



VIVIAN AREND

# WHIRLPOOL

FORCES OF NATURE

SANDHAIN PRODUCTIONS LLC

Soft shoulders and dangerous curves...

*Forces of Nature, Book 2*

Braden can't deny he's always wanted Chelsea, but getting involved wouldn't be fair. She has college and big dreams ahead of her—he has no desire to leave Jaffrey's Cove. Plus, there's the fact merfolk women often take more than one lover. Share her? Not in this lifetime.

When Chelsea's plans for the future fall apart, the only bright spot remaining is Sheriff Braden Marley. She's been angling for a shot at the gentle giant's heart—and the rest of him—for a long time. Except he not only holds her at a maddening arm's length, he somehow manages to keep other men away, too.

Enter Jamie Powell, a human marine archeologist who's in town for a cataloging project. His instant chemistry with Chelsea inspires her to try a sexy new tactic: make Braden jealous enough to stop dragging his feet and start leaving his shoes under her bed.

The ensuing storm generates a boatload of complications none of them saw coming. A forbidden attraction no amount of merfolk magic can erase. And the danger that their secrets could be exposed to the outside world...

Warning: Seductive shimmering lights, a sexy interlude on the strip club floor, mysterious Spanish lovers, and a trio caught in an eddy of intense sexual attraction. Swim at your own risk.

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# Whirlpool

*Vivian Arend*

## Dedication

To Jess Dee, because she loves dolphins, and she makes me work hard at getting it right. I can't tell you how much it's meant to have you as a friend. Watch your doorstep.

Ciar Cullen. Wow—you not only write awesome stories, you're a wealth of information. May you always consider the question "what if" important.

As always, to my hubby, who needs to make me a cedar strip kayak so we can match.

# Chapter One

A shot of lust hit him hard as he looked into the brightest blue eyes he'd ever seen. Jamie cleared his throat, striving to distract his body before his involuntary reaction became too noticeable.

"Can I help you?" The blonde held on to the door, blinking up at him, her soft voice tickling the nerves along the back of his neck.

*Could she help him?* Holy hell, he wished she were the reason he'd come. "I'm looking for Ms. Colten. I had an appointment to categorize the artifacts her late husband had gathered."

A confused expression crossed the young woman's face before she blasted him with an earthshaking smile. "Oh, you mean Lady Victoria. She doesn't live here anymore. She's moved into an apartment in town. Ms. Alexia lives here now, and her husbands aren't dead."

Jamie dragged his gaze off her and the amazing objects visible just over her shoulder in the background. The house overflowed with enticing treasures, but he needed to concentrate a little harder until the preliminary welcome was over. He must have misheard her.

"Could I speak with Ms. Alexia then?" he asked.

"She's on her honeymoon. I'm watching the house. What's your name?"

He stared into her pure, sweet face, absolutely mesmerized.

"Jamie Powell." Skin like porcelain, delicate eyelashes. He patted his pockets absently. "I have ID if you'd like. I was hired to do an inventory and assessment on Blain Colten's diving collection. Joshua Marley contracted me. Is he here?"

She hesitated for a second. "No, he's gone too. Ummm, he's...traveling."

A door opened behind the woman and a man easily six foot seven stepped through. Rock-solid muscles flexed as he strode closer. His head was shaved clean and between him and the woman Jamie felt like he'd walked onto the set of a Beautiful People magazine shoot. He'd never seen a more attractive pair.

"Chelsea, did you need me to pick up any groceries while I'm in town?" The soft expression on the man's face tightened and his voice sharpened as his dark brown eyes focused on Jamie. "Can I help you?"

Jamie wondered what he'd done to annoy the giant. He managed to pull a business card from his pocket and present it.

"He said he's here to do an assessment," Chelsea offered.

“I’m looking for Joshua Marley or Alexia Colten. I’m supposed to work on a marine-artifact collection.” Jamie found himself staring at the woman again. A faint scent of perfume wafted over and his mouth watered. Damn, everything about her was attractive.

The tall newcomer stepped between them.

“They’re on their honeymoon,” the giant answered briskly. He gently nudged Chelsea aside, prodding her in the direction of the open room behind him. She wandered backward from the door, her gaze meeting Jamie’s as she gave a mischievous wink. His heartbeat increased. He returned her smile before glancing up to see a disapproving glare drilling into him.

Jamie shook his head, partly to dislodge the images that had filled it—all involving him and the blue-eyed beauty—and partly because he really was having difficulties hearing today. “I thought Ms. Colten was on her honeymoon and Mr. Marley was traveling?”

The other man stared at him. Measuring him. Jamie stood his ground and stared back, refusing to fold under the intimidation. He hadn’t done anything wrong. Thinking erotic thoughts about the blonde didn’t mean he’d actually trespassed.

Yet.

The giant thrust out a hand. “Braden Marley. I think I saw something about you on the schedule they left. Come on in and I’ll take a look.” He yanked open the door and gestured toward the living room. Jamie strolled in, his jaw falling open as he observed the piles and piles of artifacts that lined the walls of the rooms and littered every available space. Barnacle-encrusted trucks, shiny coins and shipware. Books, boxes, Japanese glass floats and more. He’d been to many homes with nautical collections, but never one as full as this. There was a literal treasure trove within the house walls. First glance revealed a potential fortune buried amidst the usual garbage. He rotated in a circle, his mind racing to calculate where to start, how to best work through the sea of items. He rubbed his hands together, forcing down the laughter of delight rising from deep inside.

This was going to be a job he could really enjoy.

“Are you staying for long, Jamie?” He jerked in surprise to find Chelsea standing next to him, near enough that the heat of her body brushed him, scalding his senses. Her eyes widened as if shocked to find they were so close. She stepped back and stumbled. He grasped her arms, halting her fall and pulling her back to vertical. Her palms rested gently on his chest and something powerful overtook him and wormed its way into his brain. He wanted to tackle her and take her down on the nearest surface, bury himself in her warmth and softness. She whimpered, an expression of longing crossing her face. She slid her hands upward to clutch his neck and he involuntarily leaned closer.

Their bodies touched and a groan of desire escaped him. Bright eyes met his and she lifted her chin in invitation before drawing their mouths together.

The taste of her shot through him like one-hundred-proof whiskey. His senses spun and his tongue darted out to dip again into the sweet nectar of her mouth. She kissed back, their tongues dueling, hands tugging them tighter together until there was no way she could be unaware of his erection swelling against her belly.

He clasped her close, feasting on her mouth, unable to stop the driving desire to consume her that raced through him. She stepped backward and he followed her siren call, falling together onto the overstuffed sofa. She hummed with approval, nipping at his chin, licking his earlobe.

Jamie dropped his teeth to her neckline, sucking, biting, feeling the urgent need to mark her. He tugged at the waist of her shirt, his fingers brushing skin that seared him with heat, the compulsion to join with her growing sharper, pulsing throughout his entire body.

“Chelsea!” Braden barked from across the room.

The outburst broke through the sexual haze enveloping him, and Jamie shot upright. He yanked his hands back, scrambling away from where Chelsea sprawled on the sofa, her hair rumpled, her top crawling up her belly to expose where his hands had slipped under the soft material in an attempt to cup her breasts. His mind swirled with confusion and a healthy dose of lust.

What the *hell* was he doing? “I’m so sorry, I don’t know what came over me. I’m—”

“It’s okay, Jamie.” Braden clasped his arm and dragged him into the kitchen, muttering curses under his breath. When the door slammed shut behind them, Braden continued in a far calmer and gentler tone. “I found you on the calendar. How about you start tomorrow? I know Alexia hoped you’d be able to sort out what’s valuable and what can be given away before she gets home. While her Gram didn’t mind living in the chaos, Alexia is more organized.”

Jamie heard all the words, but they jangled in his mind, twisted and confusing. What had just happened?

Braden held out a glass of water, watching him with a piercing gaze. “Here, have a drink. You must have gotten too much sun en route. Jaffrey’s Cove is a bit off the beaten track.”

Jamie accepted the glass and sipped slowly. He didn’t think there was anything physically wrong with him, except for wanting the woman he’d met only moments before. Wanting her badly enough he was tempted to return to the other room and take her, kissing the mouth that had pouted at him and Braden as they retreated. Rip up her tank top to suckle the breasts that arched against him as they’d tumbled onto the couch. Bury his face between her legs and...

*Shit.* Maybe there was something wrong with him—this was not his usual behavior. While he liked the ladies well enough, he was a reasonable man. Attacking a woman at a potential job site was not his *modus operandi*, especially not in front of an obvious guardian the size of a tanker.

He rubbed a hand over his forehead then gave a tentative shrug. “I’m really sorry. There’s no excuse for my behavior. I’m thankful you didn’t throw me out of the house. I have no idea what came over me.”



Braden gave a wry smile. “Seriously, forget about it. No harm done, and trust me, it wasn’t your fault. I’ll make sure Chelsea behaves herself while you’re around.”

Chelsea rolled off the couch and fled down the hall to her temporary bedroom, spinning past the doorway and clutching the dresser as her heart continued to race. Every nerve was sensitized to the point of aching and she took long, slow breaths to regain control.

Damn merfolk hormones were going to kill her.

Once her heart rate dropped, she slipped to the door to listen for the men to return from the kitchen into the main part of the house. Even though he wasn’t speaking to her, Braden’s deep husky voice made her shiver. The stranger—Jamie—answered and she peeked out her door to try and sense if he was okay. Guilt flushed her. She hadn’t intended to hit him with the sexual mojo, but damn it, she was so frustrated it had leaked out involuntarily. She’d never had an accident like that before, and she regretted her actions, unintended as they were. He’d responded way faster and harder than the last human she’d been around. The chain reaction between them had been impossible to shut down.

Curiosity made her sneak out to watch the men wander the living room. She leaned on the wall in the shadows, staying out of sight but enjoying the view. The visual feast not twenty feet from her was mouth-watering. The two men were very different, but the contrast was appealing and for a minute she was tempted to go and try to seduce them both.

*Holy shit.* Her out-of-control libido was talking again. Insanity lurked from staying in the same house as Braden, trying not to let him know how much she really wanted him.

She let her gaze trail over the object of her obsession. For ten years she’d watched him. From her first crush as a teen, to her current insistent urge to jump his bones, there was more to appreciate every time she looked. His broad shoulders stretched his shirt to the point of ripping the seams. His sheriff’s uniform fit to a tee, snug in the most interesting places, his crotch drawing her attention even when he wasn’t aroused. His solid thigh muscles flexed the fabric as he led Jamie to another section of the room, pointing something out along the wall. Tall, smooth, infinitely edible. Damn, she wanted a piece of him even though he was the stubbornest son of a bitch alive.

Jamie knelt to touch a pile of books, and Chelsea admired him as well. He wasn’t as big as Braden but just as firm, just as intriguing. Shoulder-length blond hair, made slightly messy when her fingers had run through it. Blue-gray eyes, fair skin. The feel of his body under the expensive clothing he wore—there had been nothing wrong with his reaction to their bit of mutual groping. She sighed. Too bad it probably had been chemically induced on his part.

Her sex throbbed for a second as she thought about being pressed between both men. A wave of jealousy hit as she remembered her new best friend, Alexia, was currently off sexing it up with her two lovers.

Some people had all the luck.

The sound of the front door shutting woke her from the distraction of imagining what Alexia and her husbands were currently doing. She took a deep breath and stepped back into the living room to face the music.

“What the hell was that about?” Braden stormed up to her, all but shaking his finger in her face.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t do it on purpose. I’m frustrated, and I lost control.” She kept her head down, her eyes away from his. She bit her lip to resist moaning as the scent of his skin hit her. Her reaction to him was getting tougher to resist, and she didn’t want to be shot down again. It had hurt too much the last time.

“Well, you need to work on better control, especially for when you leave Jaffrey’s Cove. I’m certainly not going to blame Jamie for reacting to you, and I think I managed to cover it up, but what if that situation arises when you’re away at college? You cause that kind of reaction and someone is going to start asking questions. You could expose yourself as a merfolk.”

Chelsea stared at Braden’s feet, his legs set in a wide stance. Since the chance of her getting to do anything other than stay in Jaffrey’s Cove had dropped to zero, there was little probability of her causing trouble.

“Right, college.”

She turned to go hide, take a cold shower—anything to get away from the man she wanted with a hunger close to pain. If she didn’t know better she’d think she was addicted to him, which was ridiculous. They might have an animal side to their natures, but their shifted form went for casual, not commitment.

Braden stopped her with a gentle tug on her shoulder. “When do you leave for your first semester?”

She froze. He obviously wasn’t aware she’d had to cancel her registration. She took her time to pivot, trying to come up with a suitable answer to throw him off the truth. Something he might believe.

“I...didn’t get in. I scored too low on my SATs.” The lie stuck in her throat. He stepped back, a frown creasing his face with clear disappointment, and a touch of annoyance. Great, he really wanted her to go away.

“Dammit, Chelsea, I thought that’s why you’d waited years to apply—so you’d figure out what program was right for you. I know people offered to help you study.”

She stared at the wall and ignored the knot forming in her belly from lying to him. Playing dumb might hurt her ego, but it stopped the questions.

If only she understood why Braden wasn’t willing to get involved with her. She’d tried to convince herself it was time to move on. Time to let a little pressure off the powder keg of her sexual frustrations by dating someone else. Only that option had been cut off from her too as Braden’s silent disapproval scared away all the eligible men.

Damn controlling bastard. He didn’t want her, but he didn’t want anyone else to have her either.

Suddenly she was angry. Unspeakably upset, and while it wasn't completely Braden's fault, he was there and part of the cause of her troubles. She crooked her head back to stare up at him.

"So, the researcher. He's cute." She left her facial expression wide and vacant, as innocent as a newborn lamb. Driving Braden crazy seemed a suitable revenge. "I think he likes me."

Braden slapped a hand to his shaved head and groaned loudly as he paced before her.

"Chelsea, you're going to be the death of me. Of course he likes you, *everyone* likes you. Especially when you turn up the hormones until all the males within striking distance have hard-ons. Damn it, how am I supposed to keep you out of trouble? You've been deliberately taunting the humans in the community at every turn since the matriarch left on her honeymoon." He stalked closer. "You're asking for trouble you don't want."

How dare he act like her actions were by design? Chelsea glared at him. "I haven't asked for trouble. It's my damn merfolk hormones and I'm not 'turning them up', I'm frustrated. Period. It's not a matter of using more control. I'm twenty-three and I haven't had a sexual partner for over a year, ever since you started scaring away the merfolk who could satisfy me."

"This is my fault?" His skin darkened, flushed with anger, or dare she hope for another reason?

There was only one way to know for sure—she screwed up her meager courage and moved closer, like a butterfly caging a bull.

"You don't want me to have sex with the humans, but you don't want me to get involved with any of the other men from the pod. Whose fault could it be? You know you could satisfy me yourself like I asked you before. I want you, Braden, I have for a long time."

She trailed her finger down his shirt buttons, circling the last one that sat just shy of the top of his jeans. His abdomen muscles quivered under her touch. She lifted her gaze to meet his, gasping as she saw the longing and desire reflected there.

"Chelsea...baby, don't do this," he whispered, grabbing her hand and halting her slow exploration of his belt buckle.

"Do what? Make us both happy? Come on, admit it. You want me, don't you?" She held her breath. Would he actually confess this time?

He clasped their hands together, swearing softly under his breath. A long sigh followed. "You damn well know I want you, but baby—"

A shiver raced up her skin and the need to touch him made her bolder than she'd allowed herself to be for over a year. She nestled in close.

"I'm not a baby. You know it. I know it. Please, I need you." His hands fell apart and she wrapped herself around him, drawing a deep breath of the scent of his body, spicy and all male. It settled her jangling nerves even as it excited her more. "Hmm, I need you now, Braden."

## Chapter Two

Braden closed the door firmly on her continuing protests, taking the stairs two at a time as he escaped to his truck. Maybe it was the coward's way out, but staying around Little Miss Temptation any longer was impossible. Even a saint would have difficulty resisting Chelsea when she got into one of these moods.

He was no saint.

Traffic was light as he drove slowly into town, leaving the shore-side heritage home behind. The new matriarch and her lovers, now her husbands, wouldn't be back for almost a month. In the meantime Braden was stuck babysitting the most difficult member of the Jaffrey Cove merfolk. He also had to keep an eye on the rest of the water shifters during what was fast becoming the strangest tourist season on record. While the number of visitors was slightly higher than normal, the minor criminal offenses he'd been called out on had more than doubled. He would have sworn there was a full moon every night of the week from the crazy things people were coming up with. Home invasions, Peeping Toms, rotting fish stuffed in mailboxes... He was ready for a holiday himself.

Now to discover Chelsea wouldn't be leaving Jaffrey's Cove was the last straw.

The police radio rang, shrilling loudly in the truck and he sighed. No rest for the wicked—even though he was trying really hard to avoid that title. He snatched the receiver off the console and switched on the talk button.

"Marley," he snapped, turning back onto Main Street. He slowed to avoid a group of tourists gawking at the picturesque row of shops lining the boardwalk.

"Hey, Sheriff. There's a bit of a ruckus down at the Beachshore Inn. You want to check it out?"

"Ten-four." Hell, not again. He grabbed his hat and jacket and put them on as he drove. Damn woman had him so he didn't know if he was coming or going. Fighting the urge to accept the delights Chelsea could provide had been the right thing to do, but now that she was staying in town...*fuck*.

To top it off, the two of them were roommates. It wasn't her fault—he knew Chelsea had moved into Alexia's spare room temporarily to housesit before heading off to college. When he'd been asked to step in while the matriarch was gone he hadn't expected Alexia to insist he stay at the house as well as deal with emergencies among the merfolk community.

Knowing Chelsea was downstairs from him night after night was sheer hell.

Braden sighed. Even though he was suffering, he had to admire Alexia. His new leader had done well. From zero information to running the show in less than a week—Braden had been impressed. Alexia was

gutsy, beautiful and very thoroughly taken by two of his younger cousins. Funny thing that—the men were not the strongest or toughest of the merfolk, but the three of them were a perfect fit when it came to supporting each other. Alexia now led the secretive group of shifters hidden away amidst the regular souls who lived in Jaffrey's Cove.

Braden slowed as he approached the end of the road and the turnoff to the hotel. *Holy shit*. Dispatch had been right. Braden eyed the long lineup of bodies headed into the hotel/motel, the tangle of cars blocking the parking lot. He double-parked in front of the coffee shop and jogged the rest of the way to the entrance.

A deafening bedlam of voices assaulted him as he entered the office. Rapidly spoken Japanese and German bounced off the walls, accompanied by much hand waving. Max Linton, the hotel owner, and all the staff bustled behind the counter, plastic keys and credit cards flying through the air.

"Max...Max, hey, you got a problem? Need a hand?" Braden shouted.

Max cast a quick glance his direction, then dropped his gaze back to the keyboard and the mess of papers piled by his elbow.

"Hey, Braden. No problem. Well, yes, a problem—someone double booked us for two large tours, but I think I've almost got it solved. I finally got the guys who hired out the fishing charters squared away, but I have no idea what to do with him." He swung his finger to the corner.

Braden turned to see Jamie Powell standing next to the wall, quietly examining an aged photograph of Jaffrey's Cove harbor circa 1900.

"Troubles with his booking too?"

Max motioned Braden forward then leaned over the counter to speak quietly.

"He booked a suite, and I just don't have it to give. I mean, one guy in that much space? I charged the tour company full price per person and popped six people in that room. Now I'm feeling guilty. It says on his application he's doing work for Alexia. Think we can convince her to put him up for a while?"

Braden groaned. He sympathized with Max, he really did. Summer was the most lucrative time of year. Shop owners who didn't take advantage of every opportunity to make enough to last through the lean winter faced the possibility of not opening the following spring. It was in everyone's interest to keep the tourists as happy as possible.

He glanced over his shoulder at the archaeologist. Unfortunately, putting Jamie up at Alexia's house was out of the question, not with Chelsea staying there. No way on earth would he allow another man...

*Shit*. The truth hit him like a two-by-four. He was as controlling as Chelsea had accused him. A heavy brick formed in his belly, disgusted at himself for not seeing it earlier. First he'd help Max, then he'd figure out how to apologize for unintentionally being an ass to her.

He turned back to the innkeeper and nodded slowly. "There are a couple of options we can explore. I'll take care of him."

“Thanks, Braden. Thank a ton.” Max gave a quick dismissive wave, and Braden caught his attention before he buried himself in the chaos again.

“Is that the only reason I got sent over here? To help you deal with one homeless waif?”

Max swore. “I nearly forgot. There’s a couple of cars outside that zigged when they should have zagged. The owners are waiting in their rooms. We managed to calm them down and we did call a tow truck but...”

“No worries. You deal with your stuff, I’ll take care of it.”

Braden shook his head at the insanity of the place, even as it made something inside him very happy. Not the confusion, but the constant life and newness that living in a tourist destination brought. He loved the whole town and couldn’t imagine living anywhere else.

He stepped over and touched Jamie on the shoulder.

Jamie straightened from where he’d been staring at the fine print handwritten at the bottom of the black-and-white image. He smiled at Braden and the attractiveness Chelsea mentioned sprung to mind. The man was damn good-looking.

“Oh, hello again. Fascinating pictures. Do you know if they are originals from the family who owns the hotel? Who should I talk to if I want to find out more about the individuals in each photograph? Have you ever seen—?”

Braden held up a hand. “Whoa, Jamie, first things first. Seems you’re a little out of luck. There is no room at the inn.”

His forehead wrinkled in a frown. “But I had a booking... Oh, never mind. I’ll try the next hotel.”

Braden shook his head. “There is no other. This is it.”

Jamie stared at him. “Well, hell. That’s going to make this a little more difficult. Okay, plan B. Thanks for letting me know. I’ll see you in the morning.” He stooped and picked up his backpack from beside his feet, turning as if to leave.

*Plan B?* “Where are you going?”

He shrugged. “I’m sure there’s a campground around here somewhere. It won’t be the first time I’ve roughed it.”

Braden did a quick mental inventory of the information he’d read on the sheet at the house. His cousin Anthony had done a very thorough investigation into the man. Jamie’s excellent reputation had been clearly spelled out.

“How long is the job at the Coltens’ expected to take?” Braden asked.

Jamie’s eyes glazed over a little as he stared into the distance. “Have to sort and catalog, research the more isolated finds—not counting if there are any museum pieces to match. Then there’s—”

Braden hid his smile. Shit, the man could babble. “Just an estimate.”

“At least a month to start, but the rest of the sorting could take six months to a year.”

Braden swore lightly. “You’re planning on staying in Jaffrey’s Cove for up to a year? Buddy, you’ll need something more than the campground, or even the hotel. Tell you what. I’ve got an apartment you can rent. It’s being renovated, but should be done within a month. Until it’s ready you can stay at my place since I’m at the house with Chelsea.”

Jamie flushed at the mention of her name. Yeah, the man had it bad. “I don’t know what to say, except thank you. I certainly didn’t expect this kind of help. Not after my deplorable behavior at the house. I really do apologize—”

“Your things still in your car?” Braden interrupted again. The reminder of Jamie and Chelsea wrapped together made something inside him ache.

Jamie nodded. “I wanted to check in first. I’m parked down the street.”

“I need to deal with a fender bender, then I’ll take you to my place to get you settled.”

They walked outdoors together. Jamie brushed against him as they pushed through the crowd still assembled before the reception desk. An itch of an idea rose at the back of his brain. Chelsea was right; she needed a little male attention. Braden couldn’t stomach the idea of seeing her with any of the local merfolk, but maybe he could handle it if it was a human with her. One he’d handpicked and approved. Jamie was an attractive guy, and he was already interested in Chelsea. Besides, she was pretty damn gorgeous.

*So why didn’t you take her up on her offer? Especially now that she’s staying in town?* Braden dealt with the cars in the lot, only concentrating with half his mind. The other half continued to worry about his problem—blonde, stacked and way too beautiful for her own good.

No, it wasn’t her. He’d had this argument with himself a million times over the years. Merfolk were a sensual race. They had a lot of their dolphin form in their human bodies—sex was fun and they had no problem with the sharing of that pleasure in a far more relaxed manner than humans normally did. Except for him...with Chelsea. He just couldn’t bend his head around casual with her. It pissed him off no end, frustrated her and even had him wondering if there was something wrong with him at the root of his nature.

He sated his urges with other members of their community, leaving them extremely happy and himself vaguely satisfied. There was always something missing, and he’d suspected for a long time that *something* was Chelsea.

It wasn’t right to get involved with her. She’d talked about college for so long that he’d gone out of his way to ensure she didn’t get distracted from her goal by anyone local, including himself. Making sure nothing stopped her from stepping out into the world. Just because he loved Jaffrey’s Cove, he still understood there was a lot more to see and do away from their tiny village.

Now that she was staying, the thought of being with her obsessed him. He still couldn’t risk getting involved with her until he figured out what his own issue was. Imagining her with any of the local merfolk—jealousy raised its head damn quick. But Jamie? Could he handle seeing Chelsea with him? Heck, the guy was only a human. It might be a possible solution.

Thirty minutes later the collision was dealt with and Braden hopped in his truck and waved for Jamie to follow him. The man held up a hand and ran back into the hotel. He returned with a set of keys dangling from his fingers. Great, an absent-minded professor. Braden chuckled and led the way through the sleepy tourist town of Jaffrey's Cove to his home above one of the harbor-side shops. A light breeze blew around them as he unlocked the door. Jamie's aftershave carried on the air and Braden fought back the urge to lean over and take a closer sniff. Chelsea was right—something about the man really was very attractive. Braden opened the door and ushered Jamie in.

"I really do appreciate this." Jamie placed his bags down carefully and headed toward the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Braden smiled. The ocean view was the first thing everyone admired. He grabbed the spare set of house keys from the side table. When he turned back he was surprised to see Jamie had ignored the view and instead knelt to examine the collection of shells piled on one coffee table.

"Fascinating. Where did you find a *Conus gloriamaris* in such good shape? And is that a reverse-coiled Lightning Whelk? Mr. Marley, this is an amazing collection."

"Braden, please. We don't go for very formal around here."

Jamie peeled his gaze off the shells and glanced around the room. "Very comfortable. I like your style."

"Thank you." *It seems we have the same taste in many things, including women.* "Let me grab a few things from the bedroom, then you can get settled." Braden paced off, wondering if he was a touch insane to be planning to allow a virtual stranger to get involved with the woman he wanted more than his next breath.

He dug into his chest of drawers, tossing clothes into a gym bag haphazardly. There was no logic in it, but for the moment, logic be damned. He just needed a few days' reprieve. Surely granting Jamie permission to pay a little attention to Chelsea wouldn't hurt anyone in the long run.

Would it?

Chelsea watched with fascination as Jamie dove into another section of the chaos. The day he'd begun work she'd been surprised to have Braden ask her to act as assistant to Jamie.

"You want me to help catalog the collection?" The real unspoken question was totally different. *You want me around a human male all day long, alone?*

Braden wrinkled his nose. "If he's going to get the first stages done before Alexia and the guys return, he'll need help. Since you're not leaving for school anymore, I assume you need work and this should be right up your alley. After your years at the museum, I thought you'd enjoy seeing how a trained archaeologist works."



“Of course, but...”

She checked Braden’s expression. He seemed serious. After he’d walked out on her, leaving her frustrated beyond belief *again*, she’d decided she needed to try a completely different tactic. Inspiration had not hit yet, but there had to be a way around whatever his reason was for keeping them apart. It was time to put the excuses aside.

Now, three days later, she and Jamie had fallen into a comfortable working relationship. He was fun to talk to, with his mischievous turn of phrase, and worked like a packhorse without stopping for hours at a time. He also refused to take apart any of the piles without her jotting down copious amounts of notes.

“Even though chances are the items have no relationship to each other, I’d hate to lose any clues to the identity of an object by moving it too quickly. Since the owner of the collection is dead, and his widow can’t tell us much about the items, we need to create as much of a record of history as possible. If we do find anything valuable, we’ll need to establish evidence of provenance—essentially documenting the items were honestly acquired for this private collection.”

So Chelsea sat with a notebook, writing down his comments as he picked through items one at a time. What was in the pile, what it sat on, where in the room. He took the notebook from her every now and then and scribbled down a few technical phrases, Latin terms, or dashed off a sketch on the page.

“You’re an amazing artist,” she commented as he handed back the book.

He blinked in surprise. “You think so? I’m just an amateur, really.”

She turned the book around and pointed to the open page. “You drew that in less than two minutes and you don’t think you’re talented?” The sketch of the ornate jewelry box was perfectly proportioned, the details easily identifiable.

He gave a wry grin. “I should be taking digital photographs but...I lost my camera.”

A small snort escaped her. “I believe that. Did you find your cell phone? You couldn’t find that yesterday.” Jamie shook his head and she smiled. He knew at a glance what era most of the items in the room were from, but he hadn’t made it to the house once yet without forgetting or losing something.

“A lot of people use their computers for note-taking as well, but there’s something I appreciate about using pen and paper. Or in this case, you using pen and paper. I hope you don’t mind.”

Chelsea laughed. “It’s not like you’re making me slave out under the hot summer sun, Jamie. This is fascinating. Really.”

She settled back and got ready to take more notes. Instead, he sat next to her and tugged the notebook from her fingers, flipping through the pages, adding small notations in the margins. She breathed in his scent, clean sandalwood teasing her nostrils. His thigh pressed tight against hers, the warmth of his body spread like a blanket. It was tempting to lean closer and press their torsos together.

But it wouldn't be fair. She'd kept a very tight rein on herself as they worked, not wanting to torment him like she'd accidentally done at their first meeting. She struggled to find a distraction. She needed to control herself this time.

"Do you travel a lot with your work?"

"I was in New Mexico last, Greece before that, and the Isle of Man at the start of the year."

He said it so casually, but Chelsea's heart thrilled. "Greece? Isle of Man? Oh, I'd love to see those places. It must be so exciting."

He nodded, his hands gentle as he picked up a Japanese float resting beside him. He examined it in the light before rising to lay it in a box with other cataloged items. "I love traveling, but it's been a little stressful. It means I'm off the North American continent a lot of the time, and my family hates that. My mom in particular doesn't like that I'm not available to visit as often as she wants."

"Moms never want their kids to go away. I'd love to travel someday. I'm saving up." Well, she had been saving. After she had finished helping the family pay off her dad's emergency medical bills, and contributed to keeping her sister in school, the funds had dried up and disappeared. All her plans were completely turned around now that she couldn't afford to head to college.

He winked at her and his beautiful smile warmed the coldness that had begun to creep inside her chest. "Good for you. There are a lot of interesting places in the world."

"I know, but some people don't see it that way at all." She sighed. Jaffrey's Cove was nice, but she wanted to be able to visit some of the places she'd read about. Experience them for herself. The stolen opportunity twisted her gut tight, and she fought to keep the bitterness from coming through as she spoke. "I still think you're lucky your job takes you around the world. I bet your family is proud of you."

Jamie snorted. "My family hates what I do for a living."

"You're kidding? But you're so good at it." She stared after him as he paced.

"It has nothing to do with how good I am, it's more to do with being a common laborer and getting my hands dirty."

That made no sense. "They would prefer you didn't work?"

"No, no, it's just that I didn't go into the family business, and that, my dear, was like kicking them and saying they weren't good enough for me."

*Ahhh.* "Oh, now I get it. My family doesn't like what I do either. So I just try not to talk about it with them."

Jamie brushed his hands together as he turned to frown at her. "I'm a complete idiot. I never even thought to ask if you helping me would cause problems. I assumed since Braden said you were available—"

"Oh, this isn't the problem. I had quit my position at the museum since I had planned on leaving..." She coughed lightly and brushed at imaginary lint on her shorts. She didn't want to talk about her aborted

college attempt. It still hurt too much. "Helping you is not a trouble at all. I needed to find a new job. No, it's my side job they don't like."

He raised a brow.

"I dance." Holy cow, were her cheeks getting hot? She was blushing.

She never blushed.

His gaze darted over her again, quick, impersonal this time. "I don't think you're built right for the ballet. You could belly dance, or do modern jazz. I can easily see you in a funk ensemble, or then you could—" He broke off, dipping his head in embarrassment. "Damn, sorry. You're not something to catalog."

Chelsea smiled to reassure him. "I said you were good. You're right, although I did train ballet before I hit my growth spurt in my teens."

He perched on the arm of the loveseat, staring at her. "Chelsea, can I ask a personal question? Feel free to tell me to take a hike, but...what's up with Braden?"

"What do you mean?"

He checked his watch. "He's going to arrive in twenty-seven minutes. He'll pace around the room, look you over carefully, grunt in my direction, then disappear into the kitchen."

The giggles in her belly started to rise. How had Braden thought he could slip anything past this observant man? "He comes home to make lunch, that's all."

Jamie's expression betrayed his disbelief. "He'll call out to see if you want anything, remember at the last second that I'm here and add my name to the question. After we both turn him down he'll sit there..." Jamie pointed to the table, "...and watch us while he eats. Actually, he'll watch *you*. Then he'll clean up, come and ask me if I need anything, tell you to behave yourself and he'll leave after one final dirty look in my direction."

She couldn't hold it in anymore. Her laughter rang throughout the room and Jamie joined in. When she could speak again her amusement still sounded in her voice.

"Three days and you know what he's going to do?"

Jamie pulled his wallet from his pocket and drew out a twenty. He slapped it on the coffee table. "If he deviates from the norm, you win the twenty."

Chelsea smiled. "I'm not betting against you. That's exactly what he's going to do."

"So the question remains, what's up?"

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. Immaculately dressed in dark slacks and a crisp cotton shirt, he looked like he should be in a New York office, not digging through fishing nets and seashells. He was night and day to Braden's casual jeans or sweats when out of uniform. Damn if she didn't find them both attractive.

"Braden thinks I need to find a boyfriend."

Jamie slapped his hands together and pointed at her excitedly. “So that’s what those cryptic comments he made back in his apartment were about.”

His gaze darted over her, the admiration in his eyes clear. This time he wasn’t analyzing what kind of dancer she was. Heat spread over her skin, her heartbeat picking up.

“What comments? What did he say to you?”

“He let me know that when my girlfriend joined me she was welcome to stay in the apartment with me. When I told him I was currently unattached, the grunting began.”

“Oh Lord, not the grunting.”

“Yeah, the grunting and the questions. ‘You think Chelsea is good-looking?’ he asked.” Jamie rolled his eyes and gestured at her, his hand sweeping the length of her frame as if he were at a carnival, gesturing in the main attraction. “I asked if he’d been diagnosed with a brain condition.”

“You didn’t!”

“Chelsea, I’m missing a piece of the puzzle. I think you like Braden, and the man is obviously head over heels attracted to you—”

“Really?”

“Really. So why does it seem like he’s trying to hook us up? At least for the duration of the time I’m working this job?”

Chelsea flopped back in the loveseat, her head resting on the opposite arm from where he sat. How much could she say so the lines of privacy for the shifters of Jaffrey’s Cove remained uncrossed? She sniffed. How could she explain when she wasn’t sure herself why Braden was acting so strange?

She kept it simple.

“The only thing I can come up with is that he thinks we’re not right for each other. For some misguided reason he’s being noble and refusing to get involved with me. I guess he’s approved you as a backup boyfriend, so he’s pushing us together.”

“Backup boyfriend. Hell, I feel like we’re back in eighth grade. But he actually wants you for himself, so he’s still checking in the hopes nothing happens. Got it. No wonder he’s pissed at me.”

Chelsea sat up and touched his leg. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but while I like you a lot, I really want Braden. I have forever.”

Jamie frowned. “Right back at you. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m not looking to hook up with anyone right now. While you’re very attractive, I don’t need a girlfriend.” He tapped his fingers on his thigh, brushing her hand accidentally, and Chelsea sucked in a breath. She might know what she wanted, he might know what he wanted, but their chemistry was potentially explosive. She tried to pull her hand away but he grabbed her wrist, held her still.

“I have an idea if you’re game.”

“Involving Braden?”

He gave her a mischievous grin. “He’s on the edge. I’m sure it wouldn’t take much to convince him that his idea isn’t what you two really need. So as long as I’m not in danger of losing any teeth, how about we do a little playacting?”

“To try and make him jealous?”

Jamie nodded.

Chelsea thought fast. Maybe that was what Braden needed to nudge him over and finally not only admit he wanted her but act on it.

The idea held possible dangers though. She’d been without a lover for a long time, and Jamie was damn attractive in his own way. She bit her lower lip. The sexual fever burning in her veins was difficult enough to control at the best of times. If they pretended to get intimate, she might not be able to hold back.

She lifted her chin. If Braden didn’t react, then...to hell with him. Getting involved with Jamie for a bit of fun would hurt no one. Neither of them was looking for forever, and she really needed to gain back some control of her life.

“What are you thinking?”

Jamie pointed to the twenty. “Let’s start by making him mess up his routine. Give him a little something to look at. Just talk quiet to me, like you’re sharing secrets and stand close. Start pushing a few buttons. See what happens.”

“What if he doesn’t respond?”

“Then I get to spend the twenty and buy you dinner. That should go along with the goal of making him jealous.”

Chelsea grinned at him. “How about if he doesn’t react then we bump it up another notch. I’ll take you to the Grotto where I dance and you can spend the twenty on the floor. Deal?”

“Deal.”

They shook hands, the mischief in his eyes shifting to something that made her sex tingle. Tension floated in the air.

“Maybe we should do a test run before he gets here.” His voice had dropped a notch and a shiver raced over her skin as he tugged on her fingers, drawing them closer until her body was flush with his. “Just to make sure it’s going to look believable.”

He lowered his head and brushed their lips together.

## Chapter Three

Jamie intended to keep in control this time. The kiss four days earlier had surprised him, but the way the memory of it kept returning again and again was more disturbing. Even as friendship bloomed between them, there was a simmering undertone of desire he wasn't sure how to deal with. Solving puzzles was what he did best—and this should be no exception.

Especially when the investigating was so pleasurable. He reveled in her sweet taste. Chelsea softened in his arms, wrapping her hands around his torso until her fingers splayed across his back. He felt her nails like a kitten's claws against his skin as her hands traveled in slow sensual circles.

Their kiss stayed gentle even as the heat between their bodies grew. An experiment or not, the tension between them was enough to make his cock rise with interest. He breathed in deeply through his nose to take in as much of her as possible at one time. Her taste, her scent, the touch of her skin under his hands. He tugged her blouse loose from her jeans, skimming his palms over the warm flesh at her waist, and she purred into his mouth.

The sound sent a shiver down his spine.

The unemotional aspect of doing constant analysis made it possible to retreat a moment later instead of sweeping her up and carrying her to her bedroom. They both sucked in deep breaths as he attempted to pull enough oxygen into his lungs to let his mind start to fully function again. He might not want a relationship right now, but *damn*, some out-and-out pounding sex sounded better by the second. She was an attractive woman, he was a man—the chemistry between them was more than logical.

Her disheveled appearance made him break into a grin. Her lips were swollen, her eyes dark with desire. She seemed to have had the same physical response to him, whether she would admit it or not, but that was beside the point. She was emotionally attached to Braden, and he was going to help her get her man. It was the right thing to do.

Wasn't it?

"Braden will be here in about three minutes. You want to get back to work?" he asked.

Her chest continued to heave and she raised her fingers to her cheeks.

"I look like I've just been kissed senseless, don't I?" He nodded. She pulled a fist back and pumped her arm in victory. "He is so going to fall. You're a genius." She kissed his cheek quickly then snatched up the notebook.

"Wait..."

If they were going to do this right, there was one more detail to arrange. He reached out and carefully unhooked the top two buttons on her blouse. She swallowed hard before nodding and plopping to the floor to kneel at his feet.

Jamie closed his eyes for a split second to regain control. Genius, *right*. His cock was about to explode at the thought of all the things he could have her do while sitting in that position. Damn, it had seemed like a good idea at the time. *This is what happens when you speak before you think*.

The door creaked open and they spun to face Braden. That was the first difference—usually they were both so involved in their work Jamie would barely react to Braden’s arrival.

Chelsea shot to her feet and backed away, the look of guilt in her eyes adding just the perfect touch, and Braden stumbled for a second as he strode toward the kitchen door. He looked her up and down, grunted in Jamie’s direction before disappearing into the kitchen.

Chelsea straightened her clothing, staring after Braden with a forlorn expression.

“It didn’t work.”

Jamie put his finger to his lips, and she nodded.

“You’re right,” she whispered back. “I’ll give it more time.”

But nothing further happened. Jamie waited for a glimmer of jealousy to show as Braden continued his routine, glaring at them while Jamie attempted to concentrate enough to catalog a few more items. Chelsea stood closer than usual, her fair hair falling over his shoulder at one point, the sweet scent of her lilac shampoo lingering after she moved away.

Braden might not seem interested, but Jamie found it more and more difficult to remember why he wasn’t getting involved with the woman. When Braden closed the door and Chelsea rushed off to the back of the house, muttering as she went, Jamie collapsed onto the couch in relief. He adjusted the raging erection crowding his slacks, trying to find a little room to ease the pain.

Sexual tension was one thing, but he’d been right in his earlier suspicions. The intensity and speed of the desire racing through him was not normal. A faint memory teased him. He’d felt like this once before, this overwhelming and unbidden lust, and his curiosity rose. Something unusual was happening here. Something more than getting caught in the crossfire of a woman attempting to make her love interest jealous.

He glanced around at the trinkets and boxes crowding the walls, and for the first time in a long time, the idea of spending an afternoon with the past held little attraction.

Jamie rolled over in the king-sized bed, aching and hard. The vision he’d woken from was more than enough to have his cock at full mast, precome leaking from the tip. Moonlight shone in the window across the bed and his limbs felt heavy.

*The touch of a mouth, the brush of a hand...*

It had been an awesome dream, and he wished he could slip back in to appreciate it to the full extent. He absently stroked his shaft, wrapping his fingers around his girth and pulling back the foreskin on each draw. He didn't tug hard, just steady, like an easy rhythm of a lover riding him, her hips undulating as she let her blonde head fall back and...

*Shit.*

He sat up, his cock ignored for a moment. He was fantasizing about screwing Chelsea. Dammit, he shouldn't be thinking about getting involved with her. No matter what Braden had hinted at, Jamie was sure Braden would prefer to rip the limbs off anyone who truly looked at her.

They might be trying to make the man jealous, but there was something rotten about lying in the man's bed and fantasizing about fucking his woman.

Jamie scrambled to his feet and paced into the kitchen to grab a drink of water. The cool liquid slid down his throat like a balm. He wandered the apartment, naked, his arousal still begging for attention. Damn thing.

Finally more than he could resist, he gave in to temptation, slipping back to the bed and letting his mind go wild. He pictured Chelsea walking in on him, her soft fingers brushing his shoulders and pressing him to the mattress. He closed his eyes and let the dreamlike trance take over again, pull him away from logical, rational places and back into a fantasy world. An amazing fragrance hung in the air, honeysuckle sweet, spicy at the same time. It made him think about hot sweaty nights and bodies twisted together in passionate embraces. She lay next to him, and the bed shifted. His eyes popped open, fully expecting to see a person next to him.

No one—only his dreams. He fell back into the mystic.

They kissed. Her lips as they clung to his were succulent and mouthwatering. As she moved down his body, kissing his chest and licking his nipples, his balls drew up tight to his groin.

The scent of sex surrounded him.

Another body joined them, Braden cupping Chelsea's breasts. He sucked one nipple into his mouth, leaving behind a trail of moisture. Jamie leaned over to taste the rosy tips of her breasts as well, and she hummed with delight. Braden's flavor lingered on her skin.

Chelsea kissed him again before pinning him back and mounting him, her body accepting his rigid length into her warmth. She leaned forward and brushed her lips against his, then turned and kissed Braden where he lay skin to skin at Jamie's side. Braden stroked a hand down her body, past her hip to rest it on Jamie's thigh. The touch of the other man made a jolt of lightning streak through his groin, and he thrust his cock upward, seeking more pressure, more stimulation.

Another stroke, and this time Braden's hand went lower, slipping between his legs. Large fingers cupped his balls and Jamie groaned.



He was surrounded. Completed. Chelsea rocked over him, her cunt like a fitted glove, squeezing and conforming to his length. Braden rolled his balls, rubbing the skin below them, reaching toward his ass, and Jamie shuddered.

His eyes popped open again. A cool zephyr blowing from the land out to the ocean snuck in the window and fanned his heated skin. His erection was achingly hard as he massaged his length. That much was true.

He'd never had a homoerotic dream. Hell, he'd never had a ménage dream either. Before the anticipation in his limbs could escape, he stroked himself to completion, letting the vision of both Chelsea and Braden bring him to the place of release. Her gentle kiss, the rougher contact of Braden—the softness of her lips, the coarse scratch of his cheek. Jamie had played around in college, jerking off with another roommate. They'd even tried a little more, but it had all been an exercise in futility.

Yet the thought of touching Braden, of being touched, was what he imagined as his release came. He covered his cock with his free hand to stop the spray of semen from hitting the sheets, the pressure and pleasure of his climax rolling through his body. Sticky seed coated his fingers, a few stray strands hot against his belly.

He lay still, blood pounding through him for a long time before grabbing a handful of tissues and wiping himself clean.

How in the hell was he supposed to keep working with Chelsea after this without wanting to explore the sensual side of the situation in more depth? Especially when the two of them seemed to be growing closer and closer? He'd been in Jaffrey's Cove just over a week, and there was a definite friendship being established. Their playacting had morphed into something real as they talked for hours while they worked. Only Chelsea was still gaga over Braden, and Jamie... Well, he wished he wasn't quite as attracted to the two of them, Chelsea and Braden both.

He'd already agreed to accompany Chelsea to her dance club on Friday. While he was interested in seeing exactly what she did that made her family crazy, he was hesitant. Maybe he should tell her he was getting a little too attracted to her. Although that would make things more awkward during their time working together, and he really didn't want to lose her company, or her help.

All possibility of sleep now gone, his mind whirled with too many dilemmas. He rose and started his day. A cup of coffee in hand, he decided to catch up on the paperwork he'd been avoiding. He logged into his calendar on the computer, checking his notes closely.

There were at least twenty emails from his mother and family, and he wondered what family tradition he'd managed to miss now. Probably something involving black ties and limousines. He cracked one open to see how bad it was. The ranting about his lack of attendance at the soirées of New York had picked up, and his mother was beginning to mention various women's names prominently again.

*I know there is nothing I can say to make you spend time with your family. However, I do expect you to attend at least one of the get-togethers you are invited to this season. There is a fundraiser dinner a week from Saturday that is of vital importance to the family. Please tell me you can dig yourself out from whatever place you've disappeared to and join us. RSVP quickly—I need to inform the host. That is the polite thing to do, and really, isn't it time for a short excursion into civilization?*

He sighed and closed the message without responding. He just didn't have the energy for his family, not this morning. He'd try, again, to craft a properly worded explanation of his time away from the heritage home and the family social standing.

Not that they would listen, but even if they chose to be impolite and pushy, he could act differently.

He just didn't give a damn about the money, and they would not understand. He snorted in disgust. Probably more like they couldn't understand. Why would anyone turn their back on a soft comfortable life, where the battles were fought and discoveries were made in the boardroom and stock market, instead of with a shovel and hours of fine research?

It was going to be a long day.

The thought of spending time with Chelsea was the only thing bringing a spot of brightness to the cloud that had moved in over his head. And still—should he tell her he didn't feel they should try to scam Braden anymore? Or would that make her too uncomfortable in his presence?

What about Braden himself?

Jamie looked around the room. The man's taste in art intrigued him. The beauty of the apartment's location and the delicate touches in decorating contrasted sharply with the size and appearance of the man. Why the hell was Braden so fascinating?

Jamie collapsed onto the couch. Between his job and his family and their expectations, he had more than he wanted on his to-be-dealt-with list. Adding in the strange sense of restlessness and the sexual frustration he was experiencing...

It wasn't even seven a.m. and he was ready to go back to bed.

## Chapter Four

Braden eyed the enormous heap of paperwork on his desk with suspicion. “What the hell is all that?”

Getting into the office early was supposed to be a respite from hanging around Chelsea. He still wasn’t sure what to do about his attraction to her, and after watching her with Jamie for the past week, it had taken all his willpower to not make a move. Allowing someone else to get close to her seemed stupider by the minute.

The other officer on duty tapped the wad of forms under her hand. “Complaints, non-urgent.”

*Shit.* “No way. I’ve never seen a pile that big around here. Jaffrey’s Cove is a nice quiet place. Have aliens suddenly invaded us?” Braden sat in his chair and rolled closer, dragging a couple of forms over to examine them. “These can’t be serious. Someone wants to report they saw a spaceship landing in Miller’s field?”

“You did mention aliens. UFOs would make sense.”

*Jesus.* So I’m going to have to spend the morning reassuring Old Man Cedric it’s safe to walk the shore without zombies attacking?”

Helen laughed at him. “Hey, you’re not the only one dealing with crap. Things are getting downright silly around here. All my callouts this morning ended up being pranks. Deck furniture dumped in a swimming pool, someone tipped over the outhouse at the lighthouse lookout—”

Braden snorted. “Tipped over the outhouse. Isn’t that just a little trite?”

She shrugged. “There’s something up this tourist season, that’s for sure. Here...” She grabbed the papers and started sorting them into two piles. “I’ll deal with the obviously stupid ones today. You can have them tomorrow.”

“You think this insanity is going to keep up for the rest of the summer?” He flipped through a few of the complaint forms.

“I hope not, but—”

“Hell.” Braden stood, paper in hand. It was a message from Jamie. There’d been vandalism out at the condo.

“What, Chief?” Helen leaned over and swore. “Damn, I didn’t hear that one come in. Sorry. You want to take it right now?”

Braden accepted the other papers she held out to him. “Yeah, with a stranger in the place... You okay to hold down the fort for a while?”

Helen nodded. “Of course. If the aliens end up being mind-swapping freaks, remember I don’t like purple. If you see me wearing mauve, you know I’ve been taken over.”

They both chuckled as Braden hurried out the door. His assistant deputy was rock solid, and he could trust her to take care of things in his absence. He drove the short distance back to his condo without turning on the flashing lights.

While he drove, he wracked his brains for a reason for all the chaos. The only major change he knew of was that the previous matriarch had stepped down and Alexia had taken over. But how could that possibly affect the rest of the population? Most of the locals were full human, and ninety-nine percent of them totally unaware of the existence of merfolk. There was the usual huge influx of summer tourists—but the variation in everyone’s behavior made no sense.

Jamie’s car still sat in the parking lot, so Braden knocked on the door of the condo. When there was no answer, he let himself in.

“Jamie? You here?” The last thing he wanted was to freak the man out coming in unannounced.

Braden paced slowly into the living room, noting small signs of his visitor around the place. An open laptop lay on the dining room table, a few of the unending notebooks Chelsea had been writing in stacked neatly to the side.

There was no sign of the vandalism Jamie had reported, although a bucket and washcloth sat next to the sink. Braden stepped to the balcony to examine the windows closer. They sparkled in the morning light, moisture still clinging to the edges. Jamie had cleaned the glass recently.

The sound of running water met his ears and he headed toward the bathroom without thinking. He stopped in the door of the bedroom and cleared his throat. He stuck his head through the door, giving a cautious look around. “Hey, just wanted to let you know I stopped in—”

A pair of wet arms wrapped around his neck and he tucked his chin down to protect his throat. He pivoted on his heels and backed up hard, a grunt of pain rising from the person now pinned between him and the wall.

“Jamie, let go. It’s me.”

The death grip on his neck loosened and Jamie swore. “Stop crushing me then. Damn it, I’m sorry.”

Braden stepped forward, the sticky wetness of his clothing against his back witness to the fact Jamie crawled straight out of the shower to jump him. He must have snuck out the second bathroom door that attached to the main hall. The weight dragging him down lessened as Jamie’s feet hit the ground.

“No worries,” Braden said. “I take it you’ve had an interesting morning.”

“No shit. Let me grab a towel.”

Braden turned to face the other man and found himself staring after Jamie’s retreating ass. Strong butt muscles flexed with every step Jamie took and a thrill of attraction shot through Braden.

Holy fuck, just what he didn't need right now. Freaking merfolk hormones were going to kill him. Chelsea had him so riled up his cock was on a trigger switch. While there was nothing wrong with finding Jamie attractive, he really didn't need another complication in his life.

Braden slipped into his bedroom to strip off his wet uniform shirt and pull a spare one from the closet. Jamie opened the bathroom door and glanced around, his gaze hesitating on the bare skin of Braden's chest. He dragged his eyes away and headed for the dresser, clutching the towel wrapped around his hips. "Sorry again. I guess I'm a little jumpy after discovering I slept through someone covering the sliding French doors in spray paint without waking me."

"No way. Damn it, I've never had anything like that happen before. This really is the strangest season on record."

Braden was buttoning up his shirt before he realized he still stood in the bedroom, staring unintentionally at Jamie's naked torso. "Shit, I'll let you get dressed. Have you had breakfast yet? Can I make some coffee?"

Jamie grinned at him. "Coffee would be awesome."

Braden rambled around the kitchen for a few minutes waiting for the coffeemaker to finish. He scrubbed his face and took a few long, slow breaths to try to regain control of his body. His cock stood at attention, a situation he hoped would disappear before Jamie noticed.

Enough was enough. This thing between Chelsea and him needed dealing with before his rotten libido got them all in trouble, especially now that she wasn't going away. His heart ached for her—she'd been so excited about college. He'd thought it was already accomplished and ready to happen.

Adding to her pain was cruel, and he wasn't waiting any longer. If she really wanted to get involved with him—

"Coffee smells great." Jamie interrupted his thoughts as he entered the room dressed in a crisp cotton shirt and sharply creased dress pants. He reached for the pot and poured them two cups, adding a shot of cream to one and handing it to Braden.

Braden frowned in confusion. "Thanks, but how did you know how I take my coffee?"

Jamie shrugged. "That's how you take it at the house. And you had no sugar in the condo. Not big on cooking, are you?"

"Sure I am. Chinese, Italian, Greek..."

Jamie laughed at him. "Takeout doesn't count. You'll have to let me cook for you sometime. I'm pretty good, and I'd love to show you how much I appreciate getting to stay in your place. You really have made my job easier."

Braden sat at the table, stretching out his legs and nodding at the chair opposite him. "First, tell me about the vandals."

Jamie pushed his laptop to the side to make room for his cup. “Spray paint. I still can’t believe I didn’t hear anything. I’m usually a fairly light sleeper, but the last couple nights...”

He stopped, his face flushed as he took a sip of his coffee. Braden wondered what Jamie wasn’t saying, but he’d already taken more liberties than he should with someone he barely knew. It was downright embarrassing how comfortable he felt around the human.

“Thanks for cleaning it up.”

“No trouble. Easier to do while it’s fresh, something I’ve learned at various digs.”

“Anything broken? Left behind?” Braden watched closely to make sure Jamie wasn’t too spooked by the situation.

“I didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary. You should check, since you’d spot anything unusual easier than I would.”

They wandered outside and Jamie pointed out the few spots he hadn’t been able to finish cleaning up, but there was nothing broken or otherwise wrong that Braden could see.

“Well, I guess as long as you lock up there’s not much else we can do to prevent it from happening again. Really, Jaffrey’s Cove has never had a run of the crazies like this before.”

Jamie chuckled. “Brought them in just for me. I’m honored.”

“Yeah, well let’s hope they all decide it’s too quiet around here soon and head down the coast to Cynterra Bay. I hear they need a little excitement.” Braden slapped him on the shoulder and ushered him back into the condo. “You planning on heading to the Coltens’ this morning?”

“No reason not to. I’ve barely made inroads to the collection. I have to tell you—Chelsea’s been a godsend.”

Did Jamie say her name with a little extra emphasis? Braden fought down the jealousy that shot through him. “I thought she’d be a help. She’s always been a hard worker, and good company.”

“Then why... Never mind. Not my business.” Jamie walked away and pulled some items from the fridge, putting together a quick breakfast.

“You want to know why I’m not getting involved with her?”

“That’s blunt. But, yeah. I don’t get it. She’s a knockout, but more than that she’s a wonderful girl. Intelligent, quick to learn... I was surprised when she said she’d never been to college.”

“She put off going for a few years for some reason. She was supposed to head out this fall, but she said she didn’t get in. Blew her SATs.”

Jamie snorted his disbelief. “That’s a load of bull if I ever heard it. From what we’ve discussed over the past week, she’s got more knowledge than most people I’ve met. Seems to have read a lot of the classics and researched all kinds of topics.” He froze with his spoon of yogurt halfway to his mouth. “Unless...”

Braden frowned. There was something odd here. “Unless what?”

Jamie pointed the spoon at him then shook his head. “No, that’s not it. I wondered for a second if she was dyslexic, but she’s done just fine taking notes for me. Still, sometimes people freeze up in test situations—you know, can’t get the words down on paper. Because her mind is sharp, I’m telling you that.”

Braden rubbed his forehead. It was possible, and could be why she’d refused all offers of assistance, if she was trying to keep a disability secret. “You know what? You’re right, something is off. I’m going to look into it.”

Jamie’s face brightened as he smiled. “Okay, since it seems you’re a decent guy I’m going to let you in on the plot. Chelsea is nuts about you and doesn’t understand why you’re ignoring her. She’s invited me to watch her dance tomorrow night at the Grotto, but it’s really a setup. She’s got some kind of big plan that involves you. If you’ve got any feelings for the girl, I suggest you get your act together. This might be your last chance.”

Braden shook his head. “Are you trained as a relationship counselor too?”

A sudden burst of laughter escaped Jamie as he cleaned up his bowl and tidied the counter. He spoke over his shoulder. “Years of hanging out at remote digs often means there’s nothing to do in your spare time but psychoanalyze each other. It can be damn entertaining at times.”

Chelsea peeked around the edge of the stage, searching the dimly lit seating area for Jamie. The music pounded through her whole body, the pulsing beat making the need driving her more and more difficult to control. Braden had one last chance, then she was going to forget him. She’d called in every favor possible to arrange the night, and if it didn’t work, she’d just have to accept he really didn’t want her.

The girl dancing on the stage wore a skimpy tasseled cowboy outfit and Chelsea analyzed her dance moves as she waited her turn. Decent routine, maybe a little too much shimmy in the hips, but the catcalls and hollering from the floor demonstrated the guys watching didn’t mind. Jamie’s blond hair finally caught her eye. Perfect. He’d managed to nab one of the tables close enough to the stage she’d be able to pay him a little extra attention.

Chelsea tucked back into the shadows and closed her eyes for a moment, centering herself and slowing the rapid beat of her pulse. In just minutes she’d be the one out there in the spotlight, letting her body tell the story as she performed.

Fine, it wasn’t dancing on Broadway, but it made her happy, brought in a few bucks and the guys loved it.

Ms. Cowboy finished up and gathered her money from the stage. She slipped past Chelsea breathlessly. “Break a leg, girl. They’re hot tonight.”

The tone of the music changed and Chelsea rocked her body in time with the opening beats. She took a deep breath and let the rhythm settle over her. Head lowered she paced slowly out onto the stage and the collective groan from the masculine throats was oh-so-wonderful to hear.

She didn't do a bump and grind like some of the girls. She could—she knew how to pole dance with the best of them—but she'd choreographed this routine as a tease into the world of the merfolk. The shimmering blue body paint she wore flashed under the special lights, creating the illusion of the same glow she would see while making love. It turned her on, imagining her and Braden, lights flicking around them. She approached the edge of the stage and smiled into the crowd, her gaze fixing on Jamie, and suddenly her smile was real. There was something special about the man, more than the fact they were becoming friends.

His expression right now was priceless. She'd told him she was a dancer, brought him into the club then left him alone while she went to get ready. Surely the previous girls' performances would have clued him in, but the shock on his face made her want to giggle. The heat that built as he looked her over from head to toe gave a pleasant buzz to her whole body. She wagged her fingers at him suggestively and watched with delight as the men on either side of him elbowed and joshed him for receiving special attention.

The beat picked up in her music and she had to concentrate. Returning to the middle of the stage, she set in motion the sensual routine she hoped would pull them all into a whirlpool of passion with her.

She danced, every part of her body engaged in the storytelling. Bent low to the ground she pretended to swim across the floor, perching up onto a rock and preening her hair back off her shoulder. The long ringlets of her extensions hung to her hips, teasing the bare skin above her buttocks with every swing. Teasing like the brush of a hand, like Jamie's fingers had stroked her skin the other day, and she unconsciously sought his eyes.

When the dance took her back to the edge of the stage, she slipped down, lowering herself to the floor. The bouncers stiffened, but let her continue as she moved toward Jamie, her hips moving from side to side with an increasing tempo.

His jaw hung open and she slid a hand down his cheek before twirling before him. Her hands landed on his thighs as she leaned over, undulating her torso from side to side. The pull between them made her drop the choreographed plans and dive in over her head. She pressed his legs together and straddled him. He stared at her face, his eyes blazing as she rocked her hips lower, the thin strip of fabric covering her pussy rubbing his dress pants, knocking against the rock-hard erection straining the front of his trousers.

"Chelsea..." He choked out the words. She shimmied again, this time sitting on his thighs and raising a leg in the air. The back of her calf rested on his collarbone, her body heat melding with his, and he swore softly.



The emotion she saw in his eyes hit her hard. The blue paint she wore now hid her own reaction, the real shimmer of arousal rising from her body as she reacted to the need pouring off him. She extracted herself from the tangle she'd pulled them into and grabbed him by the collar.

"Chels, no more," he whispered.

She hesitated for a second then spun away, leaping onto the stage. Oh God, what had she done? Passion flared hard through her, need making her pulse jump and her core ache for a lover. The remainder of her song went far too quickly, the spotlights in her eyes blinding her to any of the faces in the crowd.

The music faded and she escaped, the whistles and clapping shaking the rafters.

"Aren't you going around to pick up your money?" one of the other dancers asked.

Chelsea shook her head. "I'll let Kasey grab it for me this time. I need to head out."

The girl winked. "I see you've got a new boyfriend. He's cute."

*Shit.* Chelsea stripped off her costume as fast as she could. All her plans were royally screwed. She had timed it so she'd have at least thirty minutes before all hell broke loose. Now she wished for longer—time to go find Jamie and apologize. To ask him to understand she hadn't meant to torment him—hell, torment herself. The incredible reaction between them had come on so hard and strong... She wrapped her arms around herself for a second. She fought the hard ache in her core that made her want to race into the crowd and grab Jamie. A glance in the mirror reminded her the body paint was still there, but she had no time to take it off and still make it home before Braden. She snatched up a wrap and fled out the door, racing across the parking lot and jumping into her car as quickly as she could.

Only then did she breathe out a sigh of relief, relaxing back onto the seat and letting go of the nervous tension that had claimed her. She'd planned the evening as a final-ditch attempt to get Braden's attention, but she hadn't expected to experience such a strong response to Jamie.

The door beside her jerked open. Chelsea's heart leapt into her throat and she swung a fist at the intruder.

Braden caught it with his mitt of a hand. "None of that."

"Holy shit, what do you think—?"

"Don't move," he ordered. He closed her door and came around to the passenger side, yanked the door open and folded himself into the seat. "You've got the drive home to figure out how you're going explain yourself."

"What are you doing in my car? You nearly gave me a heart attack."

He reached across to turn on the ignition. The motor roared to life and she twisted to examine his face. He shook his head then leaned back in his seat, avoiding her eyes. "Drive. We'll talk when we get home."

*Bastard.* Chelsea jerked the car into gear and burned rubber, peeling out of the parking lot. What the hell was he going to do, slap a fine on her? She glanced at him. He wasn't wearing his uniform.

Ah, shit...there was part of the problem. He was supposed to be on duty tonight. She'd left word for him to drop in at the Grotto, but figured he'd have gone in uniform. It should have taken until the end of his shift to be able to track her down if he'd been pissed off. Only if he wasn't on duty...

*Hell.* None of this was working out. Jamie was probably annoyed beyond belief with her, and Braden was going to reject her again. She slowed and drove more carefully. Not like she needed to get into any more trouble tonight than she already was. She pulled into the driveway of the house and parked, slipping out and heading inside without another word spoken.

Fine. She'd leave as wide a space between her and Braden as possible. They might be stuck housesitting together but this was the last time she was going to try to get him to see her as a woman.

She kicked off her shoes and turned to hide in her room.

"Where do you think you're going?" Braden locked the door behind them then blocked her path. His expressionless face taunted her more than if he'd been angry or sad. Obviously he didn't give a damn and it was time to move on.

"I'm taking a shower and going to bed. Good night."

He grabbed her by the arm and held her in place. "No, you're not."

Chelsea froze for a second then simultaneously stomped at his instep and twisted her wrist from his grasp. He simply released her, dodged the kick and grabbed her other elbow as well, effectively pinning her in place before him.

"Let me go," she demanded.

"We're going to talk. Don't run away, don't start throwing things."

Chelsea tossed her head back and glared. "I don't throw things, and I don't run. You're the one that runs away."

He nodded slowly and as his fingers released her she jerked back a step.

"What were you doing tonight, Chelsea?" The dark tone in his voice made a tiny flame of hope start to rise. "You were looking for trouble before, but tonight?"

He stroked a hand down her arm and she found it hard to swallow.

"You know that I dance. I've asked you a million times to come and watch, and you never have. So what's different about tonight? The fact I had someone in the audience who appreciated me?"

"They all appreciate you, baby. Every one of those men there tonight would have loved to be the one going home with you."

"Except you," she said softly.

The confusion in his eyes was clear. "Tonight wasn't the first time I've watched you. I've wrestled with myself every damn time you dance and I'm usually there in the back, wanting to murder the men admiring you. Wanting to race up on that stage and pull you off and wrap you up so no one can see your beautiful body."

*He'd watched before?* "Why have you never said anything?"

He rubbed his hands up the sides of her arms again, smoothing his palms over her shoulders. "I had no right."

She waited. Hoping he'd say something more. Do something more. He just kept touching her arms, stroking her hair. It was all so surreal and confusing.

"Stop it." She shrugged away from him, stepping closer to the fireplace and the long French doors to the patio. The lights of the harbor were visible off in the distance where the pier curved away from the land. Faint pinpricks of light that echoed the faint hope glowing in her heart. She turned to face him.

"So you watched. You wanted to cover me up. Fine, thanks for sharing. Does it make any difference at all? Because from what you've said to me tonight, I don't see anything changing, and if that's the case, then I'm having that shower and hitting the sack. Alone. Again. Like I have for the past year."

"Chelsea, I've wanted to make love with you—"

"Bullshit." Tears were threatening, and soon there would be no stopping them. She was so bloody frustrated it was a good thing they weren't in the kitchen or she'd be tempted to throw a knife or two. "Don't give me any more of your crap."

She dashed the tears from her eyes, annoyed that she'd let him bring her to this place. She was a strong woman, independent. She didn't need his approval or his love. She turned her back on him and wrapped her arms around herself to hold in the anger.

"Baby—"

"Go away. I don't want to discuss this anymore."

"We're not done," he growled out. "You have a crazy way of holding a conversation."

*Arrogant bastard.* She spun on her heel to confront him. "This isn't a conversation. It's an accusation. You want to bring it back to a discussion? Fine. Tell me what you're planning on doing about this."

One move ripped off her jacket. His gaze dropped to her chest, to the bikini cups shaped like giant shells barely covering her breasts. She slipped a hand behind her and pulled the string, ripping the fabric from her body and tossing it at him. One more move stripped away her thong and she stood naked before him.

Braden's eyes grew dark but his unfathomable expression never changed. "Fuck, Chelsea, what do you want me to do? Turn my back on everything I believe is right and just have sex with you?"

"Who the hell made you my moral adviser? Is it your job to go around seeing that all the merfolk are screwing only approved partners? I've heard about every one of your exploits, and you have the balls to say having sex with me would be wrong? Don't be such a fucking hypocrite. Face it, Braden, either you want me or you don't."

She held out her arms and pivoted on the spot, letting her arms rise above her head until she was back facing him, breasts thrust forward, legs parted. He stared at her, still expressionless and she gave up. Her heart was breaking inside as she lowered her arms.

“Sorry you didn’t like what you see enough to make a play for it. Good night, Braden.”

It was only three steps. Only three steps would get her past him and she could run to her room, hide away and let the tears fall.

He didn’t let her take more than one. His arms wrapped around her, clutching her against his solid body as his mouth stole her very breath away.

## Chapter Five

Enough. He'd waited and resisted and fought it for long enough, and now there was no turning back. She slipped into his arms and against him like she was meant to be there, every succulent inch of her bare skin open to his touch, to his possession. He clasped her close and lifted until her mouth reached his lips, her warm smooth torso sliding up his chest. Their tongues fought, teeth knocking together. She responded eagerly, her fingers curled around his head as she held their lips together and allowed him to ravish her mouth.

The heat between them was incredible, his skin burning from within like she'd lit a fire, and he growled with displeasure at the fabric separating them. Still connected, still clutching each other, he ripped his shirt apart. The instant contact between her unbound breasts and his chest made him hiss. Scalding hot, the bountiful mounds pressed into him, and he tore his mouth away from hers to hike her torso higher and latch his mouth to one turgid peak. He nipped and sucked hard, her nipple hitting the roof of his mouth and Chelsea cried out with a breathless gasp. He eased back slightly, afraid that he'd been too rough in his mindless haze.

"Don't stop. Oh shit, Braden, yes, more." She thrust out her chest, the wet skin of her nipple rubbing against his cheek. He turned his head and caught it again, laving his tongue over the peak with harsh, rapid strokes until she began to moan, a deep needy noise rising from her core.

Braden took a single step toward the hallway, intent on taking her to her bedroom, or at least attempting to reach the room. But she wiggled in his arms, her heated core grinding against his abdomen. Her pussy was wet, juices coating his skin, and he swore.

"Right here, right now. Oh, please," she panted.

"Chelsea, are you sure? Owwww..."

The minx had him by the ear, pulling and tugging to turn his face to hers. She glared at him, fiery blue light shining from her eyes. "I want you. I've *always* wanted you. I can't say it any clearer than that."

She relaxed her death grip and snuck her hands down his torso, scratching her brightly painted nails over his chest, leaving eight narrow red streaks in their wake as she reached for the button on his waistband.

He dropped to the floor and rolled her on top of him. While their mouths connected to continue their breathless kissing, he rid himself of his jeans, kicking them off his feet with abandon. He wrapped his arms around her soft body, his hands seeking and finding all the spots that made her sing in pleasure. He cupped

her breasts, sucking each one in turn as she squirmed in his lap, her slick pussy lips raking the length of his erection. Wetting him, making him ready for the moment they would join together.

Around them the pale blue shimmer of St. Elmo's fire rose into the air. The elemental part of their shifters that allowed them to travel through the air escaped as he let his tightly controlled emotions fly for the first time in years. She was his. Whether she understood all that would entail now was not the time to stop. He couldn't stop. There was no way to contain the lust racing through his veins, the tenderness that somehow wrapped around them as well. He wanted her, but he would die for her if needed.

Chelsea rocked her hips, pressing her firm breasts against his chest, her hot little mouth sucking his neck. He grasped her ass cheeks, kneading the flesh with his fingers before running a single digit between the rounds to play with the rosette of her anus. She drew in a quick breath as he slid his hand lower to pull moisture from her pussy. The held air released with a gasp as he slipped his finger into her to the knuckle.

"Braden. I need you. Oh shit, yes."

He lifted her up and nestled her slick opening over his cock head, arranging her so every motion brushed her clit, spread her open wide, easing the liquid of her body over his shaft and her pussy lips.

"You ready, baby?"

She grabbed his chin and turned their heads so they were eye to eye. "Yes."

Chelsea dropped her hips at the same time he thrust up and with a shout he was buried to the hilt. She squeezed him impossibly tight, heat and moisture burning as she embraced him in her intimate clasp.

She lowered her head to his chest and gave him a tender kiss. "Finally."

They moved together, the frantic tumble of earlier slowing now that they were joined. Flickering blue lights filled the air around them, the paint on Chelsea's body brushing his skin and mixing together with the natural iridescence of their St. Elmo's fire.

Damn, he'd never felt anything like this in his life. He'd had lovers by the score, shared pleasure with many of the merfolk as well as the occasional human. Something about the way Chelsea moved over him, gyrating and twisting her hips to force his shaft where she wanted him to go, made it incredible for him as well. They fit. They belonged, and he rejoiced in the pleasure and connection they shared. He tilted his hips, trying to drive a little deeper at the end of every thrust. She leaned closer, rubbing her nipples on him with each pass. The tightness in his sac increased, his balls hardening to rocks. The minx nipped his neck then threw back her head and cried out as she came. She squeezed his cock with a vise-like grip that moved in undulating waves.

He lost control and let go, his release exploding from his cock and jettisoning into her sweet body. She continued to pulse around him, little gasps of pleasure escaping from her lips, and he couldn't resist kissing her. Dusting kisses across her face, her eyes. He held her close, refusing to let her move away from him as another series of shudders shook her body.

They sat together until their heart rates slowed, their breathing finally returning to normal. She lifted her head off his chest and burst out laughing. Her delight filled the room with a tinkling sound. He was still too overwhelmed to join in.

“Sorry, Braden, but...” She trailed her hands over him and it felt so damn good. She paused, circling his nipple with one finger as she continued to shake with amusement.

“Sorry for what?”

Their eyes met. The sparkling flecks within her irises reassured him she was as moved as he was. Although he couldn’t figure out why she kept laughing. He dropped his gaze to where they were still joined and spotted the reason.

“Shit, woman, I look like a fucking Smurf.” Her body paint covered them both. Streaks of shimmering blue that had nothing to do with their natural release of St. Elmo’s fire streaked his torso.

She bit her lip, the bright smile sneaking around it. “You should see your face. Blue looks good on you. Ohh...”

He rose, his cock slipping from her body as he adjusted her in his arms. Now that he’d given in, there was no way he planned on letting her go any time soon. He strode upstairs to the room he’d been using, Chelsea clinging to his shoulders.

“Shower?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Hmm,” she purred, running a hand over his smooth scalp. “Or the ocean. I really want to go swimming with you.”

“Not very environmentally friendly are you, minx?”

“The paint is nontoxic,” she pointed out. “It’s not like I’m covering myself with lead.”

“Covering me as well.”

“That was a bonus. Next time I’ll use flavored stuff.” She buried her face in his neck and nibbled on his collarbone.

“You know we still have things to talk about, right?”

Chelsea sighed and leaned harder into him, her hands roaming freely over his torso. “Hmm, sure.”

He laughed. “You’re fuck drunk already.” A gentle kiss to her nose was the last thing he did before ducking through the doorway.

The biggest bathroom in the house was the master en suite, and Braden moved carefully, trying to leave as little sign of their presence as possible. They might have free reign over the whole house, but he didn’t want to spend hours scrubbing blue shit off everything in sight.

Once he reached the safety of the tile, he lowered her carefully, pressing another kiss to her cheek before turning to face the damage.

“Hell. I have been attacked by aliens.” There wasn’t an inch of him that didn’t have at least a streak of the fucking body paint. The mirror reflected Chelsea standing next to him, her bright smile covering her face and filling her eyes.

It had been a long time since he’d seen her look so truly happy.

She twirled and slipped into the shower ahead of him, part of her joy bubbling up and sneaking out in low chuckles as she adjusted the water taps. They could easily shower in the cold water, but there was something so decadent in using hot. All the merfolk enjoyed the pleasures modern human conveniences afforded them, and now that Braden had finally—*finally*—given in and made love with her, she planned on enjoying all the pleasures she could.

The large shower stall grew suddenly small as he crowded against her.

“I’m not done with you.” His big hands slid over her shoulders and down her arms, and she shivered in anticipation. “I’m going to wash you. Every single inch of you, baby, is going to get touched.” His hands paused on her hips, pinning her in place under the water spray when she would have turned to face him. He reached past her for the soap and lathered up his hands, his arms trapping her in their circle.

The torment began. Pleasure raced ahead of his hands, his fingers, as he explored. Stroked her breasts, rubbed slow circles on her belly. Encased her thighs with his palms and dropped to his knees behind her as he reached and washed her feet. The blue paint vanished down the drain, but the blue light in the bathroom refused to diminish. His touch, so gentle, so caring, made her heart ache.

He stood, his hands cupping her breasts, thumbs pinching the tips lightly against his forefingers.

“Damn, woman, you are gorgeous.” He pressed his hips against her and the length of his once-again-rigid cock nudged the crease of her ass.

She didn’t want to speak for fear she’d break the magical connection between them.

Braden kissed the tender skin under her ear. A shiver raced down her spine and burst into a thousand electrical pulses in her sex. The slow, methodical movements of his touch brought pleasure to her body. The continued caresses of his lips, the soft words of praise muttered against her skin, brought pleasure to her soul.

By the time he turned her in his arms and scooped her up all the tension remaining in her muscles had swirled away with the last remnants of the paint. As he carried her out of the stall and wrapped her in a towel, drying her limbs and nestling her on the bed, she sighed.

“Braden?”

He nuzzled her neck with his lips, wrapping his body around hers and tugging them skin to skin.

“Hmm?”

She stared up into his dark eyes, brushing her knuckles against his cheek. “I’ve wanted you for so long.”



"I'm sorry." He rubbed their mouths together, licking a slow draw over her bottom lip. "I was...afraid. No, that's the wrong word. I was confused and really trying to do what I thought was best. I knew how much you wanted to go away to school. I didn't want anyone to steal that opportunity from you, not even me."

A shot of pain went through her. It wasn't the time or place to explain the real reason she hadn't gone.

"I still want to go someday." It might seem impossible right now, but there had to be a way to earn the money. Maybe it would take another year, but if that's what it took...

Braden rolled to his back and pulled her on top of him, arranging her like a blanket over his heavily muscled chest. "I'll do what I can to help you. You don't have to give up your dream. The part I'm sorry for is that we could have been together for a long time." He lifted her chin. "I know this is going to sound strange, but I was worried about having to share you with any of the merfolk. I'm still...uncertain."

"Share me? Is that why you were chasing away the rest of the guys?"

"I still don't think I can handle seeing you making love with another member of the pod. I know that it's not right for me to feel jealous, but it's a reality."

Chelsea sat up, straddling his hips. Was he serious? She'd never dreamed that would be an issue. "Thank you for telling me, but I'm not looking for another lover."

"Not right now, but you will. It's normal, Chelsea, it's a natural part of the urges you have as a merfolk. My reaction is the one that's twisted and wrong. Tell me you've never had two lovers in your bed—"

"I haven't."

"—ah." Braden choked off in midsentence.

Chelsea leaned over and stroked his chest, loving the feel of the ridges of muscles under her fingers. "I wasn't a virgin, but when I said you were the one I desired, I meant it. I've watched and waited and downright hurt with wanting you."

"Never?" He looked stunned. "You've never..."

She smoothed a finger over his lips. "Shh. You're right, I might need someone else at some point, but for now you're more than enough."

She shifted slowly. The friction between their bodies heated her up and drove her crazy at the same time. Lifting her hips she reached between her legs to grasp his erect shaft, fondling the tender skin covering the head.

"Oh damn, baby. That feels freaking marvelous...holy shit." Braden fell back with a groan, his head crashing onto the pillow.

Chelsea closed her eyes as she sank onto him, the thick girth of his cock stretching her passage. She rocked downward again and again, each motion bringing him a little deeper. Their skin rubbed together with an erotic flare, her nerve endings sensitized, and she craved more. She switched to long, smooth

strokes—savoring the fullness, the sensual pressure and heat. Each propelled pleasure into her core. Braden cupped her breasts, teasing her nipples to hard points then making endless circles with his thumbs over the aching peaks.

Nothing but physical sensation remained. Her climax approached leisurely this time, the languorous pulses of her hips prolonging her building excitement. She wanted to savor every second.

“Look at me.” Braden clasped her hips to hold her still. “I want to watch you. I need to see you come this time.”

She stared down into his face. He released his grasp and let her resume control. They watched each other draw closer to climax. The room filled with the light of a million fireflies as all their tightly held emotion streamed out. Pleasure wrapped around them and tied them together until it burst in a blaze of energy. She cried out his name and he smiled, a second before his eyes closed and he came, his cock jerking within her sheath. The rapid pulses of her orgasm rolled in waves, drawing out his pleasure, setting off another series of reactions within her.

They both took deep breaths at the same time, and Chelsea laughed. She rolled off and curled up at his side.

“You going to be okay if I stay here? I’m kinda still in shock. I keep thinking I’m going to wake up and this is going to all be a dream.”

Braden tucked her closer, the heat of his body enveloping her as he tugged the sheets over their naked bodies. “You just try to get away. It’s not happening.”

She settled in and relaxed, staring contentedly at his face until the lights of the room faded and she fell asleep.

## Chapter Six

Jamie watched in a daze, uncertain if his blood pounded from racing up the stairs or from the sight before his eyes.

He'd left the bar as soon as he discovered Chelsea was gone. His groin ached, his body on fire ever since she'd stepped out on the stage in that excuse for a bikini. When she'd centered her attention on him, it had been enough to break him. Screw trying to make Braden jealous, he wanted her for himself. He'd slipped backstage only to find she'd already disappeared.

Finding her car in the driveway of the house was reassuring, but when he heard raised voices behind the door and couldn't find his fucking key, he panicked. He flew around the back and up the stairs, ready to break in when he spotted Chelsea and Braden glaring at each other across the living room. Their shouted conversation confused him and he was ready to put a stop to it when everything changed. Chelsea stripped off her clothing, and involuntarily he took a step forward, drawn with a magnetic force. Shimmering blue paint covered every inch of her body and he longed to touch her, to see if a cloud of blue dust would envelop them as he buried himself in her body, burying the ache in his soul.

Then the tableau changed as Chelsea and Braden kissed and his hopes died. He knew he should turn away, leave the lovers in privacy as they wrapped around each other more and more intimately, but something held him.

He'd never thought of himself as a voyeur. His sexual escapades were tame by some standards and actual live sex shows weren't his thing. But this, this was more than mesmerizing. Jamie slipped into the shadows, all the while his gaze fixed on the increasingly intimate performance on the opposite side of the glass. When they joined together, he swore he felt it in his own body and finally forced himself to turn away.

The journey to his car took forever, the rock-solid length of his erection making each step torturous. The drive back to the condo passed in a blur. He stumbled up the stairs, into the apartment, dropped his keys to the floor and swore, long and hard.

Damn, damn, *damn*. Ignoring the need pounding through him was impossible. He opened his slacks and released his aching cock. He stroked from root to tip, swiping his palm over the head and rubbing the moisture already leaking from his shaft. He couldn't even make it as far as the bathroom, not with the images racing through his mind.

The full tantalizing rounds of Chelsea's breasts—what he wouldn't give to be able to weigh them in his hands. To suckle the tips like he'd watched Braden enjoy. Jamie tugged harder, wishing it had been him she'd enveloped with her wet heat. He let his head fall back against the wall with a *thud*, all his blood pooling in his groin. He dropped his other hand to cup his balls, tightness spreading as he increased the speed of his motions. He pictured Chelsea's hips moving over him, her body pressed up against his. The sweet taste of her lips. Jamie angled his hips higher and thrust harder into his hand, urgent need overtaking him. His balls tightened, his total concentration on the endorphins spreading in a rush through his whole system. Release came and he groaned out her name, his seed spraying from the tip of his cock to land on the floor and his shoes in sticky strands.

When his ragged breathing faded back to normal, he glanced down in disgust.

"Ah, fuck it, teenagers have more control."

He grabbed a cloth and cleaned up the floor, stomping to the bedroom, repulsed with himself. All his exhaustion disappeared by the time he'd washed up and redressed. He felt like he'd sucked back espresso shots, his body buzzing with adrenaline. The thought of what Chelsea and Braden were doing at that very moment started another reaction he desperately needed to bring to a halt before he ended up jerking off all night long. Jamie cranked open his laptop and began the arduous task of transferring information from his latest set of notes to the Excel spreadsheet.

Shit, even the sight of her beautifully curved handwriting made him react. He put down the notebook and paced to the French doors to stare out into the night. The ocean undulated with the rhythm of the waves. The harbor to the left glowed with an eerie haze, pale greens and blues reflecting off the water as a light mist rolled in from the sea.

The azure tones reminded him of the body paint Chelsea wore and this time his cock didn't leap to attention. Ever since she'd walked out on the stage something had bothered him, something other than how dire his need to fuck her had become. A faint memory tickled the back of his brain.

He'd seen the blue before. The glow of St Elmo's fire.

Jamie went back to an old reference book he'd found days ago, tucked onto Braden's shelf, the pages yellowed with time. He traced a finger over the page, the words he'd read earlier leaping out at him. *St Elmo's fire—watchers, saviors—legends are told by sailors of the fortune of the ships guided by their light. Sailors recovered from the storm-tossed sea speak of mermaids bestowing the kiss of life to their drowning souls.*

Damn it all, where had he seen that glow before? Jamie walked out on the balcony to stare at the ocean again. It wasn't a picture he was trying to remember, he was sure of it. The water crashed against the shore and another memory intruded.

*The rush of waves, the taste of salt on the air...*

It teased him. Like the faintest of memories, hidden in the recesses of his mind. There'd been surf. The blue shimmer and waves, the heat of the night and...music. Jamie twirled and raced back to the computer in search of pictures from one of his earliest assignments. He flipped through the shots, one after another, until he hit a snapshot from New Year's Eve. Party hats and tipsy faces smiled back at the camera. He tapped his fingers on the screenshot, over the shoulder of the people. This was a part of what he needed.

*Black rocks on the beach. Black on white...*

He remembered attending the start of the party, but not the end.

Jamie poured himself a drink and took it out on the balcony, descending the stairs to the beach. The wind picked up, cool on his skin as he sank into one of the lawn chairs clustered together under the condo's umbrella stands.

*The wind had been warm...*

He tossed back the fiery liquid, letting it roll down his throat and burn away part of his restraint. He closed his eyes and leaned back. Breathed in the sea smells, the salt and the moisture. The organic scents of seaweed and flotsam.

*The sweet fragrance of a woman's body...*

They'd completed their project. Palma de Mallorca—he'd been taunted good-naturedly by his friends back home that his first excursion as an archaeology student was to a location that was a resort destination for many. Even his stuffy parents had somewhat approved. Oh, they would have been horrified at the tiny *pensione* rooms he and the other students were housed in like the serfs they were. Grunt labor at a dig was not glamorous. Digs were not attractive. Dirty, painstakingly boring maybe, never life-threateningly exciting like an out-of-control Indiana Jones movie. But the excitement came for him in other ways. Digging deep into the past and recovering missing information. Experiencing new cultures.

*The strong espresso served in delicate porcelain cups...*

New Year's Eve and it was time to party. Their month-long session of fieldwork was over. In a day they'd fly home and return to digging for clues in books instead of diving beneath the waves or brushing away millennia of grime and dust from ancient sites.

*The brush of soft female skin under his fingers...*

"Happy New Year!"

Jamie raised his glass again, the cries of happiness around him contrasting with the bitterness in his belly. He wasn't ready to leave. The new find was too fresh, too unexplored to abandon without knowing what other treasures it held.

He stayed at the party long enough to see his fellow students slip away with willing partners. Jamie was drawn in another direction. He fought it for all of a minute before giving in and returning to his room to grab flippers, mask, snorkel and his headlamp.

Swimming alone was stupid. Insanely stupid. He turned off the part of his brain that screamed at him as he strode toward the water. He wasn't really going to dive, just like he'd never dream of actually touching anything in the dive area without following proper protocol.

He had to see it once more. There would be no time in the morning before the rush to the airport, and if he did manage to wrangle a trip back in the summer, the site would look totally different.

Maneuvering past the security gate was simple with the key he'd found when he'd packed his bag. Actually, he'd found three of them, all copies he'd misplaced during the month at the site. He rounded the corner and headed to the farthest edge where the rocks cut down to the sparkling white sand, the jagged black boulders shining in the moonlight. The security fences stopped at the rock face, continuing on the far side of the next bay.

The warmth of the water wrapped around his skin like a caress, crawling up his shin and stroking his thighs. This was a part of what he loved so much about his work. The chance to be in the water, to work with his hands as well as his brain. His family had never understood his fascination with manual labor. Jamie smiled as he adjusted the mask and cleared the snorkel, focusing the headlamp to its highest beam. Then with a soft glide, he was away. He kicked his flippers with a slow controlled motion, his hands sculling before his face to hold his upper body at the surface. He didn't want to dive. He wouldn't disturb the site. A coin passed under him, the edge of green moss peeled back to reveal a flash of silver. A hunk of wood, the rotting edge of a chest. It was incredible this wreck had avoided being ravished and stripped clean before now with its proximity to the village.

He was there. The gridwork for the squares marked with metal frames instead of wood stakes like at an above-water dig. One square was clean down to the rocky bottom, the one next to it halfway cleared, and in it the open edge of a wooden box extended into his vision. Jamie adjusted his headlamp, the sound of his breathing loud in his own ears through the snorkel, air rushing through the thin tube as his excited gaze swept the area for one last glimpse.

It was gone.

He kicked in a circle to change his perspective. It had to be there. He'd found it just before they'd stopped for the day.

The necklace was gone.

He took a deep breath and dove, anchoring himself on the metal framework to shine his light deeper, closer. Seeing if the ocean current had moved the disk toward shore with the pressure of the tides.

Still nothing. His breath control was good, but not so good that he could stay down forever. After another few seconds of frantically tapping with his fingers along the edge of the wooden frame of the box, he let his death grasp loose and rose to the surface, sucking in clear night air. What the hell was going on? He was in the right spot, he was sure of it. A sliver of beach showed in the next bay, inaccessible except from the water, ragged cliffs towering over it. Jamie swam slowly toward the sand and away from the site,

wondering what could have happened. He knew he'd seen the medallion. He'd showed it to a number of the team, and yet it was gone? He paced backward, letting the elongated fronts of the flippers drag behind him in the sand until he was far enough up the rolling waves brushed his toes.

The warm wind off the water dried his skin, the high salt content leaving a soft dusting of white behind as he sat on the sand to decide what could have happened. The head of the team must have already placed the necklace into the main collection. No student would have taken it and the tide couldn't have dislodged it that quickly. He lay back and closed his eyes, trying to remember the details so he could draw the pendant when he returned to his room.

He must have fallen asleep, because when he opened his eyes the moon had shifted location. It now hovered over the western cliffs, a trail of silver light leading out into the sea. He smiled at the sight. This was why he didn't want to be in an office his whole day, looking out windows at concrete and steel.

A fin broke the surface and Jamie jolted upright. Dolphins, playing in the moonlight. Two leapt simultaneously and crossed in mid-arc and he clapped with delight. He'd heard there was a pod in the area, but with all the time he'd spent in the water over the past month he'd never seen them. He stood to get a better view and swore.

A woman walked toward him from the far end of the narrow sand ledge that was inaccessible from anywhere but the water. He peeled off his flippers and walked toward her, wondering if she were hurt.

Moonshine backlit her and he was barely ten paces away before he noticed she was completely naked. Was she injured? Lost? He held up a hand.

"¿Está usted bien?" he asked. She looked like she was fine, but why was she wandering the beach in the nude?

"Sí."

Jamie wanted to look away, but he couldn't. A puff of breeze blew by carrying the most fabulous fragrance—spicy and rich, mouthwatering—and he stood immobile as he tried to place the scent.

Dusky brown skin with her long auburn hair draped over one shoulder. Full rounded breasts, dark nipples with large areolas and peaked tips. Her limbs were strong and smooth, waist tapering in, hips flaring out. At the juncture of her thighs tight curls covered her mound and he dragged his gaze away.

"Ven conmigo."

The woman held out a hand as she commanded him to come with her. He took a few more steps and placed his hand in hers, her gaze enveloping him like a net.

His legs moved willingly as she led him back down the beach to where the green grass met the white expanse of sand. She tugged him to the soft surface with her and he went eagerly. When she wrapped her arms around him, he let his hands explore and touch, caressing her curves, stroking the valleys. She spoke softly to him in Spanish, praising him as he kissed his way down her body, crying out as he licked and suckled her breasts. A shimmer of blue rose from her skin and he watched in amazement as the light of

fireflies hung suspended in the air around them. Part of him wanted to analyze what he saw, but most of him was fixated on how heavy his balls felt. How hard his cock had grown as he touched his mysterious woman. The air grew warmer and Jamie gave himself over to the urgent desires floating through him as he made love to the vision. They moved together and he shouted as he came, her legs wrapped around his torso as he drove into her from above. He buried his cock deep in her warmth and his release sucked energy from his limbs. She tugged until they lay side by side, gasping for air.

*“Fue maravilloso, my young lover. Thank you.”* She leaned up on one elbow, her eyes intense as she examined his face.

He laughed. “Thank you. I don’t even know your name.”

A sorrowful expression crossed her face. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does.”

She sat up and stared out to sea, shaking her head. He attempted to sit up but was still too exhausted to move. She rolled and reached behind him, pulling a necklace from the ground. When she dropped it around her neck he leaned closer to admire it.

He’d seen it before. *Hadn’t he?*

She rose, her long limbs shining in the moonlight, the sparkle off the waves a hypnotic mirror. One step at a time she walked away as a strange lassitude sank over him. He could have sworn she disappeared into the surf, but it was nothing more than a vision. A dream.

*Wasn’t it?*

He shook his head and found himself sitting on the beach not even fifty yards from the bonfire, music and laughing voices ringing in the air. He looked around in confusion. How had he gotten there? He went to stand, discovered he was naked and swore.

What the hell had he been drinking?

Jamie sat up quickly in the lawn chair, the memory of that long-ago night clear in his mind. The sheer embarrassment of trying to get back to his rooms without getting caught—he’d always remembered that part of the evening. But the rest? The woman on the beach, he’d never remembered that before.

He raced inside and scrambled for pencil and paper, scrawling images before they vanished completely. The dolphins, the beach. He drew as quickly as he could and still the memories became foggy. He dashed off another sketch—this one a portrait of the woman’s face, the medallion.

He sat back in a daze, confusion strong as he stared at the dozen pages scattered before him on the table. He looked through them one at a time, each triggering a moment of recall.

What had happened to him that he couldn’t bring up these memories unaided? Hypnosis? Trauma of some kind? There was far more to the mystery than he had imagined, and all because of shimmering blue lights.



## Chapter Seven

The warmth of the morning sun caressed her skin, backlighting her eyelids with its brightness. Chelsea lay in a comfortable heap, her legs tangled with Braden's, her hand resting on his chest. The whisper of a touch brushed her cheek, and she opened her eyes to see him staring at her. His gaze traced her hair as he stroked a loose strand back behind her ear.

The adoration on his face made her heart skip a beat.

"Good morning," she whispered, not wanting to break the spell wrapped around them. Had they really made love last night? Was she really in his arms?

Braden rolled, pinning her to the mattress with his weight, his hips cradled between hers. He supported his upper body on his elbows and dipped his head to drop a line of kisses from her mouth to her ear. Goose bumps rose on her arms, and her nipples tightened.

"Good morning." He nuzzled her earlobe with his lips before rasping his teeth gently over her skin. "How do you feel this morning?"

Softly spoken words that shot a shiver along her spine as he accompanied his question with licks and caresses, his fingers and tongue worshipping her.

"I feel fabulous, especially when you, oh God—"

Braden enveloped one aching nipple, teasing the peak with the tip of his tongue, the heat of his breath rolling over her skin like a brand. How long he laved her tender skin, she couldn't tell. It went on and on and pleasure swirled around her, pushing her out of her comfort zone. The tender touches grew rougher, more demanding as Braden alternated from side to side. Neither breast was neglected long enough for the tingling heat to calm. Chelsea's heart pounded harder, her breath catching in her throat as she trembled on the verge of control. Every touch sent a burst of fire from where his mouth made contact with her skin to between her legs. Her labia swelled with pulsing need, her clitoris so sensitive that when he snaked a hand down and cupped her mound she cried out. Her orgasm hovered close, the tension in her body primed by his loving attention. He thrust a finger into her core.

"You're wet, Chelsea. Hot and slick and tight." He pressed the thick digit farther into her sheath and set off a series of small convulsions throughout her system. Her legs shook, and she writhed on the bed under his firm grasp.

“Not enough. So good, but not enough. Please, Braden...” She tugged his shoulders, attempting to draw him back over her. Wanting to feel his cock press into her again and fill her. He evaded her grasp, slipping lower on the bed, the sheets flung to the side and discarded in a tangled mess on the floor.

“You’re beautiful when you come, Chelsea. Again. I want to see it again.”

He stabbed his tongue between her folds, wet and soothing in the midst of the fire he stoked. She watched as best she could, her eyelids heavy, her limbs lacking the strength to move as all the energy in her extremities pooled in her core in anticipation of the impending explosion. The next climax was going to shake her, and she desperately wanted to be connected with him when it happened.

“Please, Braden, I want you inside.” It took forever to say the words. Each time she expelled a breath, he plunged his fingers into her, his tongue and lips tormenting her sensitive clit. The demanding thrusts massaged the nerves lining her passage, liquid easing his way, coating his fingers and leaking out to cover her thighs. He lapped eagerly, humming as his tongue delved deeper into her, replacing his fingers. He grasped her hips and lifted her to his mouth, feasting hungrily as she lay at an incline, her shoulders digging into the mattress. Each intimate touch of his lips took her closer to the edge until with one final brush over her throbbing clitoris the dam burst and she came.

“Braden, oh my...” White spots hovered before her eyes as pleasure rolled over her like a tsunami. Before the pulses deep within her core could break off, he lowered her to the mattress and crawled over her. His cock, iron hard and wet at the tip, pressed into her still-moving body and she gasped at how amazing it felt. How right. Braden rocked his hips, each time stretching her a little more, gaining a little more access into her depths until he finally sank all the way to the hilt, their groins touching.

Fullness. Pure extreme pleasure. He pumped in slow motion, dragging his rigid abdomen over her already trigger-sensitive clit.

“You’re going to kill me.” Chelsea smiled at him as she wrapped her legs around him to make sure he didn’t stop. She dug her heels into his butt at the end of his stroke and the extra tilt made his cock hit a deliciously sensitive spot deep inside. She hissed with delight. “Yesss... Oh damn, more. Harder.”

Braden lost control of his tight, evenly measured pace and slammed into her. She gasped and clutched his shoulders.

“Again,” she demanded. She’d never felt like this before.

“Too hard.” He tried to ease off and she dug in her fingernails, the indent marks showing red against his skin.

“Not hard...enough.” She’d kill him if he stopped. Chelsea arched her back as he moved, increasing the speed and impact, and they both cried with pleasure.

One pounding blast followed after another until Braden hesitated, his pace growing uneven, his face tight as he stared down at her. She couldn’t protest because she was unraveling. From the top of her head to her toenails, an orgasm ripped through her, her pussy clutching Braden’s cock in tight pulses.

A stream of unintelligible words floated from his lips as he rammed in once more and froze. With their hips locked together, his cock jerked within her, setting off another string of pleasure.

Drunk on the pheromones flooding her system, the slow increase of his weight sinking onto her torso was the icing on the cake as he took her lips in a final passionate kiss. She let her hands caress the smooth surface of his skull, holding their lips together for one last moment of contact before he rolled beside her and collapsed with a groan.

"I'm sorry." He turned to face her, stroking her cheek with the back of one knuckle.

"Sorry?" Chelsea stretched and her torso brushed his. The fleeting contact made butterfly flutters of pleasure race over her skin. Her brain barely functioned, and she couldn't figure out what in the world he thought he had to apologize for.

"For getting too rough. I shouldn't have done that."

*Damn idiot.* She grabbed him by one ear and pulled.

"Shit, stop trying to peel me like a banana."

She glared at him. "What the hell are you talking about, too rough? I loved every minute. If you didn't notice, I was the one underneath you, having a good time. Earth-shaking orgasms and all that."

Braden snorted, shaking his head. "You make me crazy, woman."

"Ditto."

Chelsea cupped his face in her hands. They stared at each other for half a second before bursting into laughter.

"You're not going to make this relationship between us easy, are you?" Braden asked.

Chelsea couldn't resist. She batted her eyes, showing her most innocent expression.

He rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. "Yup. That's what I figured. Oh well, easy relationships are overrated anyway."

The weekend passed far quicker than he'd imagined possible. They crawled out of bed Saturday morning and spent the rest of the day together without even venturing from the house. They cooked together—well, Chelsea cooked and he cleaned. They sat and talked. They enjoyed each other's company and made love until he was sure he wore a goofy grin. Having had a taste of her, he couldn't imagine how he'd kept them apart for so long.

The one lingering doubt remaining, he pushed to the back of his mind, not wanting to deal with it—not wanting the anticipation of jealousy to enter their relationship a moment before it had to. He would try his damndest to satisfy her by himself as long as he possibly could. Allowing another man in their bed?—not yet. Hopefully not for a long time.

Sunday afternoon they were snuggled together on the couch, her head resting on his chest as she sat in his lap. He stroked his fingers through her golden curls again and again, the soft tresses draped over her shoulders shining in the afternoon sun.

“You happy, baby?” he asked.

“Umm-hmm.”

Contentment stole over him. “Me too.”

The doors to the deck stood wide open, letting the cool breezes off the ocean into the house. He thought about getting up to turn on the stereo for a little background music, but the wonderful lethargy in his limbs made it too enticing to simply listen to the ocean instead.

“Braden?”

“Yup.”

She pressed her palms against his chest and looked up at him. “Can I tell you something?”

He held in his chuckle. The intent expression on her face was endearing. “You look like it’s serious.”

She shrugged. “You know when I said I didn’t make it into college because of my SAT scores?”

He nodded.

“I...lied. My scores were perfectly acceptable, but I had to drop my registration. I didn’t have enough saved up to pay for the semester and housing, and it was too late to apply for student loans.”

*What the hell?* “I thought you had more than enough saved up.”

She snuggled against him again, the tension that had built in her body as she spoke slowly leeching away. It had obviously taken a lot of courage for her to tell him, so he restrained from his first response of cussing a blue streak.

“I did. But then my dad got sick, and between the medical bills and him being off work, the family expenses stacked up. My sister Carrie has only two semesters left, so it made more sense to ensure she finishes her degree than for me to start mine. I chipped in for her tuition. Mom and Dad already rented out the in-law suite Carrie and I were living in, since we were both supposed to be gone shortly. That will provide a little extra income until Dad’s able to work full-time. Alexia said I could stay here until I find a place I can afford on my own.”

“Why didn’t you ask for help?”

Chelsea snorted. “Alexia offered, but I couldn’t take it. You think my dad wanted anyone to know he’d let his family down?”

Braden stopped cold. Chelsea’s parents were rock-solid members of the community and good people, but yeah, her father wasn’t the kind to want it advertised he needed help. Only this time it was Chelsea who’d taken the hit. “I wish I’d known.”

"I can get in next year. They said they would transfer my forms to the following September, since the archaeology program I want runs September to May. That will give me enough time to make sure I can cover the costs or get funding in place."

Braden bit his tongue. Damn right she'd have enough money to go by next September if he had anything to say about it. "You sure you can't get in this fall semester? I can loan you—"

"There's no way I'm taking your money. I withdrew from housing, and all my classes. It's a done deal for now."

She was tensing up again and he stroked her back to soothe her. Maybe there was a chance she could start in the winter semester, do a few optional classes. He had time to sweet-talk her into it, even though he already dreaded the thought of being apart.

He lowered his head and brushed their lips together. Cupping the back of her neck, he drew her around to nestle tighter to his body. She nuzzled his neck, planting tiny kisses along his jaw, and his body reacted instantly.

They wrapped around each other, kissing and touching. Hands slipping under clothing, opening buttons. Things were getting very interesting when his phone went off, the shrill buzz warning it was an official message. Braden swore. Chelsea scrambled off his lap and let him grab the phone without a word. This was the worst part about his job, being on call all the time.

"Marley," he snapped. He didn't even try to hide his annoyance.

His assistant's apologetic voice rang through. "Sorry, Chief, but we've got more calls than we can handle. I didn't want to interrupt your weekend off, but..."

Shit. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Don't kick the messenger.* "Not your fault, Helen. Where do you need me?" He glanced at Chelsea who sat on the couch, her arms wrapped around her legs as she stared up at him. She blew him a kiss and waved him away. He made his way toward the stairs as he listened.

"The pier. A few boys are mixing it up, and it sounds like it could get dicey. I'm stuck out at the freeway where there's a tractor with its trailer blocking the entire path. Clayton is working by the hospital, and I'd already contacted the volunteer senior brigade to deal with the mess somebody made at the ornamental gardens."

*Shit.* "Hell has been breaking loose. Give me five minutes to get there." He scrambled to grab his uniform.

"Don't get me wrong, it's not life or death, just more of the same insanity. I'll join you when I get this cleared away." A terrible screech shot out from the phone and he waited with concern as Helen cursed. She spoke with an air of authority as she shouted into the distance. "Mr. Carlton. If you will *please* get back in your car I will get the tractor out of the way as soon as possible. No, no, no. Jumping on the trailer is *not* going to make the space any bigger for you to drive through..."

Braden clicked off his phone and chuckled. Insanity was right.

By the time he'd dressed and tromped back downstairs, Chelsea was waiting for him at the door.

"I don't want to leave, but—"

She cut off his apology with a quick kiss, her lips hot and sweet against his. When she pulled back she gave him a wink.

"It comes with the territory, I expected it. Dating the sheriff may have hazards, but I will get to ride in the truck with the lights on sometime, right?"

He smiled, tweaking her under her chin. "Hey, we're not done talking about your schooling, you know."

"Go on. I think I'll head home for a few hours, visit with my folks. See you back here tonight?" He nodded and leaned over to kiss her again, but she pushed him out the door with a laugh. "Go, you'll be late."

He headed to the pier with a deep sense of satisfaction. In spite of her confession and what it potentially meant for their future, contentment filled him. He had a job he loved. Now the woman he'd longed for was in his life, no matter what happened down the road.

It seemed things were finally falling into place.

Jamie pulled into the parking space outside the house, relieved to find it vacant. All weekend he'd been haunted. Saturday he'd woken to a dream of enjoying twisted, sweaty sex with Chelsea while Braden stood by and watched, a curious smile on his face. Sunday morning the dream had expanded to include Braden in the midst of the tangle with him and Chelsea.

As he worked around the apartment during the day, blue lights faded in and out of his vision, and every time he turned around he swore there was someone else in the room with him. A scent, a presence... He was either going mad or there was some seriously weird shit happening.

He'd looked over the stack of papers containing his drawings so often he had them memorized. Saturday morning he'd stared in confusion at them, and even wadded a couple up to throw in the garbage before a flash of memory returned. The rest of the day he'd researched, the topics varied and eclectic. The published contents of the dig he'd been involved in off the Mallorca coast. Ancient records and legends of people appearing from the sea.

The blue lights of St. Elmo's fire.

By Sunday afternoon he couldn't resist the urge to take a closer look at a few things at the Coltens' house. If he didn't, he'd be thinking about them all night and not sleeping anyway, so he might as well take the chance.

Jamie walked to the front door and knocked loudly. Rang the bell a couple of times. He'd phoned ahead, and chances were good no one was home, but he'd hate to walk in and find Braden and Chelsea too involved in each other to answer the phone.

He used his key to open the door and snuck into the empty home, the stillness echoing off the walls. It was definitely just him and the riches filling the rooms. Best-case scenario? He would satisfy his curiosity and be gone before they returned.

He meandered slowly, trying to remember where in the chaos he had spotted it. The past week he'd gone through only a small portion of the collection, but he'd been mentally cataloging and examining the piles even as he wandered past. He pulled out the papers from Friday night—the hasty sketches he'd drawn after his vision session. Some of them were simple illustrations that helped bring the stubborn memories to the surface quicker. But one was far more recognizable and it haunted him.

Over in the corner, a heap of boxes of all shapes and sizes caught his attention, and he dropped to his knees before the mound. He examined each with care, the rough wood of one prickling his fingertips. In contrast the smooth water-worn surface of a green-tinged metal lid was cool to the touch. Off to the side of the stack, a box of purple heartwood leaned against the back wall and he picked it up with trembling fingers.

He turned the box, stroking the textures, running a fingertip over the carvings on the lid. He swore they were familiar.

A scent taunted him. He leaned closer and a sweet musky fragrance filled his nostrils. He shuffled through the pictures until he stared down into the face of the woman he'd hastily sketched the other night.

He could recall her now without the papers as a catalyst. Whatever hypnotic suggestion had blocked that night from his memories had been broken, and he remembered it all, including his mysterious lover.

If his guess was right...

Jamie flipped open the latch on the box and slowly eased up the lid. The breath he'd held in anticipation of seeing the contents swooshed out of him in disappointment when he discovered it was empty.

He could have sworn he would have found a medallion inside, one with a dolphin leaping on the surface in bas-relief. A twin to the necklace the Spanish woman had hung on her neck before she walked into the water and disappeared beneath the waves.

Still, it didn't clarify how a box nearly identical to the one he'd found during a dive over ten years earlier came to be resting in Alexia Colten's home. Especially when the other box had sat at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, the necklace it held hidden from the world for more years than easily explained.

He sat back on his heels, staring so intently at the container in his hand he nearly jumped out of his skin when someone cleared their throat.

"Holy shit." He spun and spotted Braden smirking at him.

“You do get into your work.” Braden flopped onto the couch and loosened the top buttons on his uniform. “You should be more careful. I could have been a thief, or a burglar.”

*Shit.* Jamie tried to look casual as he replaced the box. He didn’t want to draw attention to it, so he fiddled with another couple of items as he spoke, rearranging the mound.

“Nahh, you said there were no thieves in Jaffrey’s Cove.” Braden’s groan made him laugh as he rose to face the couch. “Okay, I’m usually a little more attentive. Really.”

Braden relaxed, his legs sprawled in front of him. “You’re working strange hours.”

Jamie shrugged, his mind racing for a suitable excuse. “Decided to do a few hours. Maybe get to the bottom of another pile. There’s so much to go through, I’m starting to doubt being able to finish before Ms. Colten returns.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that. I think she just wants to get it cleaned up eventually. It’s a bit much to live with on a constant basis.”

Braden leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs, and Jamie wondered why it was so difficult to keep his eyes off the muscles pressing against the khaki material. Damn, the man was huge, with broad strong muscles and yet so smooth when he moved. The stories he’d read that morning came back, the legends of people who lived in two worlds, moving with grace in spite of their muscular forms. He didn’t want to consider the impossible right now. He just wanted to...

Braden grinned at him and Jamie could have cursed. If he wasn’t going to get thrown out on his ear, he needed to concentrate a little harder and keep his freaking curiosity under wraps.

“You said something and I missed it, right?”

Braden chuckled. “You’re easily distracted. I asked if you’d found anything interesting in this mess.”

*Oh, that is a loaded question.* “There are a few pieces I know the maritime museums are always looking for. Lots of moderately collectable items, and tons of trash.”

“She needs to hold a garage sale then, right?”

Jamie snorted. “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure?”

Braden wiggled his brows and Jamie laughed. There was no way he could keep uptight around the other man. Even though Braden had seemed intimidating at the start, somehow living in his apartment and fantasizing about him made the fear he’d initially inspired morph into something more along the lines of fascination.

Braden stood abruptly and Jamie lost his balance as he tried to step out of the way.

“Shit.” Braden grabbed Jamie by the shoulders to pull him upright. A trickle of scent wafted past—familiar, haunting—and Jamie bit back a moan. He’d woken in the morning to that same fragrance drenching his bed, the visions of steamy sex with both Chelsea and Braden fresh in his mind.

“Hey, you okay?” Braden asked, still supporting him.



Jamie stepped away slowly, shaking his head. What the hell was going on with his libido? His physical interest in guys had always been limited yet now he was not only dreaming about it, but tempted to grab on tight and see what Braden would do.

Of course, Braden would probably punch his lights out. Jamie scrambled to find a good excuse for his strange behavior.

"I'm fine. Guess I didn't realize I was more tired than I thought. I'm not getting enough exercise, or sun. I need to work on a better routine."

Braden folded his arms and looked down at him, his expression unreadable. "You don't have to have everything done by the end of August. Maybe you should slow down a bit, take in some of the sights. There are lots of water sports to try, and some great scuba diving in the area. I'd love to join you if you can arrange your schedule around mine a bit." He frowned. "If the idiots in town stop their high jinks."

"More vandalism?" Jamie spotted the pile of sketches he'd made resting on the coffee table, and he picked them up and straightened the edges, hiding the drawings from Braden. Until he got more proof he wasn't going to let any of them know his suspicions.

Braden sighed. "Yeah. Still, I should be grateful there's nothing more serious going on. Shit, they were having a water fight at the pier. I got called out to break up a flipping water fight."

Jamie eyed the stains on Braden's usually pristine shirt and slacks. That was what had caused it. He dragged his gaze up, bewildered by how obsessed he had become in admiring the man. Their eyes met and Jamie watched, mesmerized as the center of Braden's pupils swirled with blue flecks.

He stepped back slowly, grabbing his coat without looking. "I should go. I'm sure you need to get changed and Chelsea will be home soon. I'll look into taking some time off. Gotta run. See you later. Thanks for...everything." He wanted to get far away so there would be no chance the thoughts rolling through his mind could be discovered. Thoughts about how he wanted to watch Braden strip off the stained uniform and display that perfect body to him. How he wanted to lean closer and find out if the scent haunting him really did originate from Braden's skin.

Find out what it would feel like to lie between Chelsea and Braden as they made love.

Jamie spun and pulled open the door, trying to make it look less like he was escaping than it really was.

"Jamie."

He froze, one hand on the knob.

Braden stepped beside him, that dark expression back on his face. He held out his hand and flipped it open, palm up. "You forgot your keys."

He grabbed them and fled.

## Chapter Eight

She thought it would be more uncomfortable the first time she saw Jamie after the night at the Grotto. Not on her part, but on his. Fortunately, when he wandered in Monday, he kissed her cheek and acted the same as usual.

“You ready to roll?” he asked.

“When you are.”

He handed her a new notebook and gestured to a section of the room they hadn’t touched yet. They worked for close to three hours, chatting easily about nothing in particular before he sat back on his heels and rubbed his neck. “Okay, I’ll admit it. I need to take a break.”

She smiled. “You’ve been going at it pretty steady since you got here.”

“Yeah, well I have a tendency to go all out when I do anything. I mentioned to Braden yesterday my goal of getting things cleared out before Ms. Colten returns is very unlikely.”

“It’s been here for years, I don’t think she expected it all gone by the time they get back.”

Jamie stood and she caught a whiff of his aftershave. No matter that she and Braden had spent the morning crawling all over each other before he went on duty, Jamie was still an attractive man. She had to make sure she didn’t do anything out of the ordinary, because while multiple lovers might be normal amongst the merfolk, humans seemed to freak at the idea. And until she and Braden discussed the issue more, there was no way she wanted to hurt him by a misunderstanding. Just because she found Jamie good-looking didn’t mean she wanted to jump his bones.

Jamie turned to face her. “Can I ask a favor?”

“What’s up?”

He twisted a carving in his hand, examining it under the light. “I want to get out and do some physical activity. Braden mentioned sea kayaking, maybe diving. I need to rent some equipment, and I should find someone to buddy up with.”

“I’ll go with you,” she offered.

He nodded slowly. “That would be all right, except your new boyfriend might have a few objections.”

Damn, there it was already. No use simply pushing it aside either. “I’m sure he wouldn’t mind occasionally, especially if he’s invited as well. But I know where to take you for equipment and for a dive partner.”

Jamie leaned back on the wall, wearing a slightly wistful expression.

“Things worked out well, I take it?” he asked.

She sighed with contentment. Things had turned out far better than she’d dreamed possible.

He laughed. “No further questions.”

A heavy sensation hung in the air. Something awkward rose between them, as if she’d put up a boundary. The easy companionship they’d fallen into the previous week teetered on the edge of falling aside. This was her fault. This wasn’t about her and Braden being together, but her actions at the club. She’d teased him, like a bitch in heat, then left without an explanation or an apology. He’d been so—normal—all morning she’d forgotten until now she owed him.

“Thanks for your help at the club, Jamie, I really did appreciate it, and I feel bad...”

He gave her a smoldering look. “Crap, Chelsea, like it was tough to handle. I knew going in a little of what you had planned. You are smoking hot, and if I ever come to watch you dance again, I’m bringing a fire extinguisher.”

“You liked it?”

“A man would have to be dead not to like watching you move.” Jamie gestured back to the pile they were working on. “I take it lunch will be a little different now. I mean, Braden’s not going to be grunting at me anymore, right?”

She laughed. “No, no more grunting. I think I’ll take a break when he comes home, if that’s okay with you?”

He shook his head, his expression guarded. “That’s something I need to apologize for. Just because I’m obsessive, it doesn’t give me the right to work you for hours without a break. I thought, if it works for you, we could go through things in the morning. Afternoons we’ll take off, then I’ll do more research in the evening. If you’re available you could help out, but I promise to be out of your hair by eight p.m., and I’ll stay away completely if you need the house vacant.”

“You don’t need to set times to come and go.”

He smiled sheepishly. “Um, yes I do. I was reminded of it this weekend as I went back through some notes from a previous job. The owners were very pleased with my work, but had a few suggestions.”

“For example?”

“The Mr. didn’t appreciate coming downstairs in his bathrobe to get the morning paper to find I’d already used it to spread out the contents of a trunk. And the fact I was there at five thirty in the morning was another issue.”

“You weren’t!”

“Oh yes. And I was still there at close to midnight. He didn’t think that was normal behavior and suggested I have set hours for both my sake and the sake of future clients.” Jamie shrugged. “He was right. I just get so involved in what I’m doing I lose all track of time. I can’t keep my current irregular hours when Ms. Colten gets back.”

Chelsea examined him more closely. Even as he smiled and moved confidently through the room, something was wrong. There was a tightness to his body, a narrowing at the corners of his eyes. He looked tired. He looked...withdrawn. "Sounds like a bit of physical break would be good. After we're done today, I can take you out and introduce you to Thomas. I think you'll like him."

"Old boyfriend?" Jamie asked, raising a brow.

Chelsea bit back the shriek of laughter that wanted to escape. "He wishes. Seventeen years old and thinks he's God's gift to woman already, but he's a little young for me. Still, he's a great guide and pretty fun to be around."

"Sounds perfect." He winked at her and turned back to his work, and the uneasy feeling in her belly settled a little, but didn't completely go away. What was he up to? Something had definitely changed.

Of course, the fact she and Braden were together now might be part of the explanation. Chelsea sighed and came back to help clean up the pile of trinkets. Guys were so confusing at times.

Jamie clapped in admiration as Thomas back-paddled rapidly and expertly spun his kayak on the spot. When he'd been introduced to the youth, he wasn't sure he felt comfortable with a seventeen-year-old as his guide. But the kid obviously had the skill and experience needed. "Okay, I trust you. Now can we go for a tour? This kayak is the same size as my one at home, so I'm comfortable I'll be able to handle it solo."

The young man grinned and nodded toward the distant cliffs. "Since it's your first time on the water in a while, we'll still take it easy. I'll show you some of the more accessible caverns from the ocean side. Later if you want, we can plan a trip to the wrecks. Jaffrey's Cove gets a lot of people who come out for the diving and explore the shipwrecks."

"I saw some fliers advertising tours in the shop."

Thomas shook his head. "You don't want to go on any of those tours, Mr. Powell. You'd be bored silly inside of five minutes."

"Jamie, please."

They paddled for a while and Jamie enjoyed the sensation of being on the water again, the surf lifting his kayak with a rolling motion. The ocean floor skimmed past under them, the crystal-clear water sparkling in the afternoon sunshine, reflecting off the sand below and dazzling his eyes.

"Hang on a second," he called to Thomas who was paddling in the lead. He rested his paddle across his lap. They floated slowly forward as Jamie patted all his pockets in search of his sunglasses.

The bright red prow of the other kayak slid next to him. Thomas grabbed the gunwales of the cockpit to hold their boats together.

"Chelsea said you might need a hand keeping track of these." He held out Jamie's sunglasses, a smirk lighting up his face.

“Thank you, but where did you get them?” Jamie slipped them on, relaxing as they cut the extreme brightness dazzling his eyes.

“You left them on the counter in the rental shop when you went to pick out your equipment. Chelsea said I should keep track of them for you. That it would be easier than carrying spares.”

Damn, she had his number already. “Again, thank you. Only I’ll have you know I’m not totally incompetent.”

“Just...forgetful?”

The boats separated and Jamie picked up his paddle and sent a deliberate splash of water in the youth’s direction. “Only about some things. I have a very good memory for others.”

“Really?”

Jamie heard the cocky challenge in Thomas’s voice. “Really.”

“Then tell me four things in the dive shop that aren’t usually in a place like that.”

They continued paddling, the salt air rushing past exhilarating and refreshing. Jamie pictured the room, letting the images roll in his mind’s eye like a video replay. “There was a pair of snowshoes, a bubblegum machine. The stuffed polar bear sitting in the Kevlar kayak at the back wall and...” He hesitated. “I can only think of three.”

“You’re shitting me. You actually saw all those things? Damn, you are good.”

Not good enough. It was going to bother him until he knew what he’d missed. “What’s the fourth thing?”

“There’s a map of the moon. Craters and all.”

“I thought it was related to ocean tides and currents.”

Thomas laughed. “I bet you’re right. You’re better than I thought.”

The waves pushed them closer to the shore and Jamie had to stay alert to keep the kayak from being forced against the jagged rocks extending above the water’s surface. The physical exertion was good. It helped clear away a few of the cobwebs that had crept into his mind over the past days.

“This feels amazing.” His many concerns and questions seemed small in the midst of the beauty around them.

“If we swing close to the next bank the cavern pops up really well.”

Thomas sounded like he was having a blast and Jamie caught his enthusiasm. They raced toward the bay, their double-bladed paddles flashing in the sunlight. Farther out to sea a pod of dolphins breached the surface and Thomas whooped out loud, waving his paddle in the air for a second before glancing at Jamie in embarrassment.

“Sorry, just...”

“No worries. I think that’s one of the most amazing sights on earth.”

“Really?”

“Seriously. The innate beauty of the patterns and the fact it’s mostly for fun, not a side effect of food gathering or mating rituals makes them even more fabulous to watch. Their society is fascinating.” Thomas gave him a curious look and Jamie swore softly. “Sorry, don’t know why I’m lecturing you. You probably know way more than I do.”

The youth choked for a second, flushing red. “Well, I’m not sure about that.”

*Interesting reaction.* “Don’t be modest. You’ve grown up here all your life, and if you’re half as skilled as the owner of the dive shop said, I think I can skip the sermon.” Jamie toned it back. Whatever it was that had made Thomas nervous was another item to add to the things-to-ponder list.

They fell into a rhythm with their paddling. Jamie continued to glance at the dolphins as they streamed through the water. There was something majestic in their movements, and the enjoyment of watching them reminded him again he needed to play more.

It was a constant issue in his life. Getting so focused on the job he couldn’t see the important things happening right under his nose.

Now, here in Jaffrey’s Cove, Jamie didn’t want to fall into the same trap. He didn’t want to miss seeing what was the most important discovery in the midst of glancing through a few baubles. If his suspicions were correct, the real treasure of the sleepy ocean-side village wasn’t contained in the Coltons’ home.

They rounded the corner and the visual impact stole his train of thought. If there had been a palace carved into the cliffside, he couldn’t have been more impressed. A smooth even arc ascended above their heads, creating a perfect natural cavern. Like the caves over Mesa Verde, the sheer walls rose up to become a roof with natural ledges and staircases scattered all along the feature.

When Thomas spoke, his voice echoed along with the low rumble of the waves around them, and Jamie imagined the place would be deafening during a storm.

“During high tide the back wall reaches the water, but at low tide there is a small passageway that divers access to go spelunking. I’ve heard that at neap tide, the lowest low tide of the year, you can walk through into another set of tunnels, but that’s more rumor than anything else.”

“Hidden pirate’s treasure that can only be accessed at certain times or death awaits?”

Thomas nodded. “Something like that.”

Jamie twisted in his seat, staring out from the shadowed protection of the cave over the sunlit ocean. He took a deep breath, soaking in the experience. Enjoying the play of the breeze over his skin, the salty scent of the ocean filling his nostrils. This was good. If he could take the time daily to experience the beauty of Jaffrey’s Cove, it might help settle the longing that burned in his belly.

A flash of desire teased him and he forced the thought aside, trying not to dwell on the images of Braden and beautiful blonde Chelsea that rose in his mind far too often. Sensual images of them together, with him.

Like a siren's call seducing him.

## Chapter Nine

“Holy shit, what a mess.” Jamie’s voice was filled with disgust.

Braden dumped another piece of glass into the garbage before looking over his shoulder to see Jamie striding into the condo. “Yeah. Seems our painters upped the ante.” Braden pointed to the heap of papers and electronics tangled together on the table. “Sorry to call you away from your work early, but I thought we should start figuring out what we need to do. You want to go through that pile, and the rest of the apartment, to see if there’s anything of yours missing?”

“Ahh, damn it...not my computer.” Jamie dropped into a chair at the table. He held up the broken body of his laptop, the lid swinging by a wire. Pieces of the inner workings slipped out to clatter on the floor.

“Sorry, man. I hope you backed up recently. I’ll totally cover you for the replacement costs, but your data...”

“I’ve got it set to auto backup to the Internet. I won’t have lost anything but the time it takes to download everything to a new computer.” Jamie plopped the remains back on the table and poked at the papers before joining Braden by the windows. “And you certainly don’t owe me anything. I’ve got insurance, and I can afford a new computer. I was thinking about upgrading anyway.”

Jamie tugged the garbage bag from Braden’s fingers and held it open. Braden nodded his thanks and grabbed the dustpan, scooping up the smaller bits of glass and shredded paper. “I guess I spoke too soon when I said we didn’t have any real crime in the area. There were a couple of other official thefts today.”

“Shame it had to be your place that got hit.” Jamie glanced toward the back of the condo. “Ballsy to break-in during broad daylight. Did they do a lot of damage throughout the whole place?”

Braden shook his head. “The windows are the biggest things. A couple of cushions got shredded and a few files dumped. For the most part it was plain old vandalism again.”

Jamie looked around the room. “They didn’t touch your stereo or your TV.”

“No, none of the easy-to-resell items were hit. And my old computer is still sitting on the desk in my office. I mean, it was under a few things, but why didn’t they take it?” Braden stood and motioned for Jamie to help him tip the couch upright. “I don’t understand why they smashed your laptop instead of stealing it. Something’s just not right.”

“You said there were other break-ins this time too?”



Braden nodded. “Helen got called out this morning to a private residence. Plus a couple of the shops on the boardwalk reported stolen objects. Damn, it’s like the place has gone insane. We never have crime like this.”

He picked up the bag of garbage and carried it out onto the deck. Now what was he supposed to do? The condo was in no shape for Jamie to stay in, but the last he’d heard the motel was still stuffed to the rafters.

Jamie wandered through the living room, continuing to pick up and tidy the mess left behind. Braden dragged a hand over his scalp. He could offer to have Jamie stay in the spare room at the Coltons’, but he wasn’t sure that was a good idea. His relationship with Chelsea was still so new and...

Damn it, he wasn’t sure what he was feeling. It wasn’t jealousy at the thought of having the man around, and that surprised him. He knew he usually reacted too rapidly when it came to other men and Chelsea, but contemplating having Jamie around didn’t upset him.

He faced out to the ocean and forced himself to confess the truth. In spite of the newness of his and Chelsea’s relationship, he couldn’t stop thinking about Jamie as well. It wasn’t just physical attraction. Somehow he didn’t worry about Chelsea as much when she was with Jamie, and that alone struck him as slightly bizarre.

“Braden, are you here?” Chelsea’s voice sounded from the door.

“He’s on the deck,” Jamie shouted.

Braden stepped through the broken doorframe and approached as she wandered into the chaos, concern written all over her face. “What happened?”

“Vandals.”

“Someone broke into the sheriff’s apartment? Are they insane?” She looked around in shock. “Either they are visitors and don’t know who lives where, or they have a lot of chutzpa.”

Braden snorted. “It’s not like being sheriff makes me immune to crime, baby. It’s okay. We’ll get it cleaned up. In the meantime, I—”

“Jamie can’t stay here.” Chelsea crossed her arms. “There’s room for him at the house.”

She sounded determined, completely convinced, and Braden struggled to find the correct response. His first reaction of “hell, yeah” might not be the right one to utter.

Jamie’s soft chuckle broke through his mental ramblings. “Why can’t I stay here? We’ll put something over the broken glass temporarily, and I’ll be fine.” He kicked a few loose feathers. “Although we’ll have to hit the hardware store before they close for the night.”

Chelsea frowned. “You can’t stay here. It’s not safe.”

“They didn’t come in with machetes and axes. They were vandals. They make messes to make themselves feel big. I’ll be fine.”

She shook her head again and turned to face Braden. “Tell him. He can have the main-floor room.” She stared, her eyes moist as if on the verge of tears.

Braden pulled her into his arms and rubbed her back slowly. “If he feels safe you can’t make him move, but if you’d like to join us in cleaning up that would be a big help.”

He’d never seen her react like this before. Jamie was obviously becoming more important to them both, digging his way into their affections.

“Really, Chels, I’m fine. You want to come check out the damage in the back with me? You can hold the garbage bag while I stuff it.” Jamie waited patiently as she stood on tiptoe to kiss Braden on the cheek. She took Jamie’s hand as he led her toward the back. Jamie glanced over his shoulder at Braden and nodded slowly—comfort and caring evident in his every move.

Astute, for a human.

Strange how both he and Chelsea seemed so attracted to Jamie. He had no merfolk blood, Braden was sure of it, but in the midst of chaos, the man was a point of calm.

It was both reassuring and alarming, and for the first time since having the responsibility of the pod laid upon him, Braden wished he could talk with his matriarch. She would have the skills to help them figure out just what the hell was going on. In Jaffrey’s Cove, and in his personal life, because none of it was normal.

None of it made a lot of sense.

From the back of the condo Chelsea’s bright laugh rang out and the knot in Braden’s belly tightened. Jamie had managed to make Chelsea laugh after how worried and concerned she’d been. The man entangled himself deeper into their relationship without even trying and suddenly Braden wasn’t sure what it was he felt anymore. Gratitude? Companionship?

Interest?

He gathered a few cleaning supplies and headed to the back of the condo to join them. Answers would have to wait.

“I’m glad you decided to dive today, Jamie. I don’t think I could stand another minute inside that shop. If I hear one more person mention how there’s never any crime in Jaffrey’s Cove, I’m going to go nuts.”

Jamie passed the air tanks out of the back of the truck to the youth. “But you know, there isn’t usually crime here. Braden said that the run of break-ins is unusual for the area.”

Thomas groaned. “Please...”

Jamie laughed. “You let me know your triggers.”

Their gear was laid on the shore when the sheriff's vehicle rolled up and Braden cranked open the window.

"You got room for one more on the tour today?"

Jamie glanced past Braden into the vehicle. "You've got someone hidden in there?"

Braden slid out of the driver's seat and reached into the back to pull out another tank. "Actually, I'm talking about me. Hell if I can stand another minute of that chaos. I need a chance to get away from it. You boys mind if I join you?"

Jamie concentrated on getting his gear together. The instant rush of pleasure that swept over him at getting to spend time around Braden raised questions he didn't feel comfortable answering.

Thomas let out a delighted howl. "You mean it? Damn, you haven't come out diving forever. I thought you hated tanks..." The kid trailed off again but not before Jamie spotted a flash of annoyance on Braden's face.

"Where are we headed?" Braden asked Thomas as they walked toward the shore with his equipment.

"Cutter's Reef and the wreck of the *Diana*. I thought Jamie would enjoy it."

Braden nodded his approval. "Have you shown him the caverns yet? Sunstar Hideaway?"

Thomas's face lit up. "If you're along we can go. I can't take solo divers into the caves yet since I'm under eighteen."

"Sunstar Hideaway? Is that the one you told me about the other day?" Jamie asked. It had sounded like a glorious, if dangerous, location.

Thomas nodded. "With the sky clear like it is today it should be amazing."

The three of them worked together in an easy rhythm, putting on their tanks and slipping into the clear waters of the Pacific.

As they descended into the rich blue of the ocean, all sound grew muted. Long-distance noises carrying on the air became outweighed by the more intimate whisper of air bubbles escaping. The rush of blood through his own veins. Thomas motioned to him and they kicked together toward the intact skeleton of a sunken vessel.

Colorful fish darted around them, flashing in schools away then back as they passed the coral ridges. Jamie slowed to touch the delicate arch forming between two ridges of rock, minute creatures turning the ocean floor into a gallery of art painted with streaks of sunlight from above.

Jamie's watch beeped, and he glanced at it in surprise to discover the first set amount of their dive time had passed already.

He'd been fascinated with the wreck, with the objects scattered over the ocean floor. The trio turned and headed toward the shore where the towering cliff plummeted to be swallowed by the surf. Here below the surface the crash was a constant buzz, and the tug of the tidal current like the embrace of a lover, cradling him and directing his path.

The entrance to the cave was glorious, the stone worn smooth by millennia. Above them the roof hung in a solemn arc, guarding the surface of the water from the sky, the colors more muted and monochromatic as they passed out of the direct sunlight. They followed the right wall toward the back and the constant repetition of his breathing calmed his excited nerves. Jamie loved this. Being underwater, seeing a world that so few people had experienced to its fullest. Sailing or gliding along the surface was one thrill, but moving beneath the waves, exploring the dwelling places of creatures that lived for years in a constantly moving environment...

It never ceased to amaze him.

A soft touch on his arm brought his attention to the others. The two of them signaled to the back section and motioned they were ready to enter the cave system. Jamie checked his tank air levels, just to be sure. The danger of underwater spelunking was just the adrenaline rush he wanted right now, but he wasn't going to be stupid.

They set off together, the first section of the passageway wide enough for them to pass through three abreast. Soft white sand lined the floor, and he could imagine at low tide the stories of pirates dragging their chests back into the cave would have entertained the imagination of many, young and old.

Slowly their route narrowed and Braden took the lead, guiding them through the eerie half-darkness that grew deeper the farther they proceeded. Jamie adjusted his headlamp, tightening the focus of the beam to shine the light into the more distance reaches. He kicked lazily, his flippers propelling him smoothly after the big man in front of him. The passage narrowed again and Jamie swallowed hard. The promise of the sights ahead pulled him along and gave him courage to proceed. Just a little farther, just one more bend.

They were there.

A beam of light descended from above, cutting through the glittering surface and breaking into a million sparkles of light. Luminescent algae and starfish of every color and size were everywhere. A sunstar with over twenty-four legs decorated the near sidewall, and Jamie stopped to examine the rigid bumps and prominences on the creature's limbs. There were few colorful fish in the cavern, but many crabs that darted back under rocky ledges at their approach. Jamie smiled as an eel bared razor-sharp teeth in his direction when he ventured too close to its hiding hole.

Paradise—an Eden hidden beneath the waves.

They spent as long as they could exploring. The direct sunshine entering the top of the cavern disappeared and the light dimmed, now reduced to the vertical passage cutting through to the underground grotto. Thomas tapped him on the wrist and pointed to his watch. They were at their agreed turnaround checkpoint. Jamie took one final pivot, soaking in as much of the beauty around him as possible.

They headed back out into the passage and Jamie noticed immediately the current had changed. Tide was sweeping in and the force of the water increased, propelling them backward if they didn't deliberately kick toward the exit. He was glad of the extra light Braden carried that helped illuminate the tunnel.

Jamie caught a glimpse of the stalactite just before the force of the tidal rush snapped him into the wall. He twisted his body rapidly, but there wasn't enough time to take the full force on his forearms, and the thud of his tank crashing into the rock made his stomach clench with fear. His oxygen tube ripped from the tank, air bubbles rushing into the water surrounding him, his lifeline disappearing in an instant. The escaping pressure from his tank jerked his body. He twisted to attempt to shut the air valve off at the source. Scrambled for the secondary mouthpiece and clutched it between his teeth. He flipped open the valve to clear the air passage.

Nothing happened.

His lungs screamed for a fresh breath of air. He locked his teeth around the mouthpiece to force himself to remain calm for another few seconds. Braden and Thomas both had buddy breathers on their tanks. He reached a hand toward Braden, signaling his need. Out of the corner of his eye he vaguely saw Thomas shoot out of sight down the passageway.

He grabbed Braden's outstretched hand and grasped for the life-giving tube. Braden shocked him by ripping off his own facemask and regulator and then pinning Jamie's arms to his sides. Jamie struggled—kicking and kneeing as hard as he could, striving for freedom. The man had gone mad. Without Braden's help he was going to die in an underwater grave. Suddenly his regulator was torn from his lips and the pressure of Braden's mouth over his registered just as he gave into the instinctive urge to inhale.

Sweet air.

It made no sense. Why was Braden feeding him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation when he could just use the tank breather? Still, he wasn't about to complain. He was in no position to ask any questions. He clung tightly to Braden, staring at him through his facemask. A clear membrane covered Braden's eyes, and Jamie blinked in surprise.

Another breath. Braden twisted them to head back to the entrance of the tunnel system. Braden's tanks hung suspended in the current for a moment before slowly sinking and moving farther down the passage, dragging along the sandy bottom. As the abandoned tank vanished behind them Jamie felt lightheaded in spite of the regular oxygen supply.

Maybe he'd actually drowned and this was a part of the final journey?

The distance back to the surface took longer than he remembered, and he tried to close his mind to the hovering fear, the need to totally rely on Braden for his very life.

The world grew a little darker, and Jamie, embarrassed even as it happened, passed out.

Braden supported Jamie's limp body against him carefully, his mind racing to figure out what in the hell to do.

Of all the stupid, dim-witted and foolhardy things...

He should have known to carry some oxygen. Merfolk always did when they swam with humans. Not a full tank, but enough in case of emergencies. It added to the illusion of using the tanks.

Braden headed toward the surface. There was no way he could let Jamie drown. The man's incredible rapport and patience with Chelsea—how he went out of his way to make her feel successful and competent—she didn't get that kind of treatment from her family, or from many of the folks around town who saw her as just a pretty face.

Jamie genuinely cared for Chelsea and it showed. And damn if that didn't make the man even more attractive in his own eyes.

Thomas darted back, passing a thumbs-up before swimming toward the cave, no doubt to gather the tank he'd left behind. Help would be waiting at the shore. Help that could keep secrets and make sure that Jamie was all right without alerting the entire world to the existence of the merfolk.

Their heads broke the surface and Braden rolled to his back, cradling Jamie on his torso. He waited, making sure that Jamie drew a full breath of air on his own without any troubles.

Troubles. Now that's something they had in plentiful supply. Braden adjusted his grip carefully and made his way to shore with his precious burden.

## Chapter Ten

Chelsea hovered outside the door of the bedroom. She'd come over as soon as she'd heard to make sure Jamie was all right. Now she couldn't seem to stop herself from fluttering around like a lost bird. "Are you sure he's okay? We don't need to take him to the hospital?"

Braden pulled her close and pressed her head against his chest, smoothing his fingers through her hair, rubbing her back gently. His touch calmed her, but still the ache in her belly refused to go away.

"He'll be fine. He'll come around soon. The doctor gave him a shot to keep him sedated for a bit, but Jamie didn't get any water into his lungs. Come on, we need to talk about what we're going to do before he wakes up."

She took one final look into the darkened room, listening to Jamie's uneasy breathing. Braden tugged her toward the second bedroom just down the hall. He sat her on the bed and pulled the chair from the wall to sit opposite her. Her fingers were cold as he took her hands in his.

"He's seen us as merfolk." Braden spoke quietly.

Chelsea looked him in the eye. "I think we should tell him everything. He's smart enough to understand why we need to keep undercover. We can trust him."

"It's not our decision to make. You know the rules. You know why it's important we stay hidden."

"But the matriarch isn't here, so it is our decision." She clutched his fingers. "There are humans in town who know about us. The doctor who was here, he's human."

Braden reached out and cupped her face in his hand. "He's married to a merfolk. He knows if he discloses anything his wife would face the same scrutiny as the rest of us."

Her hopes rose. "So if Jamie's connected with us, he could know?"

He paused. "It's not as simple as that."

"Why not? Braden, you know making someone forget us can be dangerous—it's possible to go too far and wipe out huge portions of their memory. He's a good man, and I don't want anything like that to happen to him. Call Lady Victoria, call someone. Talk to the elders, make—"

"We need to make a decision now. Not by committee." Braden took a deep breath, his gaze dropping from hers for a moment. When he lifted his head his eyes were dark, a swirl of his St Elmo's fire showing blue and iridescent. "Do you care about him?"

"Of course I do. That's what I've been trying to tell you, why I don't want anything to happen to him."

He fell silent for a moment. “Do you care about him as...more than a friend?”

Everything in her froze. Oh my God, what would telling the truth do to their relationship? The last thing she wanted was to hurt Braden. Yet his concerned expression and the gentle touch of his thumb along her jawbone calmed her. She gathered her courage.

“Yes.” His touch didn’t change at her confession and she brought her own hand up to hold against his.

Braden nodded slowly, lowering their joined fingers into his lap. “It’s okay, baby. I know.”

Her throat felt tight, and it was tough to speak. “What difference does it make?”

“It’s a possible solution. If you make love with Jamie and let your St. Elmo’s fire free, it will affect his memory. Any other way of making him forget is riskier, liable to effect more than his short-term memory. During lovemaking the magic is more focused, and it would be far safer for him.”

“I don’t want to use merfolk pheromones to seduce him. That would be wrong.”

He laughed, the soft sound out of place, and yet not. “Sweetheart, trust me. You don’t need to seduce him. He wants you already, without any additional encouragement. It’s clear in every move he makes that he desires you. The lovemaking would be exactly that—free and willing on both your parts. The only difference is that at the end you let your fire free. A really high concentration will affect his memory of what happened in the ocean. He’ll forget he saw me breathing under the ocean without tanks.”

“He’ll forget me.” Her voice cracked.

Braden nodded slowly. “He’ll probably forget things directly related to the last few hours. Like the lovemaking.”

Chelsea crawled into his lap and dropped her forehead on his chest. How could something she’d secretly hoped to happen be breaking her heart?

“He’s my friend. I don’t want him to forget me.”

“You’ll get to work with him still. He should remember you as that, as his assistant. Using lovemaking is the safest way to ensure his other memories aren’t affected.”

Sadness enveloped her. The past weeks she’d grown to value Jamie’s friendship. He listened to her, truly listened, and he made her laugh when she needed it. She didn’t want to do anything to change his memories, not of any of his experiences. Resignation filled her. There was no other solution she could see, but she didn’t have to like it.

“Braden, if I do this—you have to be there too. I’m with you now and I...” A shiver shook her and he held her close.

“I can stay with you. Help direct the fire, guide you.”

*He’d be there too?* Warmth rose, loosening the tight knot in her belly. “You think he’ll let you be there?”

Braden smiled. “I’ve seen him watch you, baby. He’s not going to say no to you, no matter who else is in the room. Not if I say it’s okay. And...”



“And what?”

Braden stroked a hand down her back. “I have the feeling he’s got some interest in me as well.”

So she hadn’t been the only one who’d noticed. She held on tight, listening to Braden’s heart beating under her ear. His spicy fragrance filled her head and filled her with need. She hesitated to ask, but spoke before she lost her nerve.

“Will you make love to me too?”

A short chuckle rose, his chest moving under her. “I wondered if you’d thought about that. Yes, I’ll join in if it seems appropriate. I care about him as well, and as long as he’s not averse to my presence, I’ll act. He’s become special to you, and if I can make this better for the two of you, I will.”

Chelsea found his lips and kissed him. A gentle, soft touch that she tried to make mean so much more. He let her take charge, take control, and a small flutter of desire flickered to life. The part inside her that longed for the attention of two men stirred, and this time she let it rise to the surface.

In the midst of the bitter for what was about to be lost, there was sweet gain. Even as temporary as it would be, she intended on giving everything she could to Jamie for the one night.

Jamie sat up and looked around, trying to get his bearings. There was a ringing in his ears and his lungs ached. A dry sensation scratched the back of his throat, painful and harsh.

Memories crashed over him. Holy shit, he’d almost drowned.

Curtains blocked the light, the room muted and dark. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a flash of movement.

“Hey, how are you doing?” Chelsea’s soft voice caressed him and the bed sank with her weight as she sat at his side. She reached out to stroke his hair back off his face. The touch felt intimate, caring.

Dangerous. He wasn’t supposed to feel this attracted to the woman.

“Good,” he rasped out, wincing at the rough sting. “Damn.”

She reached to the side table and grabbed a glass of water, passing it to him. “I was worried when they told me about the accident.”

The accident. Right. He sipped a little slower and tried to calculate his next move. Let the images he’d seen line up with the research he’d done.

Holy crap, Braden and Thomas were mermaids. Mermen. His mind reeled at the implications. He was back in his room; a sliver of darkening sky visible through the crack in the curtains showed evening had arrived.

“Why am I in the condo?”

“Do you want to see a doctor?” Concern tinged her voice. She touched his forehead, her hands warm against his skin. “They said you weren’t hurt badly. That you simply passed out.”

He pressed a finger over her lips. “Shh, I feel fine. I avoided swallowing half the Pacific. It’s all good.”

She grabbed his hand and tears filled her eyes. “I was so scared.”

All his defenses slipped away. Fuck it. Maybe he’d discovered that legends were real, but so was this woman in front of him. He wasn’t about to hurt her if he could help it. “Hey, don’t cry. I’m okay, see? Still around and planning on making you work twice as hard tomorrow since I don’t think I’ll be putting in any time at the house tonight.”

She had his hand trapped in hers and lifted his fingers to her mouth, kissing them tenderly. Her touch sent a tingle up his arm and suddenly he didn’t feel like he’d been dragged along a rocky shore.

Adrenaline and lust both made a man recover damn fast.

When she crawled closer and curled up beside him, snuggling against his side, he wasn’t quite sure where to put his hands. Chelsea had no such qualms. She curved one arm behind his back, resting the other on his bare chest. He sat still for a second, willing his body to ignore the enticing fragrance rising around him. This was not the time to become aroused.

He casually dropped a hand to rub her back. “Didn’t mean to frighten you. Kinda threw myself for a loop, you know.”

Her soft tresses spread over his skin and he bit back a groan. All the erotic dreams he’d had over the past weeks raced through his mind. He needed to concentrate on something other than how wonderful it felt to hold her warmth next to him.

“You know what happened?” Her gaze remained fixed on his torso, as if she was avoiding his eyes. He debated lying, but he’d never believed it was a long-term solution. Still, in case she didn’t know what Braden and Thomas were, he didn’t want to frighten her.

“I had troubles with my tank. Braden helped me buddy breath, I’m not sure what happened after that.” After he passed out. It was the truth, not the complete truth, but enough.

Chelsea twisted, sitting upright beside him. “I’m so glad you’re safe.” She inched closer, pressing her hands on his chest. He grabbed her shoulders, holding her steady.

She leaned so close her scent filled his brain and when her lips touched his, a switch flipped. It must have been the master control for all logical thinking because the only thing left functioning was his sex drive. He fought the dire urge to roll her under him and thrust into her body.

Lips, soft and succulent, caressed his. She tilted her head to the right slightly, stroking his mouth with her tongue, poking until he opened and the burst of her flavor rolled over him.

When she pulled away he moved with her, reluctant to let her go. He cupped her chin in his hand, staring into her face, trying to decide what move to make next. Strange emotions rushed him—desire for her, yes, but with connection and friendship at the core. The expression on her face haunted his soul.

“Chelsea, what’s going on?”

She knelt on the bed, her eyes shining with a pale blue light as she smiled at him. Her wistful expression was quickly replaced with a brighter one.

“You could have died out there, so it’s only right we celebrate. Rejoice in living, laughing.” She pulled her blouse off over her head and tossed it to the side. “Loving. When you nearly lose something important, you have to celebrate still having it.”

He wanted to look away. *Oh my God*, he should look away, but he couldn’t. She held him mesmerized, and when she reached behind her and unfastened her bra, he nearly swallowed his tongue.

“Stop. We can’t do this, it’s not right. What about Braden?” The fact he had enough mental capacity left to ask amazed him. This was the man’s condo, his bed, and now Braden’s woman who moved toward him, her naked breasts thrust in his direction.

He closed his eyes and counted to ten. Mermaids who could breath underwater were more probable than surviving if Braden found out he’d fooled around with his woman.

“Braden agrees.”

Jamie’s eyes popped open to see a tall figure step from the shadows.

“Holy shit.” He scrambled out of bed, debating which way to run.

Braden held up a hand. “Relax, I’m not going to hurt you. I said I agree with Chelsea. Life needs to be celebrated. She’s been so worried about you, and I thought maybe it would help if she knew you were truly okay.”

Jamie stared at him in disbelief.

“This is your idea? Are you insane? You find out someone is okay by talking to them, or taking their temperature or...”

*What the hell is going on?* From nearly drowning to this? He must be dead. Or in a coma, with more of his fantasies inhabiting his dream world.

Braden stepped to the edge of the bed and Chelsea met him, drawing into his arms and accepting his kisses. The sight of Braden caressing Chelsea’s smooth skin reminded Jamie of watching their previous lovemaking. A hint of blue shimmered in the air, and the musky fragrance he now associated with his erotic dreams returned.

They looked so right together. The way Braden directed her, the response of her body to his touch—Jamie’s cock went from interested to demanding in seconds. Braden twisted her around until her torso faced Jamie. Two sets of eyes pinned him in place. Dark, passion-filled eyes. Chelsea held out a hand to him.

He shook his head. “You don’t need to do this. I’m really going to be okay.” He had to resist.

Didn’t he?

Chelsea licked her lips and let her head fall to the side. Braden kissed his way down her neck, nuzzling behind her ear. Her nipples tightened, one breast held cupped in Braden's hand, framed like an exotic work of art.

Desire threaded through him, then one seam at a time yanked apart his inhibitions.

"Hmm, yes. Feels so good, Braden. Touch me, love me. I need it, need Jamie too." Her husky voice beckoned him, the sound swirling through the room, and Jamie grew lightheaded. The desire to join them, to touch and caress every part of the beautiful woman before him grew irresistible.

He wanted her. It was the plain and simple truth. Jamie lifted his gaze to take in Braden's towering frame, watching the two of them move in a beautiful symmetry together. Smooth, sensual.

So be it. In spite of not completely understanding all the whys, he was willing to accept it for now and figure the details out later.

They met in the middle of the bed and all his saved-up passion broke free. Jamie kissed Chelsea like his life depended on it. Her sweet tongue tangled with his, their naked torsos touching, the tight tips of her nipples hard against his chest. She caressed his shoulders, dragged her fingers through his hair, tugging harder as the intensity of the kiss increased.

Braden joined them. He'd stripped off his shirt and the bare skin of his arm brushed Jamie's side as they trapped Chelsea between them.

She moaned with delight. "Oh yes, this is what I needed."

The breathless confession did something to Jamie's heart. He'd desired her before all the chaos of the day, and for whatever reason he was receiving this gift, he was going to treasure it.

He glanced over her shoulder to see Braden smiling at him. "It really is what we want. She needs us both right now."

Jamie nodded, staring with fascination at the centers of Braden's eyes. Blue flecks of light reflected back at him. *I know what you are, man of mythology*. The temptation to reach over and kiss Braden no longer frightened him. Passion erased his habit of analyzing.

Chelsea wiggled impatiently between them, and Jamie willingly turned back. He sat on the bed to worship her breasts, laving her nipples, nibbling along the soft under curve. Braden slipped a hand over her belly and between her legs, parting the pale curls of her mound to play with her clitoris. He slid his fingers in and out of her passage. Jamie watched everything as he worked his way down her body, needing to taste her as the scent in the room increased.

"Braden, give me room."

Two men making love to one woman—he'd never done this before. There were points of juggling limbs he'd never realized. Braden switched his hold, bringing his hand between Chelsea's legs from behind. As Braden eased his fingers back into her sheath, Jamie covered her with his mouth, teasing her clit

with his tongue. Her flavor filled him, made his head spin. He reached down and circled his cock with a fist, holding off to make sure Chelsea was satisfied before he grew too tempted.

They worked in tandem, Jamie matching the pace of Braden's thrusts. Slow now, then quicker, until she cried out, her body quivering between them. Heated liquid rushed his tongue as he lapped, dragging his tongue against her folds. Braden pressed in, again and again, prolonging her climax. Jamie's tongue brushed Braden's fingers as the other man slowly circled her clitoris, teasing the still-quivering flesh under his fingers. Chelsea sighed heavily as she leaned back, supported by Braden's torso, her skin flushed.

Jamie held on to his control by a thread, his aching cock reminding him he wanted much, much more.

"You're amazing, Chelsea, so beautiful." Braden kissed her neck.

"Please..."

The tormented need in her voice made Jamie put aside his caution. No longer waiting to see what Braden would do, he rolled her to the mattress and covered her with his body. Skin to skin, her warmth felt so right under him. He closed his eyes for just a second to appreciate it fully.

He kissed her again, this time a slow and thorough exploration. Tongues and lips and open mouths. He breathed her in and the darkness and fears he'd experienced all faded away. She was right. It was a celebration—of life and love and a passion that had been far too long unanswered.

The stroke of a hand down his back reminded him Braden was still with them, and yet...he couldn't stop. All his focus was on Chelsea, on the pleasure he found in her, the pleasure he wanted to bring her.

"You should see what I see." Braden's deep voice rustled through the air. He touched them both, his hands skimming Jamie's side. Hovering where Jamie cupped Chelsea's breast. The contrast of their fair skin and Braden's darker coloring—his rougher, beefier hands—showed clearly. "You two look like erotic Greek statues, porcelain fine and breathtakingly beautiful."

Chelsea laughed softly as she snaked out an arm to catch Braden around the neck. "And you're Poseidon, rising from the sea to love us both?"

"Hmm, it's not difficult to love you, baby." He kissed her, lowering himself to lie skin to skin against Jamie's side. Jamie watched in fascination until Chelsea squirmed under him, pressing her breast up into his hand, and he shifted to be able to reach her easier. He nibbled and licked, listening to the soft noises of pleasure she made, hearing Braden's whispered words of love.

Then a hand cupped his own neck, threading through his hair. Braden took control of him and turned their faces toward each other.

"I want to taste you." Braden paused, and Jamie's heart leapt to his throat. Slowly, inch by inch, Braden approached. He gave ample time to retreat, but Jamie wanted this. Wanted it as much as he wanted the woman lying under him.

With a satisfied hum, Braden brought their mouths in contact. Rougher, more forceful than touching Chelsea, but just as right. Jamie ignored everything else and simply felt—the caress of Chelsea's hands as

she explored his back, the harsher touch of Braden callused hand trailing over Jamie's lower back and buttocks. The softness of her body under him as she opened her legs and he nestled tighter between her thighs. The curls on her mound were wet from his mouth and her juices, and they coated his cock as he rocked his hips slowly. He was enveloped by both of them. Surrounded and satisfied.

He'd never had such a rich and full experience before in his life and he reveled in it.

"I want you. Want you now." Chelsea pressed upward, her rigid nipples hard against his chest.

"Shit, I need a condom." Thank God one part of his mind still functioned. Oh please, let there be one close by. He couldn't remember if he had any.

Braden disappeared for a moment before returning and handing him a package. Braden dropped beside them and kissed Chelsea passionately as Jamie fumbled with the wrapper, desperate to get it open, desperate to cover himself. When he finally returned to his spot, cradled between her legs, Braden backed away, letting him see into Chelsea's eyes.

One final moment of hesitation. "You're sure?"

She wrapped herself around him, lifted her hips and pulled. He slipped slow and steady into her heat. The shimmering blue rising around them didn't surprise him at all, nor the sweet spicy aroma filling the air. What he didn't expect were the tight heartfelt emotions rolling through him as he made love with her, her fingers roaming his torso, the little moans of passion she released making his heart sing with joy.

This connection, the friendship that was so much more—it was right. He left the fears of not knowing it all behind and accepted it as the gift it was.

When he'd buried himself to the hilt, they both sighed with satisfaction and he couldn't help but chuckle. "You good, Chels?"

She smiled up at him, her eyes bright, caring in her touch. She arched into him. "Fabulous."

He didn't want to go harder, didn't want to miss a second of the erotic drag of his cock through her passage, the way she squeezed him perfectly. He lowered his head to her shoulder and slowed even more, prolonging his climax as long as possible. The flutters of her body around him let him know she grew closer as well.

Braden joined in again, kissing Jamie's shoulder, running his hands over Jamie's buttock and thighs. As an electric tingle began at the base of his spine, Jamie let it all wash over him. Braden's soft touch—a simple caress, almost nonsexual. Chelsea's fingers on his back and shoulders. The intimate caress of thrusting into her warmth.

Again and again he pressed in, his strokes increasing in tempo as she panted beneath him. He slipped a hand between their torsos to press her clit and she cried out, her passage pulsing around him. With one final thrust, he buried himself deep to explode. Every one of his stored-up fantasies faded in comparison to the reality.

When they stopped shaking, the haze of flicking lights around them made him content. It was right. He lifted his head to gaze into her eyes and the emotional pain in them shocked him.

“Chelsea? What’s wrong?”

A tear escaped and ran down her cheek. “That was amazing, and I’m glad you’re my friend. Thank you.”

He held her tenderly, kissing away the tear. A heavy weight settled in his limbs, and he didn’t even question when Braden pressed their naked bodies together, Jamie’s back warmed by Braden’s chest. Peace and contentment overshadowed the confusion, the flickering blue lights increasing even as his eyes grew too heavy to hold open any longer. As he drifted off to sleep, he wondered how he was going to explain any of this in the morning.

## Chapter Eleven

Braden stirred his coffee again, the liquid growing cold as Chelsea paced the living room for the umpteenth time.

“He’s awake.”

She rubbed her hands up and down her arms. Soon they’d know if it had worked. All night long she’d cuddled Jamie, taking in every second she could in his presence. Having Braden embrace her at the same time made the situation overwhelming. Powerful.

Painful.

She wished the situation could be different and she could wake up every day with the two of them. “How are you going to explain why we’re here? In the condo?”

“We’ll play it by ear. I’m not sure how much he’s going to remember, and I don’t want him waking up alone.”

The bedroom door opened and Jamie shuffled out, stark naked. Chelsea flushed and turned her back so as not to embarrass him. Jamie gasped out a curse.

“Holy shit. Sorry, guys.”

Braden snorted into his coffee cup. “Oh, damn. Meant to warn you. Hey, we’re here.”

Jamie laughed. “Nice heads-up. Give me a second.” When his footsteps retreated and the door to his room closed again, she turned to see Braden wearing a huge grin.

“He seems okay,” she whispered.

He nodded. “I think we’re in the clear. Didn’t act like he remembers a thing.”

The hollow pit in her stomach opened up again and her heart ached. “That’s...good.”

Braden lost his smile and held out his hand to her. She went and crawled into his lap, curling up and letting him pet her for a minute.

“I know, baby, you and me both. But we have to keep the rest of the pod safe.”

She sniffed softly. “Just, it hurts. I really care for him.”

He kissed her forehead and they sat in silence, waiting.

When Jamie joined them a few minutes later, she made sure she’d wiped her eyes dry and replaced her expression with a cheerier one.



“Why are you guys here? I mean, not that I mind, but it’s early hours. You need me for something?” Jamie felt the side of the coffeepot. “Cold. Man, I must sleep like the dead. Good thing you weren’t more burglars.”

“Just wanted to know if you were up for a little action today. Hit the boardwalk, go for breakfast. It is Saturday.”

Jamie nodded slowly. “Sounds like a plan.” He pointed to the two of them. “Neither of you had anything else on the agenda for today?”

She shook her head. He’d forgotten the whole incident of the day before, but he hadn’t seemed to forget they were friends. She’d take it. While having him as a lover was what her heart and soul wanted, having him lose all memory of her would have burned.

“I need to get a few groceries, but nothing else. You have anything you’d like to do?” she asked him.

Jamie paced over to stare out the window. “We could go paddling, but the ocean looks a little rough.” He turned slowly, his gaze flicking between herself and Braden, more guarded now. Hesitant. “I have another idea if you’re up for up.”

Braden nudged her and she rose, stepping to the side. “You’ll find we’re game for just about anything,” he said.

Jamie threw back his head and laughed out loud. When he stopped chuckling, he approached cautiously, almost like he was stalking her. A shiver raced up her spine. The look in Jamie’s eyes... He knew something.

*Oh my God, he remembers.*

Jamie stopped mere inches away. “First, I think you forgot to give me something this morning.”

She swallowed, glancing at Braden for direction. He frowned, rocking uneasily on his feet. Chelsea turned back to stare into Jamie’s blue-gray eyes. “What...what did I forget?”

He snuck his hands around her torso and pressed their mouths together. A lazy, but thorough kiss that made her toes curl. His tongue stroked into her mouth, playing with hers. She had her fingers tangled in his hair before she realized what she was doing.

She broke off with a gasp.

Braden sputtered in the background, finally finding his voice. “What the fuck do you think—?”

Jamie held up a hand. “Don’t try it. It’s not going to work. I remember everything. The diving accident, making love with Chelsea. There’s only one thing I’m curious about.”

He interrupted the stream of steady curses falling from Braden’s lips by closing the distance between them. Chelsea watched in amazement as Jamie grabbed Braden by the shoulders, pulled him down and planted a huge kiss on him as well.

Braden stiffened before assuming control, hauling the other man against him hard and ramming their mouths together. A hot and fervent embrace followed, both of them battling for dominance. Tongues and

teeth and hands grasping in impassioned fury. Chelsea whimpered, a sudden hard throb between her legs demanding attention.

Jamie had remembered.

The men separated, backing away from each other. Jamie was breathing hard and smiling harder.

Braden shook his head. "Bastard. Why in the hell did you do that?"

"What? Kiss you? I was curious why you didn't join in more last night. It was obvious you wanted to. Of course, I'm not a hundred percent sure I'm ready for a physical relationship with another guy, but I can't say I'm totally opposed to the idea either."

"You shouldn't have remembered last night," Braden complained.

Jamie sat on the couch and propped his feet up on the coffee table. He patted the place next to him and Chelsea flew to his side, curling up close to revel in the warmth of his body. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and she rested her cheek on his chest. His rapid heartbeat betrayed his unease in spite of his nonchalant attitude and she fought back a laugh.

It was going to be amusing to watch her men find a place of balance.

She sucked in a breath of air. *Her men.*

"Oh my goodness." She leaned back to examine Jamie closer. "I don't understand. I mean, I'm glad, very glad, but how...?"

"Yes, how?" Braden's expression rivaled thunderclouds and she tossed him a glare of her own, warning him to calm down. He sat on the coffee table, and his knees bumped hers. She leaned over to lay a hand on him as well, the three of them all connected.

Jamie shrugged. "You have to explain more for me to be able to calculate the exact quantitative reasoning—"

A loud burst escaped Braden. "Incredible. You're sitting here, knowing the things about us you do and you're going scientific on me?"

"Just being myself." Jamie squeezed her shoulders and she snuggled in a little tighter. It felt so good to be there, touching him, touching Braden. "I take it you are what the legends named mermaids. What's your name for your race?"

Chelsea answered this time. "Merfolk. The guys get kind of riled if you call them maids."

"I can see why. St. Elmo's fire involved in your particular skills?"

A furrow appeared between Braden's brows. "How in the hell do you know these things? I know I let it slip about the merfolk, but the fire?"

Jamie stared at her and Chelsea blushed. Having all his attention turned on her made her warm inside. He stroked her cheek. "I saw you. Making love that first time. The fire was everywhere. Then I saw it last night." He shrugged. "And I've seen it before, years ago, when someone else seduced me."

A sharp sting of jealousy shot through her. She fought it down, but not before Braden noticed and laughed. He picked her up from where she sat and arranged her on his lap. “You planning on calling the girl out for a fight?”

She tried to speak without betraying how much it actually bothered her to think about Jamie with another merfolk. “Who was she?”

Being held in Braden’s arms was so right, but having Jamie there was just as important. She didn’t want to give either of them up. Now she just had to convince Jamie, and the pod, because she couldn’t go through the potential threat of losing him again.

“I don’t know who she was.” Jamie told them everything. The dive, the medallion he’d found. The woman on the beach and the way his memories of the night had vanished. When he told about the erotic dreams he’d been having of the three of them, Chelsea interrupted.

“Why are you sharing all this with us? Aren’t you afraid that we’ll, well...”

“Kill me and hide the body? Nahh. Too much work. Besides, there’s no real crime in Jaffrey’s Cove. You guys don’t want Braden to be the sheriff on duty when the first-ever homicide occurs. Bad for the resume.”

“Bastard.” Braden growled.

Jamie grinned at Braden. “Actually, I figure the more I tell you, the more you’ll share, and between the three of us we might be able to figure out what the hell is going on. I obviously didn’t react the way you expected to your lovemaking.”

Chelsea smiled. “I don’t know, I think you reacted just fine.”

He winked at her.

Braden gave her ass a light spank. “Stop flirting.”

He motioned for her to stand, then proceeded to pace the room. Chelsea debated nestling in with Jamie again, but until things were settled, a little restraint was in order. She leaned on the wall and watched Braden wear a hole in the carpet.

“Jamie’s right, there’s something odd about his reaction.” He looked at the other man. “You should have forgotten about the merfolk, and the sex from last night. Do you think it has something to do with the fact you’d already been exposed to the merfolk?”

Jamie considered. “Possibly. I need to research a bit more. If we hit the library, I can get some information that might help me. As long as you trust me not to tell anyone.”

“You know what would happen if you announced to anyone that we exist?” Braden spoke softly. Chelsea stilled. Jamie’s response was vital.

“I have no intention of being the reason you end up under the microscope. I can know a secret without having to share it. For example, have you heard of the Manteca statue? Missing since before the First World War?”

Chelsea answered. "I read about it when I was prepping for college."

Jamie nodded. "I know where it is."

"No way. Where? They've had a reward posted for that for years."

Jamie smiled. "It's in a private collection. I saw it by chance when I did some work for the current owner. He showed me sufficient proof it had been gifted to his family years ago. Only, the legal uproar and media attention involved in revealing its location would be devastating to his health. It will end up in the public galleries soon enough, but it's not hurting anyone to stay where it is for a few more years."

"You're not tempted by the reward?" Braden asked.

Chelsea fought back a laugh. "Umm, Braden, Jamie is a Powell. They are one of the richest families in New York. Old money."

Jamie hung his head and groaned. "Damn, I didn't think you knew that. Now I'll never know if you seduced me for my pocketbook."

He winked at her and she laughed. This was the man she enjoyed working with. The one she'd grown to care deeply about.

Braden was still frowning but his anxious tension slowly eased. "Why do you seem to be taking this in stride?"

Jamie paused for a moment before speaking. "Archaeologists live in the past, present and future. So many things have slipped from the record books, and suddenly a dig or excavation reveals the truth. We see the impossible as memories that were forgotten and are waiting to be rediscovered."

Jamie met Braden in the middle of the room. "I swear I will never do anything to harm Chelsea or you, or any of your people. If a promise isn't enough, then I guess we have a problem, because I can't forget what I've discovered. Still, I give my word I will do everything in my power to keep you safe."

Chelsea held her breath. His sincerity rang loud and clear. Was it enough to satisfy Braden's mandate to the pod?

## Chapter Twelve

Jamie held out his hand and waited, staring confidently at the taller man.

Braden hesitated briefly before accepting Jamie's hand and giving it a firm shake. "You have no idea what you're getting yourself into."

"I think I can handle it."

Chelsea gasped as Braden yanked Jamie against him, spinning him around and locking him in place with his arms trapped by his sides.

"You see her?" Braden's husky voice tickled in her ears, and a wonderful anticipation raced through her veins.

"Chelsea? Of course."

Braden watch her carefully, his unspoken question clear, and she nodded slowly. She wanted to jump for joy. He understood what she needed even better than she knew herself.

"She's part of your responsibility now as a part of the pod. Thank God, because I don't think I could handle her by myself."

He released Jamie, draping his arms more gently around his torso. Jamie didn't try to escape. In fact, he leaned back into Braden and Chelsea's mouth watered at the sight of the two of them. Long and lean, muscular and handsome. An enticing combination for any woman.

Her men.

"I have a lot of questions you'll have to answer in the next few days. Just start with this—matriarchal society?" Jamie opened his arms and she went into them willingly.

"We share a lot of similarities with the dolphins we can shift into," Braden answered.

Jamie squeezed her tight and whooped as he spun her in a circle. "Hot damn, shifting? You're serious? I so need to see that."

Chelsea giggled. "Is there anything we can say that can shock you?"

He wrinkled his nose and considered. "I'm not sure. I look forward to finding out."

Then he kissed her, and all the worry and fear haunting her since she thought they'd erased his memory eased away. Instead, as he stroked his tongue into her mouth, the seed of despair in her belly bloomed into desire, and she pressed closer, loving the way his body responded to hers. Her excitement rose, the blue of St Elmo's fire lifting from her skin to fill the air around them. When they broke apart he looked up, his smile delighted as a child's.

“The fire. How can you control it? Is it something that—?”

She covered his mouth with her hand. “Later. Right now I want to kiss you, not lecture you.”

Jamie glanced over his shoulder at Braden who stood at his back. “I still don’t understand why you’re okay with this, but if you are—”

Braden silenced him again, this time with a kiss. With Jamie trapped between them, Chelsea rubbed as close as she could. This was what she needed to make sure the whole morning wasn’t some dream. That she really would be able to have them both with her.

She tugged them apart, reluctant to interrupt, yet needing too badly to let them continue. “Bedroom. Now.”

They were halfway down the hall, kissing and pulling at each other’s clothing, when Braden’s work phone went off.

“Fuck it.”

He untangled himself from them as Chelsea bit back her whimper of disappointment. Jamie pressed her against the wall and distracted her as Braden answered his call. The things this man did to her, every touch so careful and tender, and yet demanding her full attention. The way he stroked her torso while he kissed a line under her ear, sucking her earlobe into his mouth briefly before tracing the tender entrance. She squirmed. She’d never had a lover play with her ears before. Discovering they were erogenous zones gave her a thrill. She didn’t even try to hold back her cries of delight.

A touch on her arm dragged her away from the pleasure rising in her limbs. Jamie tucked her against his side and together they turned to face Braden.

“Do you need to go to the station?” Chelsea asked. The heat in the hallway continued to rise as Jamie’s fingers tickled her waist and Braden looked down at her with those dark eyes. A faint swirl of fireflies hung in the air.

“Nothing major they can’t handle without me. I’m not on duty until noon.”

Chelsea purred as he trapped her between them, their warm bodies lighting a fuse that wasn’t about to fizzle out quickly. “Then I have an idea.”

“I like it already,” Braden said.

She laughed and tugged them both toward the bedroom. “Come on, I think we should show Jamie a thing or two about merfolk before we all have to get to work.”

Braden slowed his step, letting her drag Jamie into the bedroom first. Jamie’s fingers clutched her hand tightly, some of the bravado he’d shown earlier slipping away.

“Don’t worry, it’s just that you’re right, there is a lot to tell you. I thought I could show you one of the forms we can change into, and Braden can explain a little bit.”

“We could have stayed in the living room if that’s all we’re going to do,” Jamie pointed out.

She raised her brows. “How does demonstration as foreplay sound?”

Jamie sucked in a rapid breath and Braden choked back a laugh. “Chelsea, you’re being a tease. Stop it.”

Something warm and happy welled up inside, and she shivered involuntarily. Just being with the two of them made her feel far more complete than she’d ever expected. She pushed Jamie toward the bed, then knelt between his thighs to finish unbuttoning his shirt. She batted away his hands when he tried to help her.

“We have more than one form. We can change into dolphins, but we don’t have to. The merfolk form—what you saw Braden use when he rescued you—is just as easy to maneuver through the water. Some of us can also change into a third form, and that’s the fire you’ve been seeing. When you see it and we’re not changing, it’s a result of strong emotions.”

“Kind of like an emotional barometer?” Jamie perched on the edge of the bed, his expression the most curious mix of anticipation and anxiety she’d ever seen.

She brushed his cheek with a finger before stepping back. “Kind of. Relax, I’m not going to eat you.”

“Well, damn, there goes that idea,” Braden joked and Jamie burst out laughing.

“How the hell am I supposed to react around you two?”

Chelsea stripped off her clothes to stand naked before him. “You did just fine last night.” His expression changed to one of hunger as his gaze traced her body. Lingered on her breasts, pausing on her sex. She licked her lips and he groaned.

A tingle started in her core and shot upward.

She lifted her arms into the air and let herself change. Her human form fell away, and with a wonderful tickly sensation, she changed into St. Elmo’s fire.

Freedom.

The incredible liberty she always felt in this form enveloped her and she reveled in it. With long slow sweeps she circled the room, closing in on the two men.

As she traveled she smelled less, yet felt far more. She sensed Jamie’s heart rate increase and swirled down to wrap herself around his torso with a fleeting touch, stimulating his skin and brushing her fiery fingers through his hair.

“Oh God, that feels good,” Jamie moaned, his head falling back as she stroked his throat, caressed his shoulders.

“Just wait.” Braden settled beside him. “There are games we can play you have no idea about.”

Jamie twisted in a panic. “You’re not planning on turning into a dolphin here in the room, are you?”

Chelsea laughed so hard she lost control and shifted back into human form, collapsing onto the bed. She grabbed Jamie from behind and wrestled him to the mattress, her body shaking with joy.

“Oh my goodness, I’ve never heard that suggestion before.” She straddled him, sliding her palms up the firm muscles of his chest.

“Well, you never know. I don’t want to assume anything here.” Jamie cupped her breasts, tweaking her nipples between forefingers and thumbs. A shiver racked her and the bed shifted as Braden crawled up and joined them. “I’m not in danger of losing my memory, am I? You’re not planning on hitting me with a triple whammy of the forget fire or something?”

“We can make love with humans safely without affecting your memories. Last night was a special circumstance, and no, we won’t try it again.” Braden grinned down at Jamie. “Especially since it was a bloody waste of energy.”

“Thank God. So, how do you want to do this?” Jamie asked. “I mean, how do you make love with three people at one time?”

Braden nuzzled Chelsea’s neck, his hands joining Jamie’s to fondle her breasts. “First off, don’t think about it so much. Just do what comes naturally. Focus on Chelsea and it’ll be just fine. Oh, and you won’t need a condom. We can’t get STDs, and Chelsea isn’t fertile right now.”

“You’re kidding, you can tell that?” Jamie looked into her eyes as if for reassurance.

She nodded. “Side benefits of the shifter nature.”

Jamie swore softly and took a deep breath, then both he and Braden moved in unison, taking control of her body between them.

She couldn’t hold back the moan that escaped. The attention of two men fully on her—she’d never had that before. The previous night had been more about making love with Jamie than time with Braden. He’d been there, but now as they both touched her, caressed her, the empty aching parts inside filled.

Braden cupped her skull and took her lips in a tender kiss. His tongue stroked her lips, teased along her teeth. He tasted like the sea and sweet sunshine on the ocean, and she held on tight to keep him close.

Another set of hands explored, molding her breasts together before Jamie bit her nipples hard enough she gasped. Braden eased off the kiss, sliding away from her mouth, moving along her collarbone.

She closed her eyes and just felt.

A hand caressed her belly, stroking in smooth circles that descended ever lower. One mouth, then two, fastened on her breasts. One of them suckled softly, the other with a harsher tug. The contrast shot a streak of pleasure to her core where it met the hand slipping between her legs. Somehow she’d ended up flat on her back as they touched her everywhere. When heat and moisture descended on her sex, she whimpered, needing so much more.

A slow easy tug on her shoulders brought her to the side of the bed with her head slipping back over the edge. She opened her eyes to find Jamie’s beautiful gaze directed at her. He squatted on the floor and she smiled at the vision of him upside down. Jamie brushed their lips together, the angle and direction making the gentle exploration of the kiss totally new.



Braden slipped two fingers into her sheath, licking her clit with rapid flicks of his tongue. Desire bloomed hotter in her core. His touch distracted her, sending the level of arousal in her body higher and higher until she trembled on the edge of a climax.

Jamie reached down and pinched her nipples with a firm roll of his fingers, once, twice and she came, her sheath squeezing Braden's fingers, the tingling sensation racing through her making her toes curl and her ears ring.

"Damn it, baby, you are so gorgeous. So fine." Her legs were pushed farther to the side and the head of Braden's cock nudged her wet sex for a second before he pressed in.

Jamie sat back and caressed her lips with his thumb, his gaze tender, yet heated. "Very gorgeous. Chelsea, I need to...I want to..."

He hesitated and she licked her lips and it was his turn to groan with need. "Come here. Fill me up."

Braden thrust into her again and she cried out with the pleasure of it. At the same time, Jamie rose and brushed his cock against her lips. She opened eagerly to him. His taste was different than Braden's, less salty, more an earthy flavor with a musky scent that filled her as he rocked slowly. He let her lick and suck and explore his shaft, the mushroomed head feeling strange and exotic from this new angle. A swirl of her tongue around the ridged edge made him mutter under his breath. Precome leaked from the slit at the tip, and she lapped it off eagerly, twirling her tongue in circles before closing her lips.

"Oh damn, that's it, baby. Swallow him down. Ease your throat open and let him go deeper." Braden adjusted his strokes, inching in and out, the slow drag teasing her and keeping her on a high simmer.

She stretched out her arms and grabbed Jamie's hips, tilting her head back a little more and pulling him farther in. Encouraging him to slide all the way to the back of her throat. She breathed through her nose, the scent of sex rising on the air.

"Ah damn it, Chels, I can't last. Your mouth feels too good."

Chelsea hummed as he pressed in again. Jamie's butt cheeks clenched under her fingers as he took control back. Cradling her head, he increased his speed, stroking into her mouth. Fucking her as Braden matched his tempo and between the two of them she knew it was only a matter of seconds before she climaxed again.

She wanted to take them with her. She wrapped her legs around Braden and dug her heels into the small of his back, clutching him hard on the next plunge, encouraging him to drive in more forcefully. She swallowed around Jamie's cock as he found his pleasure in her mouth, and the part she'd been hiding away for so long reveled in being taken by the two of them.

Braden stroked her clit, rubbing in time with his thrusts. Jamie lost his rhythm and with one final push buried himself in her mouth. His pulsing shaft felt wicked and wonderful in her mouth as his semen shot down her throat. She swallowed again and again, loving the sounds of his throaty groans. Loving the feel of being possessed by them both. Braden cried out, his cock jerking within her pussy and she came, her sheath

clutching and attempting to hold him in place. The lights of their lovemaking filled the room, swirling around them.

“That was amazing.” Braden wavered above her, withdrawing slowly as if reluctant to leave. Jamie stepped back and knelt to kiss her forehead before rolling next to her with a contented sigh. The mattress shook as Braden lowered himself on her other side.

Three sated bodies nestled together on the bed, Chelsea between her men. She laid her head on Braden’s chest but held Jamie’s hips tight to her as he nestled against her back.

Jamie swung an arm through the air, grasping at the glow. The iridescent flecks slipped through his fingers, creating back eddies that swirled in lazy spirals. “Tell me more about the fireflies thing. Chemical reaction or some kind of free-radical byproduct of the St. Elmo’s—”

“Holy shit, you’re not going to take notes and make an analysis every time we have sex, are you?” Braden complained. Chelsea giggled silently, shaking between the two of them. Her body rubbed their bare skin and it felt so wonderful. So right.

“Well I can hardly be expected to understand if I don’t ask questions, can I?” Jamie responded. His matter-of-fact tone made her laugh out loud and she twisted to kiss him. He smiled at her as she withdrew, his hand tender as he cupped her face. “Siren.”

She winked, then rolled over to pay some attention to Braden. She knew for sure they had the rest of the morning.

Hopefully, they had a lot longer than that.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Are you ready for this?” Braden asked.

Jamie nodded slowly, glancing between Braden and Chelsea.

“It’s time, and Alexia’s the one I need to get approval from, right?” He hesitated. “Are you two ready? I mean, are you sure you want me to speak with her about more than my suspicions?”

Chelsea wrapped her arms around his waist, her warm body nestling in and feeling so perfect he could barely breathe. If a month ago someone would have told him that he’d be involved in a relationship with two other people, he would have thought them insane. Yet that’s what he had. In both Chelsea and Braden he’d found more than he expected.

Not just because they could out-swim him, in whatever form they used.

“We’ve talked about this. In depth, Mr. Have To Overanalyze Everything.” Braden slung an arm around his shoulders. “I think the last time we spoke about it was while we were moving Chelsea and I back into the condo. You promised you would stop rehashing old territory.”

“He likes digging up the past,” Chelsea teased, dancing out of reach.

Jamie and Braden both groaned.

“Your turn to deal with her.” Braden squeezed Jamie’s shoulder before unlocking the truck and opening the door for Chelsea.

“Hey.” Chelsea crawled into the truck and settled between the two of them, cuddling up to Jamie and threading her fingers through his.

Jamie marveled at how comfortable he was with them both. No, the butterflies in his belly had nothing to do with the people he sat with, and everything to do with the appointment they had to meet with Alexia, the matriarch of the merfolk people. Jamie stared out the window at the sleepy village as Braden drove them back to the Coltens’ house. The streets of Jaffrey’s Cove had grown more familiar over the past month, faces more easily recognizable. He still couldn’t figure out at a glance who was and who wasn’t a merfolk, and that was probably a good thing.

He and Chelsea had made a bigger dent in the inventory work than he’d expected, especially with how easily distracted they’d been over the past week. Every chance possible, they stopped to explore each other, waiting impatiently for Braden to be able to join them.

Chelsea leaned up and kissed his cheek. “Hey, it’s going to be fine.”

Jamie chuckled. “Right. I’m meeting the most important member of a group of mythical people. Piece of cake.”

“She’s just Alexia.” He stared at her in shock. “Well, I mean, she’s the matriarch too, but even though she’s in charge, it’s not like she’s a power hound or anything. This should be less intimidating than some of the family events you’ve had to attend.”

He laughed and leaned over to brush his lips against hers. They kissed softly, Jamie enjoying the way she gave herself over to him, offering her reassurance and passion at the same time. Braden rested his hand lightly on top of their linked fingers, and the touch of both of them at the same time sent a thrill through him.

Plans were falling into place for a future that felt very right, no matter how different it appeared.

They gathered in the dining room, the remaining collection of trinkets and clutter still lining the walls. Standing before Alexia Colten, Jamie wondered where his bravado had fled to in the past thirty minutes. He liked to think he would have known she was the ranking merfolk without being told. There was something about the dark-haired beauty—an enticing air of command. She seemed to be judging him and yet he could find no fault in that judgment.

The men who sat on either side of her—the blond surfer and the brooding god with the intense stare—were far less intimidating physically than Braden. Yet in conjunction with Alexia, the impact of the three of them was enough to awe anyone.

“Braden informed me what happened.” Alexia motioned to her right, where Braden and Chelsea stood. “I guess you’ve discovered more than hidden treasures amidst my grandfather’s collection.”

The moment felt solemn, somewhat spiritual, like he’d been transported back in time to the legendary days of the Greeks when the gods had supposedly walked the earth. That was whom he was meeting, wasn’t it? Living legends? A sudden inspiration hit him.

He dropped to one knee and bowed deeply. “My lady.”

The man at Alexia’s left laughed out loud. “Damn, he’s good. Another intellectual come to haunt me.”

“Joshua, please.” Alexia smiled as Jamie rose. “My husband doesn’t mean to be rude. You said you had information to share?”

“I was researching one of your grandfather’s finds and discovered something in the local news archives that might interest you.” He stole a glance to the side for reassurance. Chelsea winked at him.

Alexia accepted the file of photocopied pages from him. “What are these?” She shuffled through, stopping to examine a picture more closely.

“The reason for the run of craziness over the summer.”

"I heard there was trouble while we were gone, but nothing serious. Oh my goodness, is that my Gram?" Alexia held the clipping out. "Anthony, look, I swear that's her in the photo."

"It's Victoria Colten, about fifty years ago. She'd just moved into this house with her new husband. Her mother left on an extended vacation and I would assume that's when Lady Victoria took over leadership of the Jaffrey's Cove merfolk."

Jamie pulled another couple of pages out, lining them up in order.

"Less than a week later, when she and her husband left for a short honeymoon, mysterious reports of vandalism started to appear in the news. Lots of complaints about unusual behavior in the visitors and locals—everything from streaking down Main Street to tipping over outhouses."

"Damn, some things never change," Braden said.

Alexia frowned at the papers. "The same thing happened fifty years ago? What kind of strange coincidence is that? Or are you saying my grandmother has something to do with the chaos?"

Jamie sat, resting his arms on the table. "I think she has something to do with it, yes, but so do you. It's connected with the fact you lead the merfolk, and it has to do with Jaffrey's Cove itself. Braden explained part of the reason you can shift is because there are chemicals in the area that combine with and complement your genetics. Everyone who lives here is exposed to the chemicals all the time. It makes your shifting possible, but it affects you in other ways. It appears that having you around as matriarch—having a leader in the area—helps keep the merfolk in check. Just like a group of animals can be convinced to stay calm in a difficult situation, your presence balances the rest of them."

Braden cleared his throat. "Animals?"

Jamie waved a hand at him. "I'm not trying to be offensive, but it's a common trait in all mammalian groups. I could have said humans. Leaders set the tone. When you left town on your honeymoon, and your grandmother left at the same time, there was no one really in charge of the pod. The same thing happened as in the past. The chemical overload didn't cause anything dangerous to happen or anything too noticeable. Still, it's enough that you should try to avoid being gone for long periods of time. Unless we can figure out a backup system."

"All this time it was the chemicals?" Chelsea asked.

Jamie shrugged. "I've checked a few other ideas but keep coming back to that one as the most likely."

"How is that possible? That just her presence is enough to bring things back under control?" Braden leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms.

"Are you kidding?" Jamie asked. "You change that massive bulk of yours into sparkly lights without so much as blinking, but you think it's not possible there's a mystical connection between your leader and her people?"

Braden chuckled. "Point taken."

Alexia turned to Braden. "What's it been like since I returned? Have things improved?"

He nodded. "One hundred percent. We're back to being a nice quiet little tourist destination."

She sighed. "Another item added to the list of things I wasn't aware of before assuming this position. Your speculation makes sense. I hope I can ask you to work, maybe with Anthony, on that backup system you mentioned. I hate the thought of being so irreplaceable."

Jamie bowed his head politely. She was not what he'd expected, but then, who knew what the rules were anymore in this game?

She gave him that look again, the one like she was reading his soul. "You are planning on staying around?"

Jamie let his grin escape. "Well, sort of. I've got this awesome job cataloging a pretty amazing collection, and there's this girl I've met in the area..."

Chelsea laughed and it warmed his soul. He blew her a kiss without thinking then turned back to the trio, his face heating.

Alexia's lovers, Anthony and Joshua, exchanged glances. "He has it bad, doesn't he?" Joshua asked.

She leaned over and elbowed Joshua softly. "Behave."

She stared at Jamie, a gentle smile on her lips. An eerie sensation crept over him, as if a hand had stroked his mind. It swept past his heart and the warmth that rose in her eyes settled all the worry inside him. She accepted him, not only his knowledge of the merfolk, but his relationship with Chelsea and Braden. As strange as it seemed, her approval was vital.

"You're telling the truth and you feel nothing but goodwill toward us."

Everyone in the room relaxed, as if a balloon had released its air. He hadn't realized just how keyed up everyone had become, waiting for Alexia to decide. She rose from her chair and came around the table to give him a quick hug.

Funny. While she was damn attractive, he didn't feel the same rush that touching Chelsea brought, or Braden for that matter.

She stepped back and brushed his cheek lightly with her fingers. "Thank you for adding your talents and skills to our group. Although I'm curious what you're planning to do after this job is completed. It doesn't seem like there's a lot to keep you in the cove."

He joined Chelsea and Braden, the tension inside leaching away. "I've got some ideas, but we need to discuss it first."

There were myriad possibilities, but for now, knowing that they had all their options open to find a way that would work for the three of them made the future a lot brighter.

Chelsea pushed open the door with her shoulder, juggling groceries in both hands. She caught a glimpse of the guys in the living room and gave a hello shout. “You would not believe what they’ve got down at the shops for Halloween candy. I’m tempted to dress up and go house to house myself.”

She dropped the bags on the counter and finally clued in to what was happening on the couch. *Oh yeah, that looks mighty interesting.* “Shit—sorry, don’t let me interrupt.”

Jamie untangled himself from Braden. He rose and adjusted his shirt, trying to hide his hard-on. His flushed face made her smile.

“Hey, Chels.” He kissed her and she tasted Braden on his lips. *Yum.* She slid a hand down his torso until she cupped his hard length lightly. *Double yum.*

“Hmmm, hello, but didn’t you hear me? You and Braden don’t have to feel guilty if you want to fool around when I’m not here.”

“It’s not that. We just got good news and one thing led to another and...” Jamie hesitated.

Chelsea paused. He was hiding something, and even though he was only slowly opening up to more physical interaction with Braden, she didn’t think the secret was about them getting caught necking. She glanced at Braden. Yup, he looked guilty as well.

“What are you two plotting? Other than sex?”

Braden laughed. “I told you we’d never keep it under wraps.”

“Yeah, yeah, you win.” Jamie peeked into the grocery bags and grimaced. “You didn’t buy any chocolate.”

Chelsea poked him in the side. “Quit stalling.”

Jamie held out his hand to her. She smiled and accepted it, walking with him to the couch. It felt so right to be together with both Braden and Jamie, and other than the occasional twinge of fear that someday Jamie would find Jaffrey’s Cove too quiet, she was happier than she thought possible.

“Braden and I have been talking over some long-term plans. A colleague at Boston University contacted me a few weeks ago about a temporary position that’s opened up. I’ve agreed to teach a series of guest lectures next semester, beginning January.”

And there it was. Her heart fell. “You’ll be leaving us?”

Braden pulled her into his lap. “Actually, you’ll both be leaving *me*. Your mom told us you’d applied to Boston as well as UCLA, so we checked into your paperwork. You were already approved there as well. Jamie talked to a few people and they’ve found room for you to start in January. You’re in.”

Chelsea frowned in confusion. *Boston?* “How can I...? Are you saying he used his influence to get me in? And I still can’t afford it and I don’t want Jamie to pay for me.”

“Actually, I paid half and Jamie the other half. Baby, consider it a loan if you want, but it makes no sense for you to not go. Let us do this for you. Plus, he didn’t use his name for anything more than rushing the process a little. You were already accepted all on your own.”

She stayed silent for a minute, her gaze darting back and forth between the two of them. A trickle of hope stole through her. Getting to go away to university? Live on the east coast and explore another part of the world? Excitement tinged with an edge of uncertainty remained. Braden. How could she leave him? She touched his cheek lightly.

“You don’t mind if I go away?”

“Honestly? I’m going to miss you like crazy. I love you, baby, but at the same time I want you to go. Knowing you’ll be with Jamie makes it tolerable. And I expect you to email and video conference and send me tons of whatever the hell those weird things you type on the phone are.”

Chelsea let the budding happiness inside burst into full bloom. “You never answer my texts anyway.”

“No, but I read them.” Braden kissed her tenderly.

She nodded slowly before responding. “I’d be crazy to not leap at the opportunity, but guys, you should have included me in the conversations.”

Jamie shook his head. “Didn’t want you to be disappointed if I couldn’t swing it.”

“I understand, but I’m a full part of this relationship. Don’t leave me out anymore.” A bubble of inspiration hit. This might be the chance she’d been looking for. She planted her hands on her hips, raising her chin to challenge her men. “So while I want to say thank you for being so incredibly generous, I’m claiming a forfeit from both of you.”

Braden tweaked her nose and she smacked his hand away with a laugh. “Okay, baby. We give. You’re right, and we promise not to organize your life without you again. What’s our punishment? You want us to take you out to dinner?”

“I want to watch.” She crawled up on the back of the couch. Jamie flushed bright red and Braden grinned from ear to ear.

“Watch?”

“Yes, Jamie.” She fluttered her hand at him. “Just pretend I’m not here and go back to what you were doing before I came home.” Her sex tingled in anticipation.

“You don’t want to join us?” Braden asked, giving her a slow clothing-melting stare from top to bottom, and the tingle increased to an electric pulse.

“Oh, I’ll let you know when I want in on the action.” She crossed her arms and tapped her lips. “I think you should start by taking everything off. Makes it easier for the watching, you know.”

Jamie leaned over her to nuzzle at her neck, caging her on either side with his strong arms. “You’re a naughty girl.”

She reached down and pulled his shirt from his slacks. “You, Braden. Naked. Now.”

He stepped back and smirked as he stripped off his shirt. When he popped the button on his slacks Chelsea licked her lips. She’d had months to enjoy the contrasting beauty of her men. Jamie’s smooth, lean



torso, Braden's heavy muscles. The desire she felt for them both didn't seem to diminish, only grow stronger, and with it her heart's desire.

She was totally in love with them both.

Braden reached out and snagged Jamie's wrists, pulling him close and taking over the job of removing his slacks. Braden peeled down the waistband of Jamie's boxers and the evidence of his arousal sprang into view. Jamie hissed as Braden captured his erection in one hand and pumped lazily.

"Oh holy shit, that feels good." Jamie thrust his hips forward, his abdomen muscles tight, eyes closed. Chelsea undid her own pants and slipped them off, covering her clit with her palm to stop the deafening sound of her pulse from disturbing them.

Braden fisted Jamie a few more times before releasing him and removing his own clothing. He shifted lower on the couch, his hips resting in the middle of the seat. His cock rose straight into the air and traces of familiar blue flitted around him.

"Come here," Braden ordered, and Jamie laughed as he settled on top of Braden, his knees on either side of Braden's thighs. The position brought their cocks into contact and Chelsea sighed with delight as Jamie leaned closer.

"Don't you go getting bossy as well. Chelsea as a domme I'll accept for tonight, but I'm not your bottom." Jamie cupped Braden's skull in both hands and took his lips with a consuming kiss.

Darkness and light. Raw power melded with passion. Their contrasting skin tones made it appear as if an angel made love with one of the fallen. Jamie's blond hair fell across Braden in a curtain as she watched their tongues tangle. Braden used his teeth on Jamie's neck, biting rougher than he'd ever treated Chelsea, and Jamie growled. He reached between their bodies and clasped their rigid cocks together between his palms.

They panted as they moved together, the air filling with the scent from their bodies, shimmering lights increasing. Jamie stroked their shafts, rough and quick, as Braden dropped his head back on the couch.

"So fucking good. Harder, Jamie, oh damn...yes."

Chelsea stripped off her blouse and bra, letting the cool air in the room wash over her burning skin. The sights, the sounds, the smells—everything drove her own desire higher until she couldn't wait any longer.

She slid down to the seat and joined the action, slipping her hands around their necks and accepting their kisses in turn. Sweet whispered words of desire and sensual caresses continued and blended together. Skin on skin, fingers exploring and stroking. Jamie leaned back far enough to pull her between them and suddenly she was sandwiched, intimately tight against Braden's steel-hard cock. Moisture traced her belly. She lifted her hips to rub along him, trying to ease the ache in her clit, and the head of his erection breached her folds. One smooth motion buried him, filling her core.

“So God damn right.” Braden grasped her head and took her mouth with a heated kiss, making her shiver with the passion he shared. Behind her Jamie pressed his torso against her as he bit her shoulder.

“Can you take me too?” he asked and she moaned as she nodded. She wanted it all. He left them for a moment, returning with a tube of lubricant. Jamie touched her carefully, preparing her as Braden continued to thrust his cock upward. She thrilled as Braden suckled her breasts, nipping the peaks to hard points. Jamie eased a slippery finger, then two, into her ass, teasing the sensitive nerves of her anus until she couldn’t stand it.

“Now, take me,” she begged, pressing her hips back onto Jamie’s fingers as best she could while embedded on Braden’s cock.

Jamie rose behind her and together they held their breath until he’d pushed his way in, sliding tight against Braden until there was nothing but a thin barrier keeping them apart.

It wasn’t just about their bodies, oh-so-intimate as they moved within her. It wasn’t just the flares of St. Elmo’s fire swirling around their heads, caressing their skin. It was the words Braden whispered, the touch of Jamie’s hand over Braden’s jaw, the light of love shining in Braden’s eyes. The way they encouraged her to reach her peak, stroking and enticing until her climax enveloped her, rolling through her with undeniable power.

A force of nature taking her in its grasp.

It was the way they cherished her, and each other. She never wanted to be free.

## Epilogue

Braden shook the water out of his eyes as he exited the ocean and jogged up the beach to the condo. If he hurried, he still should have time to grab a shower before meeting them at the airport.

Talking on the phone and emailing was for the birds.

Still, it had been better than nothing. Having both Jamie and Chelsea gone for the past four months helped him realize just how much they meant to him. The only thing that made it bearable was that Jamie and Chelsea would spend the summer with him before the two of them had to leave again. May to August—it wasn't long enough, but he'd take every second he could get.

He sprinted up the stairs to the balcony of the condo. He'd gone for a swim to get the cobwebs out of his brain this morning. He was downright giddy with excitement.

They were coming home.

He stepped through the French doors and her scent hit him first. A sweet fragrance—honeysuckles or lilacs. Then he was slammed from the side as a pair of arms wrapped around him and Chelsea attached herself to him.

"Holy shit, you're here." He squeezed her tight, burying his face in her neck and taking in her perfume, letting it fill his head. "Oh God, I've missed you."

He kissed her, soaking in her taste, tangling his fingers in her hair. Her lips were soft and flavored like heaven, and he could have stood there all morning. Dripping wet and breathing her air. They separated with reluctance, staring at each other. Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Missed you too." She hugged him, resting her head on his chest. Braden looked around. Jamie had to be there as well. Sure enough, the man stood by their side, wearing an ear-to-ear grin.

"I didn't miss you at all," Braden joked. "Bed hog."

Jamie crushed Chelsea between them and offered his lips for a welcome-home kiss. Braden savored the contrast between his lovers' touch, between their tastes.

They were home.

By the time they managed to peel themselves apart, Braden was nearly dry.

"Go take a shower and wash the salt off. We brought breakfast with us. I'll get it ready." Jamie disappeared into the kitchen area. Chelsea walked with Braden toward the bedroom.

"You excited to be back?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Boston was lovely, and my classes were fabulous. Still, I missed Jaffrey's Cove, and I missed you. A lot."

He tugged her into the bathroom with him. "Join me?"

She grinned. "Jamie will be pissed if you ruin his meal."

"I need someone to scrub my back."

"Right, like we aren't going to be fooling around in three seconds flat if I get in that shower with you."

He wagged his brows. "Nothing wrong with that picture."

She slipped from his grasp and out the door. "I want you too, but first, breakfast."

Braden sighed in frustration. Now that they were here, mundane things like showers were a waste of time. Although he liked that Chelsea stood up to him. He showered and dressed in record time, rushing toward the most amazing aroma from his kitchen.

The table was set with a feast. Cinnamon buns, sausages, a bowl full of scrambled eggs.

"Hot damn." His stomach grumbled. Okay, maybe food first, then they could get to the welcome-home sex.

Jamie passed him a coffee cup and nudged him with his hip toward the table. "Sit, we've got a ton to tell you."

The three of them consumed the mountain of food while Chelsea shared about her classes. Jamie told stories about the students he'd taught. All the while Braden watched them carefully, soaking in their presence. They wouldn't be around for long, and he didn't want to spoil their time together longing for it to be different.

"You spoil me." Braden laid a hand on Jamie's shoulder, needing to touch, needing reassurance they really were there.

"I like cooking and it's better than the frozen dinners you've been nuking for the past four months, isn't it?"

Braden laughed. "Guilty as charged. I still want to know how a guy who grew up with maids and chefs taking care of him can cook so damn well."

Jamie shrugged. "I'm a good learner. And there's always something new to challenge me. Speaking of challenges..."

Chelsea and Jamie exchanged secretive glances and Braden couldn't take it anymore.

"All right, enough. You two have teased and hinted the whole meal. Spill."

"We're moving home." Chelsea beamed at him.

"What?"

Jamie leaned back in his chair. "Chelsea won't be going back for the next semester."

“You’re quitting?” Disappointment warred with excitement. He wanted her home, but he didn’t want her to give up on her dreams.

She rose from her chair and came to his side, resting her hand on his arm. “Not really.” Her smile grew larger. “I applied for special credit for the hours I’d put in at the museum here in Jaffrey’s Cove. The professor who checked my work was so impressed with the additions to the displays and media presentations I’d completed the past couple years, he marked and gave me credit for four full courses. I’m officially done my first year of studies in half a year’s time.”

“Holy crap.”

“It gets better. He’s fast-tracked me. Said I was one of his best students and since I seemed to work well with minimal supervision he set up a study-at-home program for me with him as a mentor. It won’t be the same degree as completing the university classes, but I’m good with that. Part of the reason I wanted to go away to college was to get out of Jaffrey’s Cove and see something of the world. I enjoyed my classes, but after living in the big city for the semester, I’ve had enough. The school wasn’t the be all and end all.”

Braden pulled her in for a giant bear hug. “I’m so proud of you. That’s incredible.”

“Plus...” Jamie rose as well and stood behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders. “I got the contract with the Metropolitan Museum of Art.”

Braden grinned at him. They’d debated and researched for months, trying to find a job that would allow Jamie enough freedom to continue to use his skills and let him return to Jaffrey’s Cove on a regular basis. “Congratulations. You’re the new acquisitions director?”

“Associate. I’ll be working under the curator to authenticate pieces they are looking to acquire. The added bonus is that I get to take an assistant with me. I happen to know this fabulous woman who is very talented...”

Braden leaned back with a jerk. Did he mean? “You can hire Chelsea?”

“No reason why not. It’s very common for couples who are involved to partner up on work like this. Our fieldwork will also be more than sufficient to satisfy the assignments and research she still needs to complete.”

Chelsea grinned up at him. “We’ll be gone for a couple of weeks at a time, but home between assignments. It’s about the best situation we could possibly have asked for.”

Braden cupped her face in his hands and pressed their lips together. Every time they left it would tear a tiny piece of his heart away. But having Chelsea achieve her dreams was worth it. “You’ll get to see the world, baby.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I know. And I’ll be with Jamie, and you’ll be here when we return.”

He rested their foreheads together, breathing in the scent of her. It wouldn’t be a normal lifestyle, but it was perfect for the three of them. “I might just have to join you on a trip or two, you know, take my vacation time somewhere exotic.”

Jamie nodded. “Easily done and that would be fantastic.” He knelt, enclosing Chelsea in his embrace but adding Braden to the circle. “This isn’t about taking her away from you. I hope you know that.”

Braden stared at Jamie’s beautiful sea-colored eyes. Chelsea—he’d always loved and desired her. Jamie—the man had snuck into his heart and soul. “How can I not want her to achieve a dream she’s had forever? And knowing that you’re with her makes me even happier. In fact, I think you two should get married.”

“Married?” Chelsea squeaked.

Jamie nodded enthusiastically. “That’s an excellent idea. While we could simply live together, being married will make insurance and other things easier. Plus, my mother will finally get off my back.”

“Your family approves of her, don’t they?” Strange how he’d gone from being fiercely jealous at the thought of anyone with Chelsea but him, and now he couldn’t imagine life without Jamie in it as well.

“My family loves her. The hints my mother dropped the last time we went for dinner were startlingly blunt, even for her.”

“Guys...” Chelsea said.

“Well, that works well. You two get married, and we can move into the other apartment I own here in town. It’s a little larger, and no one would think anything of you renting a part of it for the times you are in town. The merfolk don’t give a shit, and the humans in town would think it’s a smart way to care for your possessions—having the sheriff as your landlord.”

“Guys...”

Jamie continued. “As long as you’re sure about it. I thought we could have another ceremony in front of Alexia, confirming that it’s actually the three of us—”

“Hello, there is another person involved in this conversation.” Chelsea pushed herself away and turned to glare at them, arms crossed in front of her.

Braden stared at Jamie in confusion for a minute. He’d missed something and hoped Jamie caught it.

“Chels?” Jamie stood. “Did you not want to get married?”

She sniffed. “No.”

Braden swore. “Why not?”

Chelsea lifted her chin. “Because you didn’t ask me.” She twirled on one heel and left them both, retreating to the back of the condo.

Braden dropped his head into his hands while Jamie snickered. They grinned at each other.

“You really okay with me marrying her?” Jamie asked.

“Definitely. Only it looks like we’re going to have some groveling to do first. Hey, that ceremony, the one in front of Alexia?” Braden grabbed Jamie and held him. “You and me are a part of it.”

“Chelsea’s the center.”

Braden nodded. "She always will be, but there's no denying that you and I are connected as well." He leaned over to kiss Jamie. They got lost in each other for a minute, Braden tugging Jamie closer until the heat of their bodies meshed together.

"Ahem."

They broke apart to see Chelsea standing in the doorway of the kitchen, naked as a jaybird. She lifted a brow before strutting away, the rounds of her ass swaying from side to side.

"I'm ready to grovel," Jamie said.

"A very good idea. Let's go grovel together."

## About the Author

Vivian Arend has hiked, biked, skied and paddled her way around most of North America and parts of Europe. Throughout all the wandering in the wilderness, stories have been planted and they are bursting out in vivid colour. Paranormal, twisted fairytales, red-hot contemporaries—the genres are all over.

Between times of living with no running water, she home schools her teenaged children and tries to keep up with her husband—the instigator of most of the wilderness adventures.

She loves to hear from readers: [vivarend@gmail.com](mailto:vivarend@gmail.com). You can also drop by [www.vivianarend.com](http://www.vivianarend.com) for more information on what is coming next.



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Falling, Freestyle

*Slippery when wet...*

## Tidal Wave

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### *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.*

### *Enjoy the following excerpt for Tidal Wave:*

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."

*Double the firepower, triple the heat...*

## Light My Fire

© 2010 Jodi Redford

Aiden Fortune's orders are clear: Find the woman, claim her as a sexual sacrifice—and share her with his horndog twin brother. Distasteful as it is, the Drakoni council insists the ancient custom be honored. Or Aiden will be banished.

One glance at Dana Cooper, and Aiden is thrown into the dragon version of a tailspin. Claim her? Hell, yes, he'll claim her. Problem is, she has no idea her father signed away her destiny at birth.

Dana has dated enough whack-a-doodles to fill an insane asylum. Two gorgeous men claiming to be dragons? Par for the course. Until they give her a tantalizing glimpse of their inner beasts, which makes her think she's the one headed for a padded cell—for actually considering their offer of the hottest sex of her life, for life.

Her resistance melts away under the onslaught of two men who pack enough heat to set off smoke alarms in a six-block radius. Especially when she realizes she's falling for Aiden. But with a town full of dragon hunters and an enemy lurking in the shadows, surviving a week of Aiden and Jace's double-teaming will be the least of her problems...

*Warning: Contains two smokin' hot dragons and their not-so-unwilling sacrifice. A few wardrobe malfunctions and inappropriate use of paintbrushes. You might want to have your local fire department on speed dial.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Light My Fire:*

Aiden sank behind her onto the sleeping bag, the nylon material whispering a sensuous sigh. His radiant heat reached her before his skin did. Pressing his chest against her back, he branded her with all that toasty warmth, coaxing a purr of pleasure from deep in her throat. His fingers wrapped in her hair—not exactly gentle but also not rough to the point of pain—and tipped her head back. She caught the briefest flash of fire in his irises before his mouth claimed hers in a hot, possessive kiss.

She'd sensed the beast lurking within Aiden, but he'd always kept it in check. This time the dragon would not be denied and made its presence known. She felt its dominance, its mastery, in the hands holding her hostage. In the tongue plundering her mouth. And she loved it.

Dear God, how she loved it.

Writhing against Aiden, she bit at his bottom lip, a strange desperation clawing at her to please both man and beast. He groaned, and giddy triumph raced through her. Their tongues rasped together, a marked contrast to the soft flicker Jace was employing on her nipple. Friction taunted every pleasure point in her

body. Even Aiden's thigh and the crotch of her jeans did their part to add to the torment, forcing her damp panties to ride against her clit, making her squirm.

Emboldened by the fever lust rocketing through her veins, she groped around blindly until she encountered their rock-hard erections. She stroked the velvet-sheathed steel of the twin shafts, earning a guttural groan from Aiden and Jace. Her fingertips swirled over the silky heads of their cocks and encountered the pre-come weeping from both slits. Taking advantage of the natural lubricant, she slicked up and down their lengths, pumping faster. Almost in unison, they clamped onto her wrists, halting her. She groaned in frustration.

"Patience, baby." Ducking his head, Jace traced the bow of her mouth with his tongue. "I want to watch my brother sink balls-deep into your sweet pussy while you suck me."

Aiden's harsh inhale ruffled her hair and she felt the rapid thud of his heartbeat against her shoulder blade. Both were strong indications that he not only liked Jace's suggestion, he was fully on board with making it happen. But was she?

Her clit throbbed in anticipation. *Guess that answers that question.* Reluctantly, she released their cocks. "I—" She struggled to moisten her suddenly dry mouth. "I want that too."

Jace's eyes darkened and Aiden's heartbeat pounded faster against her skin. She reached for the button on her jeans but Jace brushed her clumsy fingers aside. His tongue parted her lips, delving inside while he freed the button and eased her jeans down her hips. She scooted onto her rump so he could remove her tennis shoes and pull her pants the rest of the way off. Aiden leaned over her. Feathering a lock of her hair aside, he kissed her with exquisite tenderness as Jace slowly dragged her panties down her legs. Jace's finger dipped inside her and she gasped, arching her back.

"So wet and tight. You are one lucky bastard, bro." Jace crooked his finger, hitting her G spot while his thumb brushed over her swollen clit. A strangled cry lodged in her throat and she clutched frantically at Aiden's bulging biceps. Lifting his head, Aiden revealed a face flushed dark with determination and passion. A muscle twitching in his jaw, he glanced at Jace. Without verbalizing a single word, Jace ducked beneath the edge of the sleeping bag and picked up a small foil packet. He flipped it toward Aiden.

She stared at the condom wrapper before glaring at Jace. "Presumptuous much?"

He hitched his shoulder with a chuckle. "More like hopeful." Grasping her hands, he helped her up, not quite distracting her from the sound of foil ripping behind her. She imagined Aiden smoothing the condom over his cock. Imagined that thick cock sliding deep inside her pulsing core. Her breath quickened.

Jace sat back on his haunches and stroked his erection, reminding her that he was the proud owner of a very nice package of his own. She licked her lips.

"Sweetness, you giving me a preview of what you can do with that tongue?"

She gave a coquettish bat of her lashes. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

“Fuck yeah.” He leaned forward and nibbled her bottom lip. She paid him back by capturing his tongue and sucking it between her teeth, providing a mock demonstration of what she had in store for him. A drawn-out moan that was too sexy for words shuddered from Jace. They broke the kiss and he stared at her. “*Damn.*”

Poking a finger in the center of one of Jace’s sculpted pecs, she scooted him backwards. “I need a little working room here, fella.”

He happily complied and she dropped onto all fours. For a moment she suffered a bout of self-consciousness about giving Aiden a bird’s-eye view of her generously proportioned butt. *Oh, hell with it.* Pushing her female insecurities aside, she contemplated the gorgeous cock bobbing in front of her face. Using only the tip of her tongue, she traced the prominent vein running along the underside of his shaft. Aiden had seemed to really like it when she did that to him, so odds were good that Jace would too. Reaching the mushroom-shaped cap, she delicately licked the glistening drop pearling from the slit. Jace’s abdomen quivered and tensed.

Oh yeah, he most definitely liked it.

She took Jace all the way into her mouth, the fat knob of his dick hitting the back of her throat just as Aiden eased two fingers into her. The sensation was so unexpected and breathtakingly good that she inhaled hard and almost choked on Jace.

“You okay, sweetness?”

She barely registered Jace’s concerned tone. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the fingers stretching her open, making her ready. Wet, succulent noises came from her pussy, verifying that she was more than ready for everything Aiden had to give her. She pushed backward, mindlessly riding his hand, wishing it was the thickness of his cock filling her instead. Sliding her mouth off Jace, she sent Aiden a desperate stare over her shoulder. “Please. I—I need you to—” She swallowed, trying to focus, trying to shove the words past her lips. “To take me. Now.”

Aiden’s eyes glowed with an intense blue fire. Growling, he fisted his cock and rubbed its latex-sheathed head against her slit. He skimmed along her labia and prodded her sensitized clit. Her entire body jolted at the contact. “*Ooh.*”

Jace cupped her jaw, bringing her attention back to his waiting erection. Disoriented, she bobbed at him and missed. Steadying her, he guided his shaft past her lips. He tasted wonderful, musky with a slight salty tang from the pre-come flowing freely, but all she could think of was Aiden and his wicked taunting.

Panting, desperate and needy for the first thrust she knew was coming, she waited.

And waited.

Impatient, she reached for Aiden. His fingers cuffed her wrists, holding her immobilized. The sense of powerlessness sent a shock of excitement careening through her. Aiden nudged at her opening again, this

time with obvious intent. The delirious grunts coming from her throat probably should have embarrassed the hell out of her. Thank God she was too blindsided by lust to care.

Aiden's furnace-like heat blanketed her back, his tongue tracing each vertebrae of her upper spine as his cock teased her slippery folds. His lips reached her shoulder and his teeth grazed her skin. A love bite to mark his territory? He released one hand and briefly danced his fingers across her clit before he eased inside her in agonizingly slow increments. She bucked wildly and he canted his hips back, denying her silent plea. The bastard was bound and determined to drive her insane.

In sharp contrast to Aiden's leisurely conquering of her body, Jace's movements sped up, the silky gland of his cock tunneling toward the back of her throat. On his retreat, she lightly scraped her teeth over the plump head.

A hiss broke from Jace. "*Fuck*. Sweetness, you're killing me."

She hummed around Jace and he jerked in response. He tightened his hold on her hair, his grip sending a tiny sting through her scalp before his fingers flexed and relaxed. Aiden chose that moment to thrust the final few inches of his shaft into her, filling her completely on one languorous glide.

*Oh God.*



*Animal attraction is the essence of their power.*

## Shifters' Captive

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### *Magical Ménages, Book 1*

Waitress Sherrie Stolz never thought she'd need her chatting-up skills to play along with a hot, sexy kidnapper who rants about were-animals and psychic possession. Then he proves his story by changing into a wolf before her eyes.

Human contact never interested John Walker, but his mission is desperate. The pack seer insists Sherrie is the only one who can save his pack from a rash of mysterious comas. His connection with Sherrie is instant, powerful and beyond rational explanation...until a third piece of the puzzle enters the picture.

Grant Perron follows his instincts only to find his prize in the hands of his rival. He's poised for battle—until he learns his panther shifter clan suffers the same fate as John's pack. And there's more. When the three of them touch, the primal, erotic power surge swells like the waves of an earthquake.

Sherrie's hands—and bed—are suddenly full, figuring out how to manage two snarling alpha males without giving in to the urge to knock their heads together. And channel her new-found power before a villain uses it to destroy them all...

*Warning: Contains abduction, m/f/m ménage, oral & anal sex, rough sex, wilderness sex, astral projection sex and plain old sex in the bedroom—times three.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Shifters' Captive:*

"We're trapped." Sherrie stated the obvious as she craned her neck to look up the wall of rock. Somewhere at the top was the cave where their nemesis lived. Was this avalanche a coincidence or had he meant to kill or capture them?

John moved around the perimeter, pacing the limits of their enclosure. Perron got to his feet, tossing the bloodied T-shirt aside and scaled a pile of stony rubble. He attempted to climb over the boulder that had nearly crushed him.

"Damn it!" he roared in frustration as he fell back and landed on his feet.

"I told you rushing into this was a bad idea," John said. "Now we're trapped. I'm sure it's no accident."

Grant scowled and started to take off his shirt. "You can stand here and complain about being stuck. I'm shifting and finding a way out."

Without another word, Walker followed his example, quickly stripping. Once again their bodies rippled. Charged static electricity lifted Sherrie's hair and made her arms prickle. Suddenly, she longed

fiercely to be able to shift too. Into what form she had no clue, but the idea of releasing the primitive animal inside her to howl and run was deeply seductive.

She pressed back against the stone as the two wild beasts ranged around the pen in a similar way to their human counterparts. The wolf nosed the ground and whined as he searched for a break in the rock pile big enough to squeeze through. The big cat gathered its weight and sprang with a powerful thrust of his hind legs, but the leap carried him only halfway up the boulders. His nails scrabbled on stone before he fell back into the debris with a howl of rage, tail lashing.

*There's no way out, but feed me their energies and I'll release you.* The voice sounded in Sherrie's head as clearly as if she wore headphones. She clapped her hands to her ears. It was one thing to receive silent communications in a dream, but shocking in her waking life.

*Join me, and together we can have limitless power.*

*Get out of my mind!* She shook her head, clearing it of the seductive haze that had settled over her like morning mist. She was beginning to understand how this guy worked—a chance meeting, mesmerizing eye contact and next thing he was inside your mind, manipulating it. Well, she was too strong to give in to that.

Besides, her animal companions were starting to squabble. Perron brushed past Walker in his furious pacing to and fro, and the wolf bared his teeth and growled. In response, the giant cat roared. The pair faced off, hackles raised, their bodies tensed to attack.

“Hey!” Sherrie shouted. “Stop it!”

They ignored her and continued to stalk in a circle around each other, gazes locked together. John's menacing growl rumbled louder. Grant's ears were laid flat. He hissed and sprang at John, his huge body bowling him over. They wrapped around each other, teeth flashing, claws ripping, tumbling over and over. The wolf managed to grip the cat's throat and pin him for a moment, but a heartbeat later, the much bigger panther was on top.

“Shit!” Sherrie could see John was going to get the worst of it since Grant outweighed him and had razor sharp cat-claws. She scooped up a rock and threw it at the fighting animals. It didn't slow them down. They continued to bite and claw at each other with a ferocious noise that made gooseflesh rise on her skin.

Sherrie picked up a larger rock and heaved it at the panther's head. It crashed into his shoulder and knocked him sideways. The panther released his opponent and turned toward her, showing sharp fangs. Her heart pounded. At that moment, she was terrified for her life. These were two dangerous animals who might not remember their human side in the heat of battle.

“Stop fighting,” she yelled. “This isn't helping.”

The wolf crawled from beneath Perron's body and staggered to his feet, whining and shaking his head. One ear was bent and bleeding. The panther backed off, still hissing, before turning to lick his wounded flank.

“We have to work together to get out of here. Stop acting like idiots.” She felt like the idiot, talking to a pair of animals as if they’d understand her. She wondered how much of their intellect was functioning. Moving closer, she held out a hand toward each beast, palms open. She touched John’s muzzle, the top of Grant’s head, and stroked both soothingly. Soft fur caressed her palms and, once again, an electric charge entered her from contact with the two shifters. Lust, power, strength and awareness flowed through her.

Almost simultaneously, the two beasts began to change to human form. She felt the vibration, the twisting beneath her hands, and pulled away to watch while skin replaced fur and animal features became human once more.

Given their situation, she shouldn’t have had a lustful thought to spare at the sight of their nude bodies, yet her body seemed to have a will of its own. One glimpse of John’s dark-haired chest and groin and his semi-rigid cock made her stomach flutter. He bent his head to examine the clawed flesh on his side, and she longed to kiss his wound better. Grant looked just as sexy with his rumpled blond hair, one hand rubbing a band of tooth marks around his throat. An image of the pair of them locked together, not in combat, but in a sweaty sexual clinch, flashed in her mind. Liquid heat bloomed between her legs.

“Are you two quite finished?” she demanded, using anger to distract her from the mounting urgency of her desire. She threw a pair of jeans at Grant, and he caught them, but didn’t put them on. They dangled from his hand as he stood like a glorious statue and examined their rocky prison.

“Maybe we could boost you up,” John said. “You could find your way back to the Blazer and drive to town for help.”

Sherrie stared at the imposing height. “I think we’re pretty well trapped.”

She had a growing sense this was playing out exactly as it must and they’d find it impossible to escape their cage even if she was able to reach the top of the rock. They were trapped here together for a reason. Deep inside, she felt something was about to happen between her and these two men—a union that couldn’t be stopped. It both frightened and excited her, but it was undeniable. Only together could they free themselves and overcome their enemy.

Grant was near panic, although he’d never let the others know it. He hated being caged with a fiery passion. His palms were slick with sweat, and his breathing was shallow, but damned if he’d have a panic attack in front of Walker. He’d turned his fear into rage and directed it at the wolf. Rolling around on the ground biting and scratching had been better than falling apart. Now he scanned the top of the cliff wall and the morning sky overhead. Somewhere up there was the asshole who was playing with them like marionettes.

“Hey.” Sherrie was suddenly beside him, offering a bottle of water from the knapsack. “You look really pale. Sit down and rest.” She pressed her hand on his shoulder, and the warm contact distracted him from his apprehension. In two seconds flat, he went from near panic at the idea of being trapped to wanting

her with a bone-shaking desire. His libido always ran hot, but his instant reaction to this woman was abnormal. More magic like the dream travel.

Grant stared down into her light green eyes then at her plump lower lip that beckoned him to kiss it. Obeying his instinct, he dipped his head to cover her soft mouth with his. Potent energy passed between them. He closed his eyes and drank it in—until a hard hand thumped his shoulder, pushing him away.

“Hey!” Walker stood between them, fists clenched.

Sherrie grabbed his arm. “It’s all right.” She put her hand on his cheek, drawing his attention to her face, and repeated softly, “It’s all right.”

Rising on her toes, she kissed the wolf, a light peck at first that soon became a deep, searching kiss. Grant’s already hard cock stiffened even more. He palmed his erection, squeezing lightly as he watched the hungry mashing of lips and tongue. Then he put a hand on Sherrie’s hip, completing the joining, and once again a powerful jolt crackled through all three of them, their energies entwining as well as their bodies.

Grant accepted the sensation with a satisfied grunt, but the wolf broke away, his eyes wide and worried. “Damn!”

“This is supposed to happen, the three of us together.” Sherrie sounded confident, almost serene. “Can’t you feel it, John? Don’t fear it or fight it.”



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