thomas. Never heard a word of it. Hey, you keep your eyes and ears open for me, okay?”

Thomas flicked a salute, and with one last quick glance at Alexia, he jogged off down the boardwalk.

Chapter Twelve

The warm night air blew around her body as Alexia stood on the deck staring at the ocean. Less than a week since she'd arrived to "help" her Gram. Less than a week to have her whole life turned upside down and sideways, to fall in love with two men and a whole race of people she hadn't known existed. She wrapped the robe a little tighter around her body, the silky smoothness caressing her skin even as she longed to throw off the garment and stride naked into the water.

She laughed at herself. More things had changed than she'd realized. The shy little girl had become a wanton exhibitionist.

A pair of strong arms surrounded her and she turned, nestling in tightly to Joshua's embrace. His kisses bathed her neck and she hummed with pleasure.

"Are you ready?" He touched her forehead with a final kiss.

Was she ready? She thought so. Anthony had reassured her she would be able to transform soon. She was showing all the signs and simply needed the catalyst of the call to push her over the edge. Alexia shivered at the thought of being surrounded by the men of the pod.

"Hey, don't worry. We'll be there, Anthony and I. We're never going to leave you." Joshua leaned back and looked at her with such tenderness in his eyes her heart ached. "I have to make a confession. You know how we told you we follow the dolphins in our mating habits? How some merfolk don't have life mates?"

Alexia nodded. Her skin felt tight and tingly over a heart already stretched to the breaking point. Joshua's emotions covered her like hot molten lava.

"I lied. You're mine and I'm never giving you up. We're meant to be together. We were always meant to be together." Joshua dropped to his knees and held her hand. "Alexia Colten, will you marry me?"

Her throat was choked tight with emotion as she stared at him. She wanted this, wanted it badly. But... "What about Anthony?" she whispered. He was in her heart as well and she couldn't give him up. Not even for Joshua.

Joshua snorted. "Since he says he's so good with words he can ask you himself."

"You mean marry both of you? That's not possible. It's not legal." Alexia tugged on his hand, trying to pull him up.

He refused to budge. "You don't want to marry me? Is that what you're saying?"

Now he was being frustrating. What did it matter what she wanted if she couldn't have it? "Of course I want to marry you—"

Joshua leapt up and swept her into his arms, covering her with kisses. She giggled and returned his embrace, her mouth rejoicing as the taste of him poured through her system.

A soft cough interrupted them and Alexia pulled back with a grin to face Anthony. He held a single red rose in his hands and he smiled sweetly as he approached.

"I see I'm late for the party. Joshua, you ass. You said you'd wait for me." Anthony punched his cousin lightly on the arm before facing Alexia and dipping his head respectfully. "My lady. For you." He handed her the rose as he dropped to his knee.

Alexia's heart swelled and overflowed, tears rising in her eyes as Anthony kissed her fingers. His expression showed his longing and the heat hidden deep within him that rocked her to the core. It couldn't be true and yet it was.

"Will you marry me, Alexia? Let us stay together forever and raise a family? Let me support you as you lead our pod into the future? I'm lost without you."

Joshua muttered in the background, "Now you know why I wanted to go first. Damn poetic English teacher..."

Alexia waved a hand at Joshua and sniffed back tears of joy. She dropped to her knees and threw herself into Anthony's arms, kissing him and accepting his kisses.

One week. A whole new life.

Amazing.

The moonlight sparkled on the surface of the water as she approached the shoreline. Alexia was alone, for the moment. Joshua and Anthony had kissed her back at the house and left her to initiate the call on her own.

Her skin tingled harder than ever, and she stopped to stretch her arms and rotate her wrists, a pale blue shadow dancing over her skin. She longed for the water, but more than that she was excited beyond belief. Every step she took made her pussy throb as blood rushed to swell her labia, her breasts tight and aching for a touch. The whole situation would have been funny if it wasn't so frustrating.

She needed a lover with every inch of her being.

Her robe slipped from her shoulders, and she dropped it to the sand above the tide line. Alexia stepped into the water, the cool caress on her feet and calves contrasting with the heat racing through her. She stopped when the water reached her thighs and held up the medallion. The weight seemed heavier on her palm than before and she squeezed it tightly, little bits of blue radiating from between her fingers. Whatever she had received from Anthony and Joshua seemed to have affected the medallion.

Hopefully it had been enough for her blood.

Turning to face the open ocean, Alexia stepped forward until the tide covered her chest. A bright blue light flashed as the medallion sank under the waves and she took a deep breath. Whatever needed to happen had begun.

The sexual tension in her body spiked and she gasped. The water cradled her like a lover, a fleeting brush against her tender and sensitive skin. The muscles in her back and her arms tightened in painful ripples. Flickers of light from the medallion shot out in flares, wrapping her torso in long fingers that glowed with the reflected light of the moon.

Alexia swayed in the pull of the current.

Waiting. Longing. Needing.

In the distance she saw them approach. Beautiful bodies leaping through the waves, like she'd seen so many years before. They came to her, to her side, and she held her chin high and watched with pride.

They all came. Every one of the men she'd seen on the dance floor, everyone she'd met over the years growing up, the boys of summer now grown men. Her body pulsed with desire as she rotated and watched them enclose her in their midst. Anthony had thought some of them might stay away, but she swore there were more than ever standing naked in a circle around her, hard bodies and smooth skin glistening in the moonlight.

A streak of blue raced over the water toward her, and she laughed as Joshua changed and joined the throng, his bright green eyes sparkling at her. It was so right that he arrived in his fire form, and she held out her arms and pulled him to her, the touch of his body easing the pain of arousal while he lit her heart on fire.

"Is he your choice, my lady?" a deep voice asked. She turned to see Braden step toward her. "There are others here who would serve you as well."

She held up a hand to stop him from touching her, the thought of his caress turning her stomach until she felt his intent. His emotion swept out, no secrets kept. He was on her side and approved of both Joshua and Anthony, but he was concerned there was danger. He moved closer and she let him move into position as a guard beside them, trusting her instinct.

Joshua stiffened, and she smoothed a hand up his neck and reached to kiss him. She brushed her lips over his ear and whispered, "Trust me."

She turned around the circle slowly, watching eyes, measuring emotions. Her heart grew lighter and lighter with every member she checked as their complete devotion became clearer. They hadn't come to challenge Joshua and Anthony but to accept them.

Her survey at an end, Alexia frowned. One huge dilemma remained. "Where's Anthony?"

Joshua moved forward and checked the group. "And where's Michael? I can't believe he's not here."

A shout rang out and all eyes spun to the ocean where a group of fins could be seen in the moonlight moving toward the shore. Alexia found herself in the middle of the group, protected by so many layers of bodies she could barely see.

A large dolphin was being herded toward them, harassed and prodded by at least twenty smaller bodies. Each time he tried to escape he was nipped or pushed until the group of them hovered off the shoreline.

The instant Michael resumed his human form, a gasp went up from the men around her. He sported a rather swollen black eye and various cuts and scrapes on his body. Another of the dolphins changed and Anthony appeared, his bright smile cutting through the fear that had risen in Alexia's soul.

Anthony dragged Michael to the edge of the circle before releasing him. "You were called. Now witness and be silent." He strode over to Alexia's side and bowed. "My lady. My apologies for being late. It seems someone didn't hear the call, and I didn't want him to be able to claim a false choosing later on."

Alexia closed her eyes. Everything was ready. Her pod was ready to accept her. Her lovers were there. She just needed to be able to change.

A shiver raced over her skin and she lifted her hands to the sky, stretching her arms to ease the pain in her back. The tingling sensation in her limbs increased, and even with her eyes shut she could see the bright blue glow that seemed to fill the circle surrounding her. Voices roared in her ears for a moment before falling silent.

It was time.

She lowered her arms and took a deep breath. She needed to be brave and finish this to the best of her ability. Slowly she exhaled and opened her eyes to see Anthony and Joshua watching her closely, and she smiled. She held out a hand to each of them and they surrounded her, holding her tightly.

She kissed Joshua first. It was only right since he'd been the first to kiss her so long ago. The first to bind her heart and soul to the merfolk. His mouth was soft under hers, an echo of the hesitant caress of the youth, and she nipped his lower lip lightly before drawing away.

Then she kissed Anthony, a hot, possessive kiss that thawed the last of the fear from her that had snuck in when he'd been absent from the circle. He was her fire and passion, her wildness set free, and she let him know how much she loved that side of him as she offered herself.

Finally breaking away, she was breathless as she whispered to Anthony. "Do I need to say anything special?"

He laughed and twirled her in his arms, water spraying in the air around them. "Look around, love. Who are you going to speak to?"

Alexia's head swung back and forth, but the shore and water were empty except for her, Anthony and Joshua.

“You chose, sweetheart,” Joshua said. “In front of all of them, including Michael. Thank you, Anthony, I never thought he might try to pull a fast one.”

Anthony wrapped Alexia tight in his arms and stroked her skin. “I tried to make sure we had all the bases covered. Thomas was keeping an eye on Michael for us. That boy is a little too precocious. He felt the call and wondered why Michael remained sitting on the beach, grinning. I don’t know how he was planning on explaining how everyone else heard the call but I didn’t want to give him any opportunity to plan mischief in the future.”

“Was it the youth who helped herd Michael in here?” Alexia asked.

Anthony nodded. “They like you, Lady Alexia. They like your choice of consorts.” His cock pressed into her belly and the urgency of her desire returned in a flood. “We just need to keep young Thomas away from you.”

“Then keep me happy, boys,” Alexia purred as Joshua covered her breasts with his hands. The feel of four hands dancing over her body lit nerves already tight and ready to fire. She hesitated. There was one more thing. “Wait. Don’t I need to change or something first? To prove myself?”

Joshua grinned. “You changed, dear. When you closed your eyes and reached for the sky you changed to St. Elmo’s fire. I think you’re going to find people mind their manners very closely around you, because it’s very, very rare for someone who changes as an adult to have a fire form.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “I changed? Really? I thought something happened but it just felt...right. Does that mean I can do the other changes as well?”

Anthony slipped a hand down her body and nodded, his expression heating as his gaze followed the trail of his fingers. “You should be able to. So, what do you want to do, my lady? We could take you for a walk on the beach.”

Joshua moved in on her other side, his hand covering her hip. “We could take you for a ride in the moonlight.” He snuggled closer and touched a kiss to the pulse throbbing in her neck. “We could go and make love.”

Alexia giggled. “I know what I want.” She paused and bit her lip to stop from bursting out laughing. “I want to...” She pulled away from them and walked backward up the shoreline, tugging them by the hands. They grinned and the anticipation in their eyes lit her body with need.

She raised her brows a few times and then whispered, “I want to build a sandcastle.” She dropped to her knees and started digging the sand into a large pile.

Stunned silence echoed in her ears and she hid her grin from them. She’d barely made a small mound of sand before two sets of hands picked her up and she swayed from the heights of Joshua’s shoulder as he marched them back toward the house.

“Not that we don’t plan on fully supporting you in your role of matriarch, but are you nuts?” Anthony smiled sweetly at her as he followed behind, his cock tracking her like a homing missile. “I’m sure what I

heard you say was you wanted to suck on my cock while Joshua fucks your pussy, then we'll move on to your next request which was for me to fuck your ass while you suck Joshua."

"Hey," Joshua shouted back. "I thought I got her ass this time. You're such a pain, Anthony. So damn greedy."

They laughed together as she bounced on his shoulder, the water retreating in the distance as Joshua's rapid pace brought them back up the rock path to the house. Back to their home.

Joshua lowered her carefully to the floor in the living room, his hands cradling her tenderly, opening space on her other side for his cousin to join them. Anthony stepped forward and stared her in the eye, a spark of mischief mixed with the heat. "You're right, Joshua, I must have misheard her. She said she wanted to ride me while you took her ass. That's what you want, isn't it, sweetheart?"

Alexia licked her suddenly dry lips with a mouth too parched to speak. It had all turned out fine. She still longed to feel what it was like to change into a dolphin. She still wanted to swim as a merfolk and breathe underwater. But this...this was what she needed right now. She nodded silently, breathlessly, and heard her lovers whoop with delight.

Right before they took her upstairs and did everything she wanted.

Epilogue

One month later

Three dolphins slipped away from the rest of the pod, dancing through the waves at the end of the morning swim. They spun in the air and crashed to the surface, splashing and chasing each other through the crystal-clear water. The smaller one leapt the waves and entered the water, sliding over the larger body that dashed ahead so she would land on him. She turned on her tail and darted away, trying to outrace her lovers, but they had more power and they knew how to trap her, closing the gap around her until she was surrounded. All three shimmered and changed to their merfolk bodies, sinking toward the bottom as their naked bodies twined together.

Alexia looked up at the surface of the water as it faded in the distance, the sunlight filtering down in ribbons to where her lovers caressed her skin. Joshua latched onto her breast and nipped, the thrill raced all the way down to where Anthony licked her pussy, his tongue sliding over her clit on every pass. Swimming as a dolphin was wonderful, but this was the icing on the cake. Enjoying a human body with no need to rise to the surface until they had sated every urge they had among the three of them, this was everything Alexia had dreamed of and more.

Anthony rotated in the water, his body inverting and his erect cock brushed past her mouth, too tempting to resist. She sucked him in, not needing to worry about gravity knocking them off balance as the water supported them. Joshua slipped around to her back and his fingers trickled down the crack of her ass, stopping to rub the tight rosebud hidden there. Alexia rocked her mouth over Anthony's cock and he jerked, tilting his hips to help her reach. His tongue darted in and out of her pussy and an orgasm hovered just out of reach.

Making love underwater the sounds muted and changed to suit her new hearing, but she still felt the emotions rolling off her men. Anthony was on the verge of exploding in her mouth and he withdrew before she could protest. Joshua dipped a finger into her ass, stretching her and stimulating all the nerves that set her on fire. Anthony spun around and dropped his thumb to rub her clit and she climaxed, her body vibrating in waves.

She rested her head on Anthony's shoulder and let them open her legs wide. Two cocks nudged at her body and she smiled at what she knew was coming. Anthony drove in first, his cock slamming into her like a spike all the way to hit her cervix and set off another wave deep within. Then he pulled her close and

leaned back, forcing her ass cheeks apart so Joshua could press inside from behind, slowly and smoothly, their skin's extra lubricant easing his entry until she was filled to the brim.

Her body. Her heart. Her soul.

They moved slowly as they loved her. Anthony anchored her hips in place and let Joshua wrap his hands around her torso to tease and pinch her nipples. She was surrounded, filled and connected.

Anthony increased the speed of his thrusts, leaned forward and caught her mouth with his. His tongue penetrated her mouth with the same intensity he drove his cock into her flesh. Joshua matched pace in her ass and Alexia exploded, her pussy and core seizing tightly around their cocks, trying to lock them in place. Anthony froze and she felt his release as her body milked his cock. Joshua pumped once more before joining them, clinging to her body as he spent within her.

They floated, three bodies entwined until Alexia needed to stretch and move. They separated, Alexia holding a hand of each of her lovers as they smoothly headed back to the house. Their morning swim might be over, but Alexia looked forward to the rest of their Saturday.

Life was never boring in Jaffrey's Cove. Alexia peeked at her lovers and snickered before shifting quickly to her fire form and flying to the surface, trying to get ahead of them. She knew they would catch her again, but she had a good chance of making the cavern before they would.

She knew just how she wanted to spend the rest of the day.

About the Author

Vivian was playing hooky the day they taught about the importance of getting a “real” job; she was hiding out at the local library rereading everything for the fifth time. Since then she’s become a Jack-of-all-trades with a job experience list only slightly smaller than the average phone book.

She’s hiked, biked, canoed, kayaked and camped throughout Canada, seven European countries and twelve states, including Hawaii and Alaska. All these adventures have now become settings for her overactive muse to wander through.

Vivian lives in Western Canada with her longtime sweetie, two wonderful kids and a dog that looks like a stuffed toy.

The best place to come and visit is vivarend.blogspot.com.

You can also drop by www.vivianarend.com or send her an email at vivarend@gmail.com

Look for these titles by Vivian Arend

Now Available:

Wolf Signs
Tidal Wave

Coming Soon:

Wolf Flight

Talk about getting your signals crossed...

Wolf Signs

© 2009 Vivian Arend

Granite Lake Wolves, Book 1

Robyn Maxwell doesn't care that her brother has to cancel out on their backcountry ski trip. She can do it alone. The fact she's deaf doesn't make her survival skills any weaker. The chance to get away from it all and relax in the Yukon wilderness is just what she's been craving.

Meeting wilderness guide Keil at the cabin starts cravings of another kind. Keil's one hot hunk of ripped, tasty male. Now she has to deal with raging hormones as well as strange questions about wolves and mates and challenges to the death.

Keil was trying for a nice reflective retreat before challenging for the Alpha position of his Alaskan pack. He wasn't planning on meeting the woman destined to be his mate, or finding out she's not aware she has the genes of a wolf.

Between dealing with his accident-prone younger brother, a deaf mate with an attitude and an impending duel to the death, his week—and his bed—is suddenly full.

Far from the relaxing getaway any of them had in mind...

Warning: Gives a whole new meaning to the phrase "talking with your hands". Includes dangerous use of sarcasm and hot nookie in a remote wilderness sauna.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wolf Signs:

Robyn shifted uncomfortably on the bench in the annex outside the sauna. Keil had gone back into the cabin with TJ and left her with the directions to relax and wait for him while he grabbed a few things. She added a couple extra logs into the stove, topped up the snow in the buckets and sat to wait.

It was damn uncomfortable to be sitting there knowing any moment a werewolf was going to walk in the door and have sex with her.

Argghhhh. Even the thought made her twitch. What the hell was she doing? This was crazy. It was beyond crazy.

The door opened and Robyn jumped. Sexual heat flowed off Keil's body and reached to caress her skin.

Okay. She remembered why she was going to do this. Every inch of her was on fire and she was being drawn toward the tall, hard male as if she had ropes that twined about her limbs, trapping her. Keil dropped a blanket on the bench beside her. He glanced at her before lifting her chin with his hand.

"Hey, it's okay. Let's take this slowly."

Robyn dropped her eyes, blushing furiously. *"I'm scared."*

"Scared of me?"

"Kind of."

His gentle hand traced over her ear and nestled in the hair at the back of her neck. *"I don't want to scare you, little bird. I want to love you."*

She lifted her eyes to his. *"I don't know what to do. I mean, I know what to do but I've never..."*

Keil wagged his eyebrows and his eyes brightened. "I know you've never. I'm glad you've never. It's good that you've never. Now I don't have to go track down your old lovers to kill them."

"Possessive much?"

"You have no idea. Yet." Keil leaned closer to brush his lips over hers. *"Wait until you are fully wolf. I bet you're going to be just as possessive about me. Wolves mate for life, and we don't like to share."*

Robyn shifted again on the hard bench. How could she want this much and still feel afraid to take the next step. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to build up her courage.

A gentle touch pulled her to her feet. *"You're thinking too hard. Let's go slow. You must be sweaty from our ski and digging up TJ. Let me help wash you up."*

Keil's hands drifted over her shoulders, pulling her up against his body for a brief caress as he reached behind her body to grasp the bottom of her long-sleeved T-shirt. With a slow fluid motion, he lifted it off her, then dropped it on the bench behind them.

As his eyes traced over her torso, Robyn fought the urge to cover her chest with her hands. Ugh. She had to decide to be seduced in a mountain cabin wearing her plainest and sturdiest underwear. Luckily Keil's face didn't seem to express any displeasure with what he saw.

And neither could Robyn complain. Keil removed his own shirt with one swift yank and stood inches away from her, his rock-solid abs tempting her fingers.

"Damn. Just...damn. Is what they mean by washboard abs? Can I do some laundry?"

Keil smiled and reached for her. Removing the tight sports bra didn't go as smoothly. In the middle of pulling it off, Keil's hand got stuck in the twist of the Y back and Robyn froze with her arms pulled over head, bra wrapping her tight with Keil's forearm. The heat rose in her face.

"Hell of a thing to happen, but don't worry. This gives us some very interesting possibilities." Keil lowered his head to press a kiss on her neck, fluttering soft kisses down over the tops of her exposed breasts, sending chills shooting through her even as he supported and stretched her arms above them.

His touch was gentle but the restrained power was there, under the surface. His tongue stroked over her skin toward her cleavage then his teeth nibbled back up the line of heat he'd created all the way to her lips. His hand was loose from her bra and she lowered her arms slowly, his hot gaze never leaving her body.

"Take off the rest and I'll get the shower ready." He spun around quickly, leaving Robyn wondering what she'd done wrong.

“Keil?”

His strong arms poured the heated water into the holding tank over the top of the shower. *“I need to cool off a bit. You’re very beautiful and because you’re my mate, I really, really want you. I’m trying to keep things slow here.”*

After prepping the water, he placed her into the shower, turning her body until she was wet from head to toe. With a flick of the wrist, he stopped the water and picked up the washcloth and soap. Starting at the back of her neck, he rubbed small circles over her skin, covering her shoulder blades, slipping over her spine until his hands cupped both cheeks of her ass.

Robyn dropped her forehead against the side of the shower stall and closed her mind to everything but the wonderful sensations racing over her skin at his touch. The heat from the sauna warmed the side room they were in to the point that she was comfortable even as droplets continued to cling to her skin. His mouth fastened on her neck, lapping at stray pebbles of water pooled there. Her womb clenched, releasing moisture as every stroke of his tongue sent thrills through her body to increase the desire mounting deep inside.

His touch dropped lower as Keil squatted behind her, his hands caressing down one leg. The small circular motions were driving her crazy as he teased, moving closer to the core of her heat and retreating without satisfying.

“Turn around, beautiful.”

Keil’s voice in her mind was deep and dark. It sounded like rich chocolate and Robyn was so into chocolate.

His voice made the tingles race.

One scorching lesson in seduction...

Teacher's Guide to Wildlife

© 2009 Kaye Sykes

Finally free of her stalker ex-husband, Faith Cahill has a lot to celebrate. It doesn't take much prodding from her best friend to throw caution to the wind and kiss a perfect stranger. And Dean is perfect, indeed: darkly handsome, tattooed, wicked smile, talented with his hands—and he cooks!

The last thing she needs is to get involved again, especially with a guy who's hiding something. Despite her vow to avoid him, though, her resolve is shredded every time he crosses her path.

One night with Faith leaves Dean hungry for more, and he senses the feeling is mutual. His instincts tell him Faith won't be satisfied until she's unearthed all his secrets. He'd like nothing more than to reveal every last part of himself to her. The question isn't whether she can handle it. The question is, once she knows everything, will she back away and return to a normal existence.

Or join him in a fight against the evil that threatens their small New England town—and their newfound passion.

Warning: This book contains searing sex, violence, an ex who gets what's coming to him, chick fights, inappropriate gifting of dog biscuits, and a ménage à trois.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Teacher's Guide to Wildlife:

With a growing lightheadedness, Faith entered Sadie's bedroom. A fluttery nervousness overwhelmed her stomach as she saw Dean removing his shirt and unbuttoning the fly of his jeans. Sadie had already taken off her pants and folded them, placing them neatly in the rocking chair by the window. Faith joined them in the mechanics of disrobing until the joyless action tweaked her sense of humor. "You guys stop." They looked puzzled. "If we're going to do this, we're not going to do it because we have to do it."

Two pairs of eyes doubted her sanity. "This has to be special. It has to be real." She started to get frustrated. "We have to do this because we want to do it."

She crawled onto the bed and propped up a few pillows behind her. Now that she had their attention, she didn't know what to do. The awkwardness of the situation sank into her. Dean solved the problem by joining her at the head of the bed. She pulled his head to hers and touched her lips to his. The feel of his tongue twisting in her mouth and his warm flesh beneath her fingers ignited the familiar fire. She lost herself and the weighing presence under his caress and kiss.

Until another hand wound through her hair. Faith opened her eyes and saw Sadie by her side, desire filling her eyes as she watched them. Sadie's hand stroked the side of Dean's neck and down his shoulder. He pulled away from Faith and reached up to Sadie who lowered her mouth to his and the two kissed. At first, jealousy flared in Faith, but it buckled under the excitement of watching them. Sadie's eyes were

closed as she flicked her tongue along Dean's mouth, and Dean's eyes shone a thin thread of blue as he studied Faith's reaction. Sadie was now between them and Faith gulped and leaned forward to kiss her friend's neck. The scent engulfed her senses and she let her fingers skim under Sadie's sweater and around to cup her breasts. Her friend's nipples sprang up and encouraged, Faith bit her neck, sucking at the tender skin gently, then harder when she felt Sadie groan.

Four hands pushed Faith back into the soft pile of the pillows. Dean's rough kisses covered her mouth while Sadie's fingers unbuttoned her shirt and spread the cloth. She opened her eyes to see Dean at one breast and Sadie at the other, sucking her nipples and biting the hardened nubs, teasing her until she arched off the bed. Despite the indecent pleasure, she wouldn't lie to herself. The bizarreness of the situation inserted itself in her mind. Everything in her upbringing—such as it was—commanded her to stop. Good girls didn't have threesomes. Good girls didn't get excited watching their boyfriends kiss their best friends.

As if she could tell Faith's attention wandered, Sadie cradled Faith's chin in her hand and kissed her. She thrust her tongue between Faith's lips and dominated her mouth, licking at her tongue and lips. The kiss drowned out the naysaying voice, but what really obliterated doubt was the sensation of Sadie on her. Her best friend hiked up her own sweater and the softness of her breasts and stiffness of her small nipples on Faith's own sent a thrill that called to her body.

Sadie slid her body between Faith's legs and moved her lips along Faith's cheek and down until they lit on her breast. Her teeth were rough. Faith moaned and opened her eyes. She could see Dean over Sadie's head, his eyes boring into her, gauging her enjoyment. Much as she reveled in Sadie's touch, her body searched for him. She reached out and he caught her hand, sucking on each finger and biting her wrist. Two mouths on her brought another moan to her lips and she raised her hips to connect her center with Sadie's. The cloth of their panties kept the friction at a teasing level and Faith wanted to remove the barrier.

Before she could move, Dean pulled Sadie upright. Her friend's body hid most of his nakedness, but Faith could tell he was nude. Sometime during the interlude with Sadie, Dean had rid himself of his jeans. His hands started at her hips then swiftly coasted upward, bringing the sweater with them. Sadie obediently raised her arms and Dean lifted the clothing over her head and tossed it aside. Faith saw his lips curl as he sank his teeth into Sadie's shoulder. Her friend rolled her head and pressed Dean's head down on her. The slight gesture urged him to bite harder. Faith gulped and sat up.

As if he could sense her misapprehension—or smell it—Dean tipped his head without loosening his hold. When he drew away, his mark stood out on Sadie's skin. He gripped her hips and Faith closed her eyes as she imagined what Sadie felt, the pressure of his erection on her ass. When she opened her eyes, his stare challenged her, questioned whether she could go through with this. Sadie slipped out of her underwear and Dean reached in front of her, pushing his hand between her spread thighs. A small sound escaped from her best friend and she lolled against him, nestling the back of her head on his shoulder. He stroked her, a dare in his gaze, one arm under Sadie's breasts as he rubbed his hand between her folds. Faith saw her

friend's body convulse when his fingers entered her. The sight maddened her, making her want him inside her, to deliver her from the frustration building in her untouched body. He withdrew two glistening fingers and without releasing Faith from his gaze, licked them slowly.

The action galvanized Faith. She whipped off her panties and shirt and went to her knees, pressing Sadie's form between them. She captured her friend's lips, her tongue demanding entrance and Dean's hand skated down their bodies. His knuckles brushed her curls as he once again sought entrance to Sadie and the tease of the slight contact forced Faith to press closer, letting her friend be the conduit of their passion.

He grabbed the hair at Sadie's neck and used it to tilt her head to the side. In the space, he leaned and covered Faith's mouth with his own. They ravished each other with their lips, Sadie's form a solid buffer between them. His hand continued to work unseen below and Faith heard her friend's breath speed up. She didn't know how close Sadie was, but knew from the way she moved her body on Dean's fingers that release wasn't far.

Nilana has one night to make the choice of a lifetime: Accept the love of two men, or keep hunting—alone.

Hunting the Huntress

© 2007 *Ember Caser*

No man has ever tempted Nilana to give up her freedom. Life as a huntress has given this shapeshifter everything she thought she could ever want. But one look at the warrior and the shaman who have come to run the Harvest Hunt has her questioning her own decision.

Tate and Cheveyo have ridden far across the plains, drawn by dreams of the woman they are sure will unite their tribe. They just never thought they'd have to convince their fantasy woman that they are the future she has never considered.

They have one night to convince the huntress that becoming the hunted can lead to a beginning, not the end of all she holds dear.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Hunting the Huntress:

The moon had barely begun its path through the night sky when she'd slipped away from the maidens. Hoping she'd gotten away from camp before the warriors had time to begin their hunt, she'd headed for a quiet spot by the river. After covering the slight trail her footsteps had made she let her totem answer the lunar call, enjoying the feel of the autumn wind ruffling through her fur as she breathed deeply the smells of the coming night.

She'd headed for the river alone, eager to lose her scent in the quick running water. A hunter could not follow where there was no trail. She had been almost giddy with her power as she headed out under the clear, bright sky of the early twilight.

She had hoped for a quick run through the night followed by a quiet evening of rest under the full moon while the hunt went on without her. Her hopes had been quickly dashed. It was there by the river they had found her, the warrior and the shaman. She'd stared at them for a moment, unable to believe they had tracked her down.

And there the chase had begun.

She should have taken them more seriously. Overconfident in her ability to hide her trail from any hunter in her tribe, she had taken them lightly when she first picked up their scent. Nilana admitted it had thrilled her just a bit to be pursued by the men so many of the maidens were dreaming of. That excitement had faded as they proved hard to shake from her trail. She should have remembered her role tonight was that of prey, not huntress. It was a truth driven home again and again as they ran her down the path they wanted her to take.

A glance over her shoulder now showed only one form behind her. Tate, the warrior. His longer legs continued to eat the ground between them. Under other circumstances, she would have enjoyed watching him run. His glossy brown coat rippled with the powerful muscles beneath. There was awesome strength in his lean body, whether he took the form of man or cougar. As a man he stood head and shoulders above the warriors of her tribe, his long body impressively formed of muscles and sinew. But when he called his cougar totem to take its form, he became the *Chimaga* who was already the source of legends.

Pursuit by the legend had lost its charm for Nilana. She needed to get to higher ground.

The canyon curved ahead and she used the tight corners to her advantage. Her legs were shorter than his, but her agile body was better able to take the corners at high speed. Shooting out of the last curve, she saw a fork ahead in the path. *Yes!* With any luck one of the branches would lead up and out to the forested foothills where she would have the advantage. To freedom.

Get out of the canyon. Get to the hills. The two thoughts ran through her head with the rhythm of her paws as she sped across dry ground.

She poured her last reserves of energy into a final burst of speed. Higher ground was to the left, and that way should lie freedom. Great bounding leaps took her onward, hope adding strength to her feet as she reached the split.

Already springing for the left path, she roared her anger when she found she had been outmaneuvered. The shaman Cheveyo stood guard there quietly, a furry, gray shadow blocking her path.

With a snarl of frustration, Nilana headed right, further down the canyon. She had not scouted this far past the forking canyon during the days of hunting and had no idea what lay ahead. Desperately she prayed for a way out. *If this path dead ends...*

It did indeed dead end.

Nilana skidded to a stop and began to pace the small space, her tail whipping behind her as she studied the steep walls on all three sides. She had been herded into the canyon like a buffalo in the hunt. She admitted the hunters had chosen their trap well, running their target into the ground and making sure there was no escape. She could have admired their skill, if she were not the prey.

Angry howls escaped her as she sprang from one side of the canyon to the other. Desperation clawed at her. Capture during the harvest hunt was not only a blow to her pride. It could mean an end to her freedom. Her heart pounded with frenzied outrage.

A muted roar came from behind her. They had managed to corner her, but she was not down yet.

Nilana backed into the corner made by the rough, rocky walls. She would not give in without a fight. She put her backside to the wall and faced the opening, then dropped to a crouch. A warning rumble escaped her throat. Let them come to her.



Samhain Publishing, Ltd.

It's all about the story...

Action/Adventure

Fantasy

Historical

Horror

Mainstream

Mystery/Suspense

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Red Hots!

Romance

Science Fiction

Western

Young Adult

www.samhainpublishing.com