

J . M . S T E N G L

The Little
Siren
FARAWAY CASTLE

The Little
Siren
FARAWAY CASTLE
J. M. STENGL



© 2018 by J.M. Stengl

Published by Rooglewood Press

www.RooglewoodPress.com

www.JMStengl.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

This volume contains works of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of each author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Book design by [Bulbous Squirrel](#)

*Dedicated to Audrey with love from Grammy.
Someday you'll be old enough to read and enjoy Kammy's story!*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Coming Soon!](#)

[Excerpt from CINDER ELLIE](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER ONE



I have never heard anything more terrifying in my life than the scream that rang over the lake that summer morning. I stared upward as my satchel slipped from my nerveless fingers. Then a shadow passed overhead, above the lake's surface, larger than any bird I'd ever seen. What in the world was up there?

I slowly surfaced. Stupid, I know. Curiosity is one of my biggest weaknesses. At first the sun's glare off the lake nearly blinded me, used as I was to the dim green depths of the lake, but then I saw it, the biggest bird I'd ever— No, make that the biggest bird *in the world*, like an eagle but much, much larger. It dived toward a tall pine tree standing on a spit of land. That's when I heard a shout—a deep human voice—and stopped being afraid for myself. One of the resort's walking trails passed right along that shore. Was the bird attacking a Faraway Castle guest?

Moments later (though it seemed an hour to me) it rose back into the sky, its huge talons still empty. Had the man escaped, or did he need help? I dove under and swam at top speed toward that tree.

As I approached, I could hear sounds reverberating through the water, including the human voice. The bird's black shadow passed over me, and for the first time I wondered if it could see me beneath the surface. A bird that size could snatch a mermaid out of the water like a seagull snagging a perch.

I heard the human talking again, but he didn't sound either frightened or angry. What was going on up there? Reluctant to surface again, I tried to distinguish shapes through the rippling water above me. There was the huge pine. The giant bird seemed to circle it. Nothing else was distinguishable.

Frustrated, I looked around. Small fish zipped away then turned back to stare at me. The lake bottom was muddy and weedy here, with occasional rocks and the skeletons of trees. Water

lilies and reeds grew in profusion nearer the shore. These could serve to hide me, or they might entangle me. If I swam carefully through them, maybe I would find cover beneath saplings and brush overhanging the shore . . .

Curiosity could be deadly. But this wasn't just nosiness; that monster bird was hunting a human. How could I swim away and leave another sentient being to almost certain doom?

I slipped into the thicket of waterweeds and swam toward the shore. A shadow overhanging the water turned out to be an old willow tree. The water beneath it was shallow and smelled strange, but those leafy branches provided decent cover. I propped my hands on a log that lay in the water at an angle, careful to keep my tail away from the muddy lake floor. Nasty things tend to live in such places.

I peered above the surface. Nothing of interest in sight. I pushed myself higher but still couldn't see much beyond the willow's veiling limbs. After some maneuvering, I sat on the log and shimmied my hips up it until I could push the branches aside.

On the shore amid the tall weeds surrounding the base of the huge pine crouched a human boy, my age or maybe a little older. He gripped the tree's trunk with both hands and peered up and around. In profile, I saw a long nose and angular jaw. He wore black frame-things over his eyes and hooked over his ears. Shaggy hair hung in his face.

Then he gave a yelp and flung himself to his left, still clutching the tree. Wind whistled in the bird's feathers. Those huge wings pounded the air. It swooped off at the last second, its gleaming talons just missing the tree trunk. I felt the wind on my face, and the willow branches whipped about after it passed.

"Magnificent!" I heard the boy mutter, and then he gave a hoarse whoop as if in celebration. He had a long skinny body with arms and legs to match. The clothing on his upper half was open in front, and when he turned my way, I saw a gold chain around his neck as he reached for a pocket on his trouser leg. To my surprise, he pulled out a tablet. I watched in disbelief as he jotted something down with a pencil, glanced up at the bird, then wrote more. He was studying the bird. His life was in danger every moment, and he took notes?

The bird attacked again with another whoosh, and my heart forgot to beat. This time the boy didn't shout or comment—he was too busy avoiding those talons. But he succeeded, and the bird again soared away, screaming vengeance.

"Hey!" I called. "Over here."

He turned, and when he saw me wave his eyes looked huge. I had never been close enough to a human before to see that those black frame-things, like he wore, held tiny windows of glass. I didn't have time to ponder the absurdity of this just then. "C'mon!" I waved again, beckoning. "Hide here under the willow where it can't get at you."

He shook his head, panting for breath, and said, "Can't. Historic research. Endangered species." Then he dove behind the tree as the bird once again whooshed past. This time it hadn't flown as high before returning, and it nearly got him. I heard a tearing sound, and the boy gave a yelp.

I was so astounded by his refusal that I forgot to be frightened. "Seriously?" I said as he scrambled to his feet. "That bird is going to kill you, and then no one will ever read the notes you've written. Come now, while it's not looking."

He scowled. "Stop distracting me. This is incredibly momentous. If only I had time to sketch . . ."

I couldn't let him die. Fool or not, he was worth saving. And what use is power if I never use it? "Leave the bird and come to me," I called, saturating my voice with siren magic.

The boy turned, his face slack, then made a dash, leaped right through the willow limbs, and landed on both feet with a great splash the bird must have heard. I flopped off my log in my hurry to grip the back of his shirt and haul him into deeper water. His thrashing made it harder to tow him, so I grabbed his arms from behind and spoke softly into his ear, using my normal voice: "Don't touch the bottom; nasty biting things live down there."

He seemed to freeze as I spoke, but as soon as I released him, he moved his arms and feet in a regular motion that kept his head above water. He kept his eyes on the slivers of blue sky between the willow branches. Above us, the bird gave a deafening screech then wheeled around the pine in widening circles, searching for its lost prey.

I wasn't sure if a bird might be smart enough to perch on that pine and wait us out. If it did, I could possibly swim away fast enough to avoid its attack, but no human could.

"It's going to dive right into this tree," the boy said. "It sees us."

"Can you swim?" I asked.

His head bobbed an affirmative. "Where to?"

“I’ll lead the way. Take several breaths, then hold one and dive that direction.” I pointed. “We have to swim through the swampy part before we reach deep enough water. I’ll hold your arm and tow you, but you’ll have to kick.”

Keeping his eyes on the bird, he pulled the framed glasses off his face and folded in the side pieces that had rested over his ears, then drew and released several breaths. I grasped his left arm, waited for him to draw breath and nod, then dived.

I could see well enough underwater, though the boy’s feet had stirred up mud and debris. He stroked hard with his free arm and frog-kicked. We made it through the weeds with only a few minor snags, but there was one more dangerously shallow area before the open lake. I hoped the churned-up mud and algae would hide our passage well enough that the bird wouldn’t try to snatch us out of the water. I was sure it could catch and carry us both away.

This thought helped me put all-out effort into that swim. The boy caused less drag than I expected, and we were covering the shallow area quickly when a shadow passed overhead. Seeing its angle, I jinked sharply right, shoving the boy aside.

Splash! From the corner of my eye I saw huge talons pass just beside my left ear, and a wing slapped the water above us so hard that it knocked us into the lake floor. This was a good thing, because the bird’s beak (larger than my head) slashed toward me but could only slice a few scales from my tail. That stung a little but didn’t even draw blood.

And then we were in deeper water where the bird couldn’t hope to catch us. But I knew the boy must need air by this time. After all this effort, what if I drowned him! Did I dare take him up for a breath? I glanced over my shoulder and saw churning water where the bird struggled either to swim back to land or to take off again. Even though it was floundering, I still hesitated to surface so soon.

But I when I looked at the boy’s face, I knew there was no choice. He was desperate. I took him by the elbows and hauled him to the surface—he was heavier than he looked. We emerged into brilliant blue sky and sunshine sparkling off the lake, and I felt all bright and cheery as if we hadn’t just nearly been skewered by gigantic talons. I hadn’t enjoyed myself this much in . . . I couldn’t think how long. Maybe ever! While the boy gasped for breath, I looked for the bird and spotted it just dragging itself onto the spit of land, shaking its wings and head, and looking scruffy and furious.

“Can you swim again?” I asked. The boy was breathing hard, but his color looked better. I was pretty sure humans were not supposed to be blue. “I’m going to take you to my island. The bird can’t get us there.” The idea came to me as I spoke. What better place to take refuge than my tropical-island home? And I could keep the boy to myself for an hour or two. My mother would be furious, but I really didn’t care.

Treading water, he slipped the framed glasses on his face and stared back at the bird, which hadn’t yet noticed us, being too occupied with shaking water from its feathers. “I never believed they existed.”

“Birds?” I asked before thinking.

“Turuls,” he replied as if my question had not been stupid. “What a marvelous creature! No one will believe I saw it.”

“And you nearly became a trul’s supper,” I reminded him. “Where did it come from? I’ve never seen one here before. A bird like that, I would remember.”

“Turul, not trul.” He finally looked at me, but I got the uncomfortable feeling he was laughing somewhere behind that blank face. “Never mind. They come from Tiszaroff and surrounding kingdoms.”

Land countries, of course. I had no idea where Tiszaroff might be.

The boy could hardly take his eyes off that bird. He’d just been rescued by a mermaid. What was so stinking special about a big bird?

Forget him.

I swam away. Slowly. On the surface. Yes, I was hoping he would follow.

He soon caught up with me. “Hey, thanks for the rescue.” Then he turned and headed toward shore, a good fifty yards away.

“Wait! Where are you going?” I checked on the turul. “That bird will be after you again in a moment.”

He paused to stare toward the preening bird. If he insisted on swimming off alone, what could I do? Drag him underwater to keep him alive? I really didn’t want to siren-call him again so soon.

I tried to sound inviting. “Please come to my island. We need to go before the bird dries out enough to fly.”

“Can’t it pick us off the island?”

“No lake birds or animals can come ashore. I will take you inside the barrier.”

Again he looked from me to the shore to the bird. Then he swam toward me, his expression regretful. “It was checking out a nesting site, and I got too close.”

He seemed to focus on everything except our present danger. “The last thing we need is a turul nesting beside Faraway Lake.” When I looked back this time, the bird’s wings were outspread and quivering. It stared directly at us, thinking of revenge and supper.

I finally had a useful idea. Ducking underwater, I called, “Nelumbo, come to me!”

When I surfaced again, the boy looked startled and wary. “What was that sound?”

“I called for help,” she said. “The lake serpent.”

Interest sparked in his eyes. Score! But just then I caught movement from the corner of my eye and turned to see the turul take off. It skimmed the surface of the water, turning in a large circle and rising with each beat of those vast wings.

I turned on him and said, “Can you swim fast underwater, or should I tow you? That bird will be on us in another minute.”

His eyes were back on the bird. I tried again. “I can hold you under your arms, unless you’d rather hold on to me.”

That got his attention, but his eyes had a blank look that made me want to clock him one over the head . . . and made me blush. I hadn’t thought through how he might hold onto me. Mermaids don’t wear much in the way of clothing. Idiot!

Which of us was the idiot is open to debate.

“Fine. I’ll hold on to you.” I moved behind him, grabbed under his arms, and said, “Take a few good breaths, then hold one and dive.”

His chest expanded and deflated twice, then he took a third breath and ducked underwater. I leaped over him and plunged down into the lake, swimming hard. The boy kicked too; I felt the extra push.

Weeds carpeted the lake floor below, and I spotted a few young tench and a large catfish. Then an enormous, spiky head and thick, sinuous body appeared below us. I felt the boy go tense in my grasp, and his head snapped back into my ribs hard enough to hurt. I couldn’t help laughing a little at his expense.

Nelumbo the lake serpent turned to face us, tilted his head, and gave us a quizzical look.

“There’s a huge bird hunting us on the surface,” I explained. “Can you help us?”

He gave the boy another look then flowed upward, his scaly body undulating gracefully. With him nearby I dared to surface, giving the boy a chance to breathe. He sprayed water, wiped his face, spun to stare at me, and gasped, “That serpent came because you called it?”

“Of course. Look.” I pointed beyond him, and he spun about, treading water.

The turul wheeled high overhead; I felt its burning eyes fixed on us. However, not ten feet away was Nelumbo’s broad head with its fleshy whiskers, and his eyes followed the bird. Would he protect us if the turul attacked? I thought so, but one never knows about lake monsters.

With a jerk of my head I indicated the island’s cliffs, now a short swim away. “Once we reach the rocks surrounding the island, we’ll be safe. Dive once more?”

He nodded. Again I swam behind him, grabbed hold under his arms, and dived, trying not to think how solid and alive his body felt. One more sprint. As soon as we passed through the division between cold lake water and warm ocean waves, the lakebed rose sharply beneath us, sprouting tall volcanic columns with the island just beyond. I hauled the boy up to the surface and made myself let go. He flailed a little at first then grabbed hold of the nearest rock.

I had brought a human boy to Palau Kalah, the lost island. My chest felt tight and my stomach hurt, I was so tense and happy. There’s no simple explanation for my reactions. I am a siren, which might explain how possessive I felt right then, but I think it was more than instinct. Instead of wishing him harm, I wanted only to keep him safe and happy.

I knew I couldn’t keep him, yet for the moment he was mine. I had rescued him. And even though he was a strange-looking creature, I considered him perfectly beautiful.

Hearing the turul’s hunting cry, I turned to face it, announcing, “We’re safe now.”

The bird flew directly at us.

The boy shouted something at me.

I saw the turul’s blazing eyes, its beak gaping, talons extended.

I remember thinking *perhaps* I should take cover after all, when a hand grabbed my arm and hauled me behind the rock. I’m pretty sure I screamed, and I know I hit my head and scraped my side. There was a whistling sound, a splash, and a deafening screech of fury—then the frantic percussion of the bird’s wings as it fought to regain altitude and avoid crashing into the cliffside.

In the midst of this chaos, I was clinging to the rock like a mussel, my tail hanging limp. The boy was behind me, his hands gripping the rock on either side. I could feel his heartbeat against my back, and his weight pressed my ribcage into a protruding rock. It was terribly

uncomfortable, but I didn't want to move. I could see that his fingers were bleeding. The volcanic rocks were brutal on skin.

"You said it couldn't follow us here!" the boy said in my ear, his tone accusing.

"I didn't expect turuls to be magical," I admitted. Heat rushed into my face, shame and embarrassment combined.

He didn't speak, but as soon as the next wave receded, he hauled himself up to peer around the side of the rock. I pulled myself up beside him, my arms shaking. He seemed unaware of my presence as he watched the turul wheel back around over the lake. Its beak opened in another harsh scream, and its sharp eyes calculated its next attack on us.

It did not intend to fail again.

"Superb!" the boy said, looking almost hypnotized. "What a bird!"

But I shouted, "Nelumbo, help!"

No weedy face appeared. Nothing happened. So much for having a monster on my side.

The bird began its dive, and I grabbed the boy's arm. I think I was vaguely hoping we could dodge another attack and make it to one of the many caves riddling the island's shore.

When the turul was so close I could count its talons, the lake erupted. Nelumbo the lake monster made a mighty lunge, lifting more than half his forty-some-foot length from the water. Seeing the toothy maw rising at it from below, the turul gave a squawk and nearly turned a flip in the air.

"Yes!" I shouted.

"No!" the boy cried in horror.

The great jaws closed with a loud chop.

And Nelumbo fell with an epic splash, his teeth bristling with tail feathers.

Still squawking, the lucky turul flapped toward open sky.

"Too bad!" I shouted after it. "Go back where you belong, you overgrown goose!"

Nelumbo hadn't surfaced, but I addressed the big waves he'd made. "Thank you! Better luck next time, Nelumbo." The end of his tail appeared above the surface, wiggled, then slipped out of sight.

CHAPTER TWO



The boy's eyes blazed at me. "Better luck next time'? What are you thinking! That monster nearly killed a *turul!* Do you have any idea how tragic that would have been? There are lake and sea monsters all over the world, but the *turul* is a living legend, a creature out of mythology!"

I blazed right back. "Oh, did I spoil your happy ending? Guess I should have done the environmentally responsible thing and let the *turul* kill you, which it fully intended to do. But then, you really should have let it carry me off to feed its nestlings; the world is overpopulated with merfolk anyway." I watched his gaze fall then added, "Nelumbo merely chased it off. Your legendary bird is short a few tailfeathers. Feathers grow back. So stop your whining!"

He stared down into the water, his forehead creased. When he spoke again, he said only, "I dropped my eyeglasses when I grabbed you."

Trying to hold a conversation with this boy was like trying to catch a jellyfish in my hands—impossible and painful. Were all humans this disconnected?

"Thank you for that," I said, feeling heat rise in my cheeks. "For grabbing me, I mean. I was going to dive, but it would have been too late."

A pause. "You towed me all the way here." His comment connected to mine, sort of, but his tone was flat, as if our adventure had meant nothing.

"I thought we would be safe here," I said. "It was a foolish mistake."

He did finally look at me, but again his expression was blank. I've seen more emotion in the eyes of a moray eel.

I needed space to think. "Excuse me a moment." I submerged and skimmed the sandy ocean floor while thinking. Was he angry? I couldn't read him at all. He'd lost his eyeglass thing while saving me from my own idiocy, and if it had fallen through the barrier, it was lost for good in the ocean across the world. All because I forgot that the *turul* was magical. Duh! He might never forgive me for being so stupid. I wasn't sure I could forgive myself.

Why did I like him so much? Not only was he human, he was nearly impossible to talk to. And my mother would kill me . . .

A glint of light caught my eye, and there were the dark frames like empty eye sockets at the very line where lake mud met ocean sand. In fact, one of the folding bits appeared to be missing. But when I picked up the strange device, the part reappeared.

When my mother moved our island from a tropical ocean to a lake high in the mountains of Adelboden on the opposite side of the world, she had encountered a few logistical problems. Such as what to do with the lake water displaced by the island, how to keep the salt and fresh waters from mixing, and how to keep the creatures of both habitats safe and happy. Her magical fixes seemed odd, but they worked. The tropical creatures never knew that their island wasn't in the ocean, and most of the lake creatures never saw the island at all. Weather was another issue altogether, but may I simply say that Mother knows her business.

When I turned to swim back up, I saw the boy not far above me, his eyes squinting in the bright water, his gold hair floating around his head. He gave me an awkward little wave, and I felt instantly better. With a flick of my tail I rose and extended the glasses to him, but he swam to the surface instead of taking them.

His head disappeared above water, and I saw him suck in a deep breath. How strange! I've always taken for granted my ability to breathe both water and air. Why not? Both are rich in oxygen. Yet most creatures can breathe only one or the other.

Rising slowly, I studied his legs. He wore trousers, like mermen do, but I knew that his entire body must have skin instead of scales. He moved his feet in alternating circular patterns, and I could see his extended toes, like stubby fingers. How fascinating! Inefficient for swimming, yet far more useful than a tail was for walking.

I realized he might wonder what I was looking at, with my face level with his feet, so I popped up to the surface. He did give me a wary glance.

"I've never seen human feet up close before," I said quickly.

Instead of responding, he announced, "I cannot swim much longer." Then he held out one hand for the framed glasses, which I still clutched.

I felt foolish and inconsiderate. "I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking." I handed over the frames then took his hand and tugged. "This way." I took him along the western edge of the island, the side facing away from Faraway Castle and closest to the lakeshore.

That's where I mostly swim, out of sight of the high-class resort where rich, titled, and royal humans from all over the world flock every summer, and often in winter for ski vacations. The castle side of the lake gets crowded and noisy; and even though humans can't see me unless I speak to them, who wants to risk getting accidentally whacked with a canoe paddle or run over by a ski boat?

We headed for an area of flat rocks within a cove, sun-bathed but partially hidden from the shore by more of those vertical volcanic rocks. I towed him to a broad stone with a wave-worn surface. "Can you climb up?"

"Sure." Shivering, he hauled his body from the waves, crawled up, and sprawled in the sunlight. His chest rose and fell rapidly, and he propped one forearm across his eyes, gripping the eyeglasses in that hand.

While he wasn't looking, I swam a short distance away underwater then charged the rock at an upward angle, checking my speed at the key moment. I landed facedown beside him with only a minor "splat," then quickly planted my palms on the rock and lifted my upper body. He was probably peeking at me under his arm, but since I couldn't help that, I just rolled to one side, neatly folded my tail, and sat upright. The rock was hot.

"Please tell me why you wear windows on your face," I said all in a rush.

He lifted his arm far enough to stare at me from beneath it. "You really don't know?"

I lifted one shoulder. "How would I know?"

The boy sat up, unfolded his glasses, and shoved them onto his face. "I wear these glasses to correct my vision. Without them I can't see clearly much past the end of my nose."

"When you look at me without your glasses, what do I look like?"

"Blurry, unless you're really close."

Not that he cared to look at me now. He propped his forearms on his upraised knees and stared about with avid curiosity. The lake's surface rippled slightly in a breeze, but ocean waves broke against the island's volcanic rocks. A seagull took off from the island, soared away . . . and vanished. A swallow performed an aerial dance above the lake, disappearing and appearing as it crossed back and forth over the barrier.

"The swallows cannot see the island at all," he observed. "And the gull never sees Faraway Lake. Why do I see both places? I'm not magical."

So much for explanations. I couldn't help admiring his quick comprehension. "Mother set up the rules. Even non-magical humans can see the island." I shifted my tail, but the new spot was even hotter. "Mother wanted this piece of home, so here it is."

The island arrived here before even my sisters were born. I thought the move happened when Mother joined the Magical Council, but I was fuzzy on details.

"Can the lake serpent move out of this lake? I mean, to the ocean."

"He can use our water doors to travel, and I expect he spend his winters where the water doesn't freeze over, but in summers he likes it here. My father first introduced him to me. Sometimes Da took me with him to other lakes and seas. He encouraged me to explore the world, learn its mysteries, and broaden my horizons."

Talking about my father made me feel lonely, so I tried to think of an amusing story. "I was with him once when he chewed out Nelumbo for nearly upsetting a ski boat full of children. The poor serpent looked so wilted and ashamed! But ever since Da told him to be careful of those smaller and weaker than himself, he tries hard. Most of the time. I've known him to take offense, but he never causes harm to humans."

"Your mother is a sorceress."

"A *sahira*," I clarified proudly.

"Wow." He sounded impressed. "What does your father do?"

I had to look away. "Da died a few years ago." The boy didn't say a word, but somehow I felt a little better. "He rescued more than thirty humans from a sinking ship after a battle—put them all into lifeboats to be found by a rescue ship. But when he returned for more, there was an explosion . . ." My voice choked up. I had to pause for control before continuing: "Mother lost two other husbands before him—one to a human with a gun and one to a shark—so now she keeps us girls close. She wants to marry us all to steady merprinces so we won't involve ourselves with humans or monsters and get hurt."

"But you're like your father," the boy said. "Curious and brave."

The comment lifted my spirits to the sky. I smiled at the boy's profile. "I hope so. My father risked his life to rescue humans. I'm proud of his legacy. He had a human friend, a scientist who studied sea life, and Da observed fish for him and kept records explaining his theories regarding the social patterns and mental capabilities of fish and other creatures.

Including magical creatures. Da used to visit us here on weekends, and he showed me his records and taught me to observe the fish in Faraway Lake and here at Palau Kalah.”

The boy said nothing, but I explained anyway: “That’s the island’s name: Palau Kalah. Mother named it that after she stole it. The volcano is Mt. Ibu, because it erupts whenever Mother does. I speak only the universal language everyone around the resort speaks, but ‘ibu’ means ‘mother’ in some human language, and ‘palau kalah’ is something like ‘missing island.’”

I believe my tail and backside were starting to sizzle. I shifted again, trying to touch as little of the rock as possible. Everything I tried hurt. “I need to get back into the water,” I said, and made a shallow dive off the side.

As soon as I surfaced he asked, “What became of your father’s records? Did he study sea birds as well as fish?”

I bobbed in the water beside the rock, looking up at sunlight glowing on his hair. “I have his records, and I’m keeping my own of the fish here at the island and in the lake. I don’t think he studied birds. Maybe those that live by the water; I don’t know. Some seabirds nest here on the island and other birds nest in the jungle. And there are lots of ducks and geese in the lake. Mother doesn’t care much for birds. She says they make a mess, but Da always reminded her that every living creature makes a mess.”

His forehead creased. “Have you seen goldeneye ducks in Faraway Lake?”

“What do they look like?”

“I’ve got a drawing—” He slapped his leg pocket then looked sick. “My tablet.”

“Did you drop it by the pine tree? I dropped my tablet too,” I admitted. “My whole satchel of supplies, actually. And didn’t you have a gold chain around your neck?”

He reached for his neck, and his eyes went wide. “My grandmother’s ring was hanging on that chain.”

“It’s probably somewhere in the lake,” I said.

He gave me another of his blank looks. I wasn’t sure how to interpret that expression, and I really didn’t care for it. “I know who can find it. C’mon.”

He rolled his head around, making his neck crack, and when he twisted from side to side and stretched his long arms, a great many ribs showed through his skin, and his shoulder blades showed through his torn shirt. His hands and feet looked too large for his arms and legs, yet he seemed strong and healthy enough.

“Did the bird scratch you? Your shirt is torn.”

“No.”

He stuffed his eyeglasses into the pocket on his leg, pulled something that sealed it shut, then jumped into the water beside me and surfaced with an expectant air. “Lead on.”

I headed for a certain cove on the nearest shore, which boasted a number of good-sized, partially submerged boulders. He followed me, swimming on the surface. I paused to observe his technique, surprised by the speed he attained with such a motion. His arms came out of the water with each stroke, and he snatched breaths to the side every few strokes. He caught up with me and stopped to tread water.

“I’ve never understood why humans swim that way,” I said. “But it seems to work for you.”

“Feels cold swimming out here after being in the tropics,” he observed. “Is there any variation in lake water temperatures nearer the island? How does ice form around it in winter?”

“It forms right up to the barrier,” I said.

“Remarkable. Do you swim under the ice?”

“Sometimes. We often travel during the winter though. Mother leaves the island here, and we go back to her home territory for a few months.” He listened intently, but I could see his interest wane when my answers lacked scientific import.

“We’re headed for those rocks,” I said, then dove underwater and swam there directly, arriving first by a good distance. I settled into a natural seat on the side of my favorite rock and thought about my boy. I was very ready to like him, but I wasn’t sure what he thought of me. If he thought of me at all.

He approached at a steady rate, making very little splash, his breathing regular. He stopped once to check my location then swam the rest of the way with a stroke that made his head and shoulders bob up and down in the water. It was not quite as fast, but he could look straight ahead while swimming that way.

Instead of joining me on my bench, he pulled himself on top of the boulder and again lay flat on his back. I rested my forearms on the rock and my chin on my arms and watched him. Water streamed from his hair and clothing, and his chest rose and fell rapidly. He turned his head, met my gaze from only inches away, and sat up quickly. With fumbling fingers he opened

his pocket, pulled out the eyeglasses, and shoved them on his face. "Haven't done much swimming in a while."

"I'm no critic. I can't walk at all."

He paused, looked down at me, and then he smiled.

I felt as if the sun had emerged from behind a cloud. No, even better. Until that moment his focus had been elsewhere even when we talked. Now, for the first time, I felt as if he truly noticed me. I smiled up at him until his forehead crinkled and he looked away.

"So, the ring," he said, gazing out across the lake.

"Oh, yes!" I turned around on my seat, put my face underwater, and called, "Fathoms, are you near?"

Almost as soon as I sat upright again, a broad gray head slipped into my lap. Fathoms's long whiskers twitched as he peered up at my face.

"Wow, that was quick!" I stroked one hand down his slimy back. "Were you spying on me?"

The boy clambered across the rock and squatted just above me, his clothes squelching. "What is that?" he asked, his tone far from admiring.

"This is my friend Fathoms, the wels catfish." I scratched behind his tiny dorsal fin, right where he liked it.

"You're friends with a fish?" A pause. "I suppose that makes sense."

"What do you mean?"

He paused again. "I mean . . . since you're half fish."

Was that how he saw me? "I'm not half fish. I am one hundred percent siren. My parents were both merfolk."

"Are you warm or cold blooded?" he asked.

Ouch. My stomach started hurting again. Did he not even think of me as a girl? I pushed my wet hair back over one shoulder and looked up at him over it. "I am both warm and cold blooded. I'm a magical creature. Now it is my turn to ask personal questions."

He rewarded me with averted eyes and a red face. "Didn't mean to offend you," he mumbled.

"How old are you?" I asked boldly.

"Sixteen. How old are you?"

“Fifteen.”

“You are . . . beautiful to look at,” he said, and looked away, then back. My heart pounded out an extra beat or two. His tone was matter-of-fact. But then, he said almost everything that way. My appearance might be scientific data to him, but at least he noticed.

“Of course.” I looked up at him from under my lashes. “I’m a siren.”

He blew out a long, low whistle, shoved hair from his face with one hand, sat down on the rock, and let his long legs dangle over the edge beside me. “Why is the catfish your friend?”

“I rescued Fathoms last summer, and now he loves me.” I had to crane my neck to see his face, but I saw his expression and guessed the question he didn’t ask. “From guests at the castle. I was swimming with Nelumbo early one morning, and we heard this poor fellow crying in distress.” I patted my pet’s slick back. “We hurried to see what was happening and found him swimming in circles and jerking around. I thought he’d gone crazy at first, but then I saw the line and the hook in his mouth. See here? He still has a hole in his lip where the hook tore it.” I pointed at one corner of my fish’s wide mouth.

“Fish cry when they’re hurt?”

“I can hear them,” she said. “Maybe humans don’t. Anyway, I caught hold of the line and calmed him down until I could take out the nasty hook, which I smashed with a rock. Then I let go of the line and told Nelumbo to get them.”

The boy’s lazy half-smile vanished. “Get them?”

I gave him an arch smile. “It was two boys. Nelumbo spun their boat until they were dizzy and sick. Meanwhile I swam off, found a lifeguard on her scooter, and reported the incident.”

“The castle lifeguards get to talk to mermaids?” he asked.

I squirmed on the inside. And maybe a little on the outside. “We’re not supposed to talk to humans at all. But those boys needed to be caught and punished.”

“Being spun by a lake monster wasn’t punishment enough?”

I gave him a quick glance, glimpsed the humor in his eyes, and grinned. “Not in my opinion. The lifeguard promised to warn them never to fish in the lake again. Poor Fathoms was exhausted and terrified. He could hardly swim, and he was bleeding. I nursed him back to health, and now he’s my buddy. He comes when I call him, and he finds things for me.”

“Fish are that smart?” the boy said. “I thought they had tiny brains.”

“Like birds do?” My tone was a little sharp, but his disrespect toward fish rankled, especially since he’d referred to me as half-fish.

“Some birds are very smart.”

“So are some fish. And they are beautiful.”

He gave a dismissive sniff. “Birds are more colorful and varied.”

“No, they’re not! Fish come in many colors! The fish here in this lake are mostly shades of brown, green, silver, and black, but in the ocean they come in endless colors and patterns. You should see the beauties that hide in the island’s caves and lagoon.”

“The same is true of birds. Some are dull colors, but others are vivid and exotic.” He lifted a brow, gazing down at me. “I’ll admit that fish are interesting if you’ll do the same for birds.”

I glared at him a moment longer, then let myself smile. Just a little. This argument felt like our first real conversation. “All right. Birds are interesting.”

He looked pleased. “So are fish. Do you draw?”

“Yes, and I keep records of which kinds of fish are spawning and where. We sometimes get accidental visitors from other lakes if people leave the water doors open. We always send them back home, and merfolk in other lakes do the same for us. Ocean creatures can’t come here; they die if they slip through.”

“Um.” He sounded hesitant. “Water doors?”

“Magical doorways, of course. We’re connected with bodies of water all over the world.”

“Magic doors in the water? How do they work?”

I opened my mouth, then remembered. “That’s secret.”

He nodded. “Do you have lungs?”

I drew and expelled a deep breath. “Yes.”

“But no gills?”

“No gills. My lungs can breathe water. I can breathe both in and out of water, but my tail dries out if I’m on land too long. Mermen do have gills, and they can’t stay out of water long at all.”

Sitting there with Fathoms purring in my arms, I felt happy. To have a friend, a boy my age who talked about interesting topics and appreciated both science and magic—this was beyond my fondest dreams!

“Mermen have gills?” The boy sounded startled.

“Yes. They are quite different from sirens—almost the opposite.” Feeling relaxed, I rambled a bit. “My father’s name was Bluefin, and he resembled a tuna. Mother often said he was the handsomest of her three husbands.”

“In what way did he resemble a tuna?” His voice sounded strained.

“He was powerful and silvery. But his face was intelligent and expressive, unlike a tuna fish’s face.”

The boy was silent. When I looked up, he quickly looked away. “Do mermen have tails like yours?” he asked in that same tone.

“Oh no. They have legs like yours and webbed feet.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” he said carefully. “I don’t mean to offend. Now, as a mermaid has the upper body of a human woman and a more-or-less fishlike lower body, would I be correct to say that a merman has the lower body of a human man?”

“More or less, yes. They even wear trousers.”

His brows rose high. “Um, good to know. And a merman has the upper body of a fish?”

“Not entirely. They have arms, but with lots of webbing.”

“Oh.” A pause. “Ah. So, tell me how you can gauge the intelligence of a fish.” His tone didn’t change when he changed the subject, but I sensed thoughts and emotions he wouldn’t share.

“I can show you that. But don’t imagine I can’t guess your thoughts. My sisters think human males are hideous, so I suppose some humans must think mermen just as ugly.”

“What do you think?” he asked.

I paused to consider my answer. Was he hoping for a compliment? “I think character matters more than appearance. My father was wonderful—intelligent and heroic, always thinking of others before himself. I didn’t care that his face was scaly and stiff. He was handsome to me.”

I used the pretext to study my friend’s face. His features were distinctly masculine though still boyish. “I believe you are very intelligent, and I enjoy talking with you, but I don’t yet know if you are kind or heroic.”

His slightly open-mouthed stare reminded me of my father, and I smiled at the thought. “Do you really want to see how I gauge the intelligence of a fish?”

His mouth closed, and he nodded.

I looked down at my pet. “Fathoms, fetch me a striped stone.”

Fathoms swam away, and the boy gave me a look. “Are you serious?”

“Wait and see.”

“He can distinguish colors with those tiny eyes on top of his head?”

“I doubt he can see color, but he can see patterns. And he somehow manages to pick out the right kind of stone every time. Just wait.”

The boy was dry now, and the hair falling into his face shimmered in the afternoon sunlight. He shoved it back with one hand, then pulled his feet up on the rock and said, “Your fish is Fathoms, and the monster is Namumbo—”

“Nelumbo.”

“Right. But what is your name?”

“Kamoana. What’s yours?”

“Torbjorn. But everyone calls me Tor.” He paused. “Kamoana. Does anyone call you Kam? Or Kammy?”

“No. I like Kammy.”

I thought I read satisfaction in his face, though he said only, “I need to get back to shore. I’m starved. It must be past— Whoa! What’s this!”

Tor leaped to his feet just as a large wave swept toward our rock, lifted me from my seat, and soaked him to the ankles before it struck the rocky shore and receded. Another wave followed it, and then a smaller one. “What’s going on?” he asked. “Waves from nowhere?”

“My sisters must have lured a boat close to the island,” I said, returning to my seat. But this time I propped my forearms on the rock so I could look at him without straining my neck. “Lifeguards will find the shipwrecked guests.”

I couldn’t help laughing at his expression. “We’re sirens! We sing to lure men toward the island and then wreck their boats with whirlpools or waves before they can land. But we never harm anyone. We would be banished from the lake if we harmed a human.”

“The resort director warned us, but I thought it was a gimmick.”

“Oh yes, Madame Genevieve sternly warns every guest to stay away from the island in the lake, but . . .” I grinned and shrugged. “Sirens.” But then I wanted him to know my true feelings. “Seriously, I’ve never understood the thrill; luring men is my sisters’ hobby. Mine is studying fish.”

He totally didn’t need to know that I’d used a siren call on him. Though he might guess . . .

“You should try birds,” he said.

I fully intended to. “You won’t tell anyone that you’ve been to the island, will you?” I asked. “Madame would tell my mother, for certain.”

Just then, Fathoms popped his head above water and spat a pebble at me. I turned and caught it in the air, then opened my palm to show Tor a striped stone. “Good boy,” I praised my fish.

Fathoms made a mewling sound and rubbed around my tail.

“That’s impressive,” Tor said. “And he acts like a cat. A real cat, I mean.”

“I’ve never seen a land cat,” I said. “Does he look like one?”

Tor chuckled. “No. I can tell you that no real cat ever had whiskers as long as his.”

“I wish I could see one. But you can’t show me your world.”

He stared at me, and I thought he was contemplating something. But then he gave his head a shake and said, “I need to get back before they send out a search party. If I were to swim in the lake and call you while I’m underwater, would you hear me?”

“That depends on distance.”

“I mean, if you heard me, would you answer?”

“If it’s possible.” I felt warm and happy inside. He wanted to see me again! At least, he did now. I suspected he might forget me by the time he stepped ashore.

He nodded, looking pleased. “Good. I need to get back.” He looked at his bare feet and grimaced. “It will be a long walk without shoes. I was stupid and wore flip-flops.”

I didn’t bother asking what those might be. “The running path is close to the trail here.”

“Or I could just swim back to the castle on my own.”

“You swim well, but you will need to swim regularly and build muscle and endurance if you want to explore the lake,” I told him bluntly. “Explorers have to be fit. Also, you shouldn’t swim alone.”

Tor shrugged, jumped into the water, and slogged toward the shore, walking on the gravel bottom that sloped rapidly upward. He turned and called while walking backward, “I can see the running path from here. This afternoon I should search for my tablet.”

“I will get Fathoms to hunt for your ring,” I called back. “I have to look for my satchel too.”

“Thanks!”

Smiling, I turned and dove underwater. I had a friend! A friend who truly understood my obsession, since he had one of his own.

“Fathoms!” I called, and when the catfish appeared, I asked, “Help me find my satchel? And keep an eye out for a ring on a gold chain.”

CHAPTER THREE



Fathoms found my satchel right where I'd dropped it at the bottom of the lake, and Tor's gold chain and ring in the bay near where I first hauled him to the surface. My pet's long whiskers were so sensitive that he could locate almost anything sooner or later. He was quite young yet, not quite three feet long, but quick and nimble and eager. I felt particularly fond of him that day.

"You impressed Tor, I think," I said, rubbing him behind his gills. "He knows now that fish are just as good as birds. And since you found his ring, maybe he will think you're better than any bird! I wonder if he will swim with us tomorrow? You'll tell me if you hear him call me, won't you?"

I slipped the chain over my head and touched the ring on my chest. The chain was woven out of gold, and the ring had subtle engravings like waves. I didn't dare let them be seen, so I tucked them both inside my swimsuit top. Before heading back, I gazed briefly at the pine and the willow, considered looking for Tor's tablet, then shook my head. He wouldn't thank me for getting it wet. The sky was clear of giant birds, and it was all too easy to believe the morning's adventure had been a dream.

But I had the ring and chain, for now.

Before heading back, I took a detour into an inlet where I knew birds nested. There were songbirds perched on reeds, singing pretty refrains. And a mother duck with a following of nine fluffy ducklings bobbed in and out between water weeds, plucking food from the water. The mother made low croaking sounds, and the babies peeped.

They were adorable. How had I ever considered birds boring?

I kept the picture of them in my head while I swam back to Palau Kalah and around toward Siren Rock. I thought it wise to spend an hour or two with my sisters and maybe do some drawing.

I longed to tell someone about my adventure, but there was no way any of my sisters would agree to keep such a tale from our mother. I intended to enjoy my friendship with Tor for as long as possible. There was no telling how much longer his family would stay at the castle, and every day was precious. "I'll have to ask about his family when I see him again," I informed Fathoms as we approached the siren rocks. "Now you go play for a while. I'll swim with you again later."

Fathoms purred around my middle then obediently swam away, heading toward the lake floor to seek a meal.

"It's about time," Moselle called as I beached my body on the low rock, leaving my tail dangling in the waves. "You missed all the fun. We sank a canoe with two men in it, but the lifeguard already picked them up. Their faces were so ridiculous!"

"You only say that because they were enthralled with me," Coral retorted, running her fingers through her hair. She was closest to me in age, a pale beauty with mysterious green eyes and glorious red-orange hair. Her tail was deep orange with black tips on its fins. And she was shamelessly vain.

"Turbot might not let you enthrall human men once you're married, you know," Talulah reminded her. "Better have your fun now, but don't get addicted."

"Too late for that warning," Coral sighed. "Turbot knows I couldn't live without fulfilling my sole purpose in life. And if I marry him, we'll live off the busy coast of Maricopa, where I'll find plenty of men to call and wreck if I so choose."

Moselle and Talulah exchanged wry smiles. My sisters were competitive about luring humans to ruin, though none of them would have harmed one of their victims even without the rules. At least, I hoped so. I was never quite sure about Coral.

"I saw the waves," I said. "I was on the west side of the island when they passed."

"The lifeguard came too quickly," Coral complained. "I hardly had time to tempt the men to try coming ashore. But the big one was on his way when that human girl grabbed him."

"He reminded me a bit of Turbot, in a human sort of way," Talulah said with a wicked smirk. "Big and dumb."

"Better than your skinny little Wrasse," Coral snapped back.

"Enough," Moselle warned in her rich, dark voice. "You two bicker like gulls."

"They're no angelfish," I quipped.

Moselle was pledged to marry later that year. Her betrothed, Bream, lived in the Andhran Ocean, far across the world, though only minutes away by magic. Talulah had a beau—we had all been promised at birth—but those two seemed in no hurry to tie the knot. My oldest two sisters planned to spend their daylight hours here on the island even after marriage. Coral, however, told Mother that she “would be happier in a workplace offering greater scope for her siren skills.” Getting out from under the queen’s watchful eye was her most urgent goal. I could hardly blame her.

Mother had promised me to a merprince from a chain of huge lakes on a different continent, whose royal parents desired a marital alliance with Queen Pukai. Why I ended up with the prince, I don’t know. Even though my sisters’ mermen are all from good families, I never hear the end of my marrying into royalty. I would gladly swap, but I don’t like their beaux any better than mine.

The prospect of marrying Prince Pike keeps me awake at night, trying to think of a way out. He is incredibly handsome, three years older than me, mannerly, and strong. But he talks about himself constantly and has the intellect of a sea squirt. My father disapproved of Pike for me, but even when he was alive he’d had no say regarding official matters such as royal marriages. Mother says she will never force any of us girls to marry, but once she sets her mind on something, she’s about as reasonable as Mt. Ibu.

A bird flew past the island, just outside the barrier, and my thoughts skittered like a water strider away from Pike. I knew very little about birds. How should I begin to study them? Perhaps by taking note of their habits and body structure, same as I did with fish. I would be limited to birds in the immediate vicinity of the lake and the island, but there were plenty to keep me busy. And perhaps, in time, I would travel to lakes and seas in other parts of the world and study their bird populations.

While my sisters bickered, my gaze strayed toward Faraway Castle. Tor must be there somewhere, maybe with his family or friends. I could only hope he wouldn’t tell anyone about me. Worse yet, what if he decided not to look for me again? I did use my siren voice to call him to me, but I hadn’t enthralled him. He was free to forget me. He’d truly paid attention to me only once or twice during the whole time we were together anyway.

What good might befriending a human do me? I wanted to answer “nothing,” but Tor had much to offer. He might be funny-looking and awkward, but he knew so much. I liked him. A lot.

What good might my friendship do him? That question wasn’t so easy to answer.

A gull landed on a nearby rock, so I pulled out my tablet and drew it. Not very well, but I did notice things I’d never seen before. I liked the soft look of its feathers and the way it smoothed them with its beak.

“Why are you drawing a bird?” Talulah asked, peering over my shoulder.

“It’s kind of pretty,” I said, shading in its wing feathers.

“Gulls are cruel,” said Coral, and flicked water at it with her tail. The gull merely walked a few steps away and preened again. “It would eat you if it could.”

“Most creatures are cruel sometimes,” I answered. “They take what they need or want and never consider the needs or feelings of others.”

She didn’t have an answer for that comment. Talulah looked disapproving, sensing an innuendo that I may or may not have intended.

“Aren’t we philosophical today?” Moselle gave me an amused look. “Speaking of birds, did you happen to see that enormous one at the west end of the lake? We were grateful it never came this way.”

“There is supposed to be magic to keep dangerous creatures off Faraway Castle property,” said Talulah. “Did Mother’s magic fail?”

“That bird is a very rare creature, so maybe the magical barriers didn’t exclude it.” I spoke without thinking, then quickly added, “Do any of you know what it was?”

“How do you know it’s rare?” Moselle inquired, frowning.

“I’ve never seen one before. Have you? I wonder if Mother knows it was here. It looked almost the size of Nelumbo.”

“Not that big,” Talulah said. “But big enough. I hope you didn’t swim anywhere near it.”

“I do have some good sense,” I said, and wrinkled my nose at her. Which was true. I simply opted not to use it at times.

The subject drifted off to less hazardous topics, but I worried that Mother would somehow learn about the turul’s invasion and come home early from her conference.

I didn't see Tor that evening. I did swim over near the castle and watched guests play some kind of game using a round object and a net. He wasn't there. At nightfall I gave up and went home, curled up in my cave, and felt strangely alone even though my sisters were talking in the next cave over. About mermen, no doubt. There was a lot of giggling.

The next day was worse. I waited all morning in our cove—even sent Fathoms out with orders to watch and listen for Tor.

Nothing.

I drew pictures of birds and fish with my magically waterproofed pencils and tablet—a special gift from Mother. Would Tor ever see them?

In late afternoon I slipped under the dock nearest the beach, clutched one of its supporting posts, and peered toward the beach, hoping to be hidden in shadows. My heart seized up for a moment. There was Tor, sitting on the beach with two little girls and several other kids his age. His shoulders were hunched, his bony knees up, and his elbows resting on them. He wore an orange tee shirt, swim trunks the color of swamp muck, and a cap with its bill turned backwards. His nose had white stuff on it, and he wore eyeglasses with dark lenses. He was gazing out over the lake, and I thought he looked glum. A sailboat came in to the dock and blocked him from view, so I swam away.

How could I get his attention? I could wave, but then resort staff members—all of whom had at least a little magic—might see me and report me to the resort director, who would tell Mother. Tor had been gazing toward the island, and that gave me an idea.

Two years ago, while visiting relatives in Mother's ocean kingdom of Singkiang, my sister Talulah and I watched spinner dolphins practice their amazing leaps just for the joy of it, and we got inspired. We studied their technique for days, swimming among them and attempting our own spins. We did some painful belly flops and back smacks while learning, but by the end of that visit we could both manage two full rotations most of the time. The key was a fast start from deep in the water to gain altitude.

I dared attempt only one on this busy summer day at Faraway Lake, but I determined to try it. Any magical human who saw me might believe I was a fish . . . or a figment of their imagination. So, taking a vector in the direction Tor had been looking, I headed straight for Siren Rock but stopped a good hundred feet short. I surfaced to check my accuracy.

Moselle and Coral lounged on the rock, as usual. I turned back toward the beach and realized I was too far away. Tor would see only a flash from that distance, if anything. So I dove down and retraced my swim a good way. This time, when I craned my neck and rose above the surface a bit, I could just make out his orange shirt.

Before I could lose courage, I flipped over and dove straight down to the bottom. Looking up at the shimmering surface far above, I wondered briefly about the wisdom of this stunt. A second later I was swimming with all my power, straight up, my arms making a point above my head like a dolphin's snout.

As soon as I reached air, I arched my back and twisted my tail hard. One, two, three rotations, and then my hands struck the surface and my body plunged down amid frothing bubbles. That leap ended in a nearly perfect dive! Easily the best spin and best landing I'd ever achieved.

Had Tor even been looking? I might never know.

My satisfaction and pride ebbed away as I joined my sisters on the rock. "Hello, shrimp," Moselle said, and rolled to her back, her tail draped in the water.

"Where'd you come from, minnow?" Coral asked, and yawned. "The humans this year have no moxie. Our afternoon is nearly gone, and we've had no luck at all."

"You might have more luck if you stayed awake," I suggested, then flopped down on my back and stared into the endless blue above.

Two tears slipped from my eyes to the rock beneath my head. Why did I miss that stupid boy so much?

CHAPTER FOUR



Early the next morning I settled on a rock near the shore where a fast-running stream entered the lake. I'd noticed little birds dipping their beaks into the water along the streambank, so thought I would try drawing them. Fathoms patrolled the lake bottom nearby, gobbling up worms and crustaceans along his way.

I told myself I wasn't hoping to see Tor. I tried to ignore the way my stomach and heart hurt, the feelings of rejection and insecurity. Was I so forgettable to that skinny human with hair sprouting on his chin?

But hope wouldn't die. Sure, he hadn't shown up the day before, but that didn't necessarily mean he had forgotten me. If he called for me while I was out of the water, I might miss hearing him. I stuck my face underwater. "Fathoms, if you hear Tor call, let me know right away." My fish friend swam toward me with exaggerated wiggles, then returned to the bottom. He's more sensitive to vibrations in the water than I am anyway.

I kept thinking of excuses for Tor: Guests at the castle had dozens of activities to choose from, and this morning was misty and cool. Even if he wanted to go swimming, other humans might interfere. He was probably a lord of some kind, so his time was not his own. He might even be promised to a titled young woman who would demand his attention all day.

I reached up to touch Tor's gold ring hanging on its chain around my neck. He would be pleased to get it back, I was sure. For now, I enjoyed the feel of it, smooth and heavy on my chest.

I was staring into space, thinking these cold-hard-reality thoughts when Fathoms popped his head out of the water, flung it from side to side, and made his squeaky mewling sound.

"Really? You're sure it's him?" Feeling both silly and hopeful, I shoved my tablet into my bag and ducked underwater.

Almost immediately I heard a muffled voice calling, “Kammy! Kamoana? Hello? Are you there?”

“I’m coming!” I called back, using my siren voice, then gave a squeal of excitement, hugged Fathoms—which startled him—and swam along the shore until the island came in sight, and, to my right, the cove where I’d last seen Tor. “Call me again!” I yelled underwater.

“Kammy?” He sounded much closer.

And then I saw him swimming slowly on the surface. He wore large floppy things on his feet. It took me only a moment to zoom upward toward him, and I saw his eyes widen behind a strange round mask. He had something in his mouth and wore a shiny black skin that covered most of his body. His head popped above the surface, and I followed him.

“Hello!” I said.

He removed the end of a curved tube from his mouth and pulled off the mask. It left strange marks on his face. “You came.”

“You called me,” I said, and smiled. “Where are your eyeglasses? What’s that thing?”

“It’s a mask. I have to wear contact lenses when I use it.”

“I like your eyes better without the glasses or the mask,” I said without listening.

He smiled briefly, frowned, then shifted his gaze to the distance beyond me as if noticing the mountains surrounding the lake for the first time. “I had to watch my sisters yesterday so couldn’t get back until now. They and my parents are at a children’s party today, so I got some time to myself. Do you have time?”

“Time?”

“Time to hang out with me. Bird watching.”

“I might.” I gave him a straight look. “If you’ll promise to fish watch with me.”

He nodded. “Deal.”

“I’ve tried drawing two birds,” I said. “A gull and another one I don’t know the name of.”

“Show me.”

He kept his head above water by paddling with those fake fins on his feet, I noticed as I pulled my tablet from my pouch. His face looked pink and wet, and his eyes were bright. I felt so happy that my hands shook when I held up the tablet for him. “Looks like a dipper,” he said. “Where was he?”

“I could show you, but don’t you want to get your tablet back first?”

He lit up. "I do! Can't carry it back with me now, but I'd like to know if it's there."

"I could carry it for you. My bag is waterproof."

"Even better."

Those fins on his feet gave him extra propulsion, so he could keep up with me if I swam at a leisurely pace. He could swim as fast as most mermen, since his fake fins were larger than a merman's feet. He had the tube in his mouth again, and I figured out that he breathed through it. But now and then he had to stop, remove the tube, and draw deep breaths.

"You were right," he said. "I've got to get in better shape for exploring. How far are we going?"

"Not much farther."

When we reached the spit of land with the pine tree, I watched from the open lake as he searched around the tree then headed toward the willow. Partway there he scooped up something and held it aloft in triumph. I swam close to the shore and opened my satchel, which had once been my father's.

Tor dropped his tablet in. "Can't find my pencil, but that's easy to replace. I can carry the bag," he offered.

I ran my finger along the seal until it vanished, then grinned up at him. "It's just as easy for me to carry it, since I'll be towing you anyway."

He looked sheepish but said nothing, merely hopped to keep his balance while strapping on a swim fin.

He had tied his hair back somehow, so it didn't hang over his mask. I wished he would take the mask off again. I was used to seeing humans, so he didn't look alien to me. My sisters think human males look too much like females, but nothing about Tor seemed feminine to me. I don't know if humans would consider him handsome, but I liked his face very much. Especially when he smiled, which didn't happen often enough.

I soon got my wish: He took off his mask while we sat on rocks near the stream mouth and watched the dippers snap up insect larvae and little crustaceans in the water, sometimes diving all the way under. They were cute, plump little birds with white throats. While we watched them, Tor talked about varieties of songbirds, identified them by their songs and calls, and pointed out several in nearby trees.

Not once had he mentioned his ring, although I'd seen his eyes on it more than once. When I saw his eyes return to it briefly, I reached up to take it off. "Fathoms found it for you," I said, and held it out to him.

"Thanks." He took it and squeezed it in his fist, shifting his gaze to the mountains. "It looks better on you than on me," he blurted, and I saw red creeping up into his cheeks.

"It's very pretty." That was all I could think to say. But my face felt warm too.

Tor scrambled to his feet and picked up several rocks. For the next hour, he showed me how to throw rocks in such a way that they skipped over the water's surface. His traveled a long way out before sinking. I tried it, but my best throw resulted in two hops.

"You need to work on your angle," he concluded. "You've got a strong throwing arm though."

This pleased me. I smiled up at him until he looked at the mountains again. "So, do you know where any ducks might be nesting?" he asked abruptly.

"Ducks *and* geese," I answered.

"I have to go back in time for lunch—I'm starving—but I'll try to sneak out again tomorrow morning. I'll be here at the resort until the end of this week, and I don't want to miss another day. With you, I mean. Swimming and talking. About birds." His voice got all stiff and abrupt, but I knew he was sincere.

My heart felt so full, I couldn't speak.

"Hey, um," he said, looking uncertain. "Do mermaids jump? I mean, out of the water?"

I laughed. I couldn't help myself. "I do. Did you see me yesterday?"

"I thought it was you, but it happened so fast, and then you were gone." He laughed a little. "That was . . . awesome. Incredible."

I shrugged, savoring his admiration. "My sister Talulah and I learned that trick from spinner dolphins."

He shook his head, tried to laugh, but then just stared at me in wonder. "Wow."



The next morning I took Tor to see the baby ducks. He taught me how to tell the varieties of duck and geese apart, and also males from females, and juveniles from adults. He also showed me his drawings of goldeneye ducks. "If you ever see any here, let me know." I eagerly agreed.

While he talked, he sat on a rock and sketched bird feet and wings and markings in my waterproof tablet. Seated on a submerged rock at his feet, I listened and soaked in as much knowledge as I could hold . . . and I enjoyed watching the ducklings and goslings.

I mostly enjoyed watching his face light up as he talked about birds . . . and flight patterns and habitats and migration patterns and food sources. Studying birds apparently involved a great deal of geography, physics, and natural history. The more he talked, the more ignorant I felt and the more determined to become educated about the wide world around me.

We then moved to several places along the lakeshore, pausing in one inlet to watch a kingfisher perched on a branch above us as it fed a small fish to its chick, which was nearly as large as the parent. Both were an iridescent aqua with a bright orange breast, a long black beak, and a flash of white on each cheek. No ordinary pencil could do justice to such beauty.

“If only I had some way to portray color,” I said on a sigh.

“Can’t your mother make waterproofed colored pencils?” Tor asked.

“I never knew there was such a thing as colored pencils. I will ask her for some when she comes home.”

He lifted a brow but said nothing. I was used to this by now and answered without waiting for a question: “She’s at a conference for the *sahirae* and *carovnae*. They needed to discuss regulations and by-laws, she said.”

“Isn’t there a top enchanter in the world? The greatest of all?”

“Yes, the *Trollkarl*.”

“I don’t know much about the magical world, but I’ve heard of him,” he said. “I know that he’s human, not a troll, and he originally came from my region.”

“He’s also reclusive,” I added. “Some of the *burvae* and *carovnae*, and even a few *sahirae*, question his wisdom and dedication to duty. There’s been talk of replacing him. But the majority, including my mother, believe that he oversees the magic world well enough without running to every meeting.”

“Would they be able to replace him? I thought he was supremely powerful.”

“He is very powerful, but if enough of the lesser magicians worked together they could possibly overthrow him, maybe even kill him. Mother says there is no danger of such a thing happening at present, but some of the younger magicians are rebellious troublemakers. They’ve never seen the *Trollkarl*, and some doubt that he exists.”

Tor said nothing more on the subject, and we were silent for a minute or two while the adult kingfisher dived from its branch and reappeared with a young roach wriggling in her beak. I pressed two fingers to my lips, feeling sad for the baby fish. Yet I could not help admiring the bird's hunting skill. Life in the lake should long ago have taught me not to become attached to its smaller inhabitants, but I always did. The baby kingfisher swallowed the fish eagerly and sat there looking bright-eyed and sweet.

I caught Tor looking at me, his expression unreadable again. "Studying wildlife involves witnessing wild-death," he commented. "It's hard to keep from getting attached or choosing sides."

I nodded. "I think it would just about kill me to be an entomologist and see my little babies get devoured by the hundreds."

He gave me a blank stare.

I fought back a smile then gave up and grinned.

The smile spreading across his face delighted me. He shook his head and laughed softly. "I can picture you cooing over mosquito wrigglers and caddisfly larvae."

"Bleck! Ick! Not even I am that sentimental, but I have been known to rescue butterflies or dragonflies."

He chuckled again. "So have I."

He'd been treading water all this time without complaint, but I knew he must be tiring. "Do you need to get back in time for lunch?" I asked.

"I probably better head back, yeah," he said reluctantly. "Don't need a search party sent out after me."

"No, that wouldn't be good. I'm not supposed to talk to humans, ever."

"When will your mom be back?"

We had started slowly paddling toward our little cove, neither of us eager to end the morning.

"Early next week. She travels a lot for work, so I'm used to staying with my sisters. They're kind of like three extra mothers anyway."

"Really? My sisters definitely don't think of me as an extra father."

"Do you love them?"

“Sure I do. A lot. But that doesn’t make me want to listen while they jabber about their dolls and imaginary games. They’re twins, and they live in their own little world most of the time. But they’re more social than I am.”

“My sisters are quite a lot older than me,” I said. “It would be nice to have a sister as a close friend. But I enjoy my fish and bird friends.” I paused to look around. “We’re still a long way from the cove. Would you like a tow? I could hold your arm.”

A strange expression flickered across his face, but then he nodded, pulled on his mask, and held out his hand. When I grasped his wrist, he clasped my wrist with his fingers as well.

Tor’s kicks with those fins combined with the propulsion of my tail sent us along at a rapid clip. Happy though I was to be with Tor, my spirit seemed to collect gloom as we neared the cove. Soon he would leave me behind again.

I bypassed my rock and took him to where the pebbled lakebed stretched up toward the jogging path. After Tor removed his swim fins, mask, and snorkel and planted his big feet on the bottom, the water still covered him to the waist. He slogged further up the shore, then paused, his feet still submerged.

Since the bottom dropped off sharply, I swam in close and sat on the bottom, gently pushing with my tail to keep balanced. I hoped Tor would sit beside me, but he backed off a few steps, the water nearly at his knees.

“Thanks, Kammy. Today was great.” His gaze bounced off me toward the mountains, the distant shore, the island—he seemed to have trouble holding my gaze. “I’ll come back as soon as I can. Tomorrow morning, if possible.”

“Please come,” I said quietly. Fathoms swam up and bumped Tor’s ankle to emphasize my request.

One side of his mouth quirked upward, and he bent down to rub my catfish’s back. With a sideways glance at me, he gave another one of his huffing laughs and said, “I’ll be here. Whatever it takes.”

To my surprise, he came back that night.

CHAPTER FIVE



Fathoms can't contact me when I'm at the island, and the ocean water doesn't carry sounds from the lake, so I would have missed seeing Tor again if Nelumbo hadn't shoved his head through a tunnel, around a corner, and into my sleeping cave beneath Palau Kalah. I nearly screamed when his yellow eyes appeared in the near-darkness, but I clapped both hands over my mouth just in time.

I knew in an instant that his visit was about Tor. Without a sound, I snatched up my satchel, slid between two spikes on his back, and held on while he backed out carefully to keep his spines from catching on rocks. "What's going on?" I asked once we were outside.

He didn't answer, of course, but I sensed he was amused. I let him carry me around to the west side of the island, to my cove with the rock I thought of now as Tor's.

Sunlight still glowed on the mountaintops around us, but twilight had fallen over the lake. Music from the castle drifted across the water. "Tor?" I said quietly.

"Kammy!" He ran down the rocky bank, straight into the water, and swam out to me. "I was just about to give up. Nelumbo heard me calling and nearly scared me to death. I asked him about you, but I didn't dare hope he would really bring you to me." His voice held relief and something else . . . something I didn't want to identify.

"He stuck his head right into my sleeping cave."

"Were you asleep already? I'm sorry." He sounded horrified. "I just . . . I really needed to see you. Could we sit on that rock again?"

"Of course."

I felt a sharp ache in my belly. Premonition. I wasn't going to like what he had to say.

He didn't have his swim fins or mask, but the rock was close by. He clambered up on it then went down on one knee and reached a hand to me. I gave him a look, and his brows quirked higher. "Lift? The rock isn't hot."

“I’m heavy.”

“I doubt it. Try?”

“All right.” I clasped his arm.

“On the count of three,” he said. “One. Two. Three!” I gave one flick of my tail, and he hauled me up to sit beside him, even turning me around with a twist of his arm. Then he sat beside me. Close. His feet dangled in the water next to my tail.

“Would you like to see my drawings before the light is gone?” I asked.

“Very much.”

I pulled out my tablet and opened it to the first page. “Is that one of your sisters?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s Talulah. I spend the most time with her. She and Moselle had the same father, but they aren’t much alike.” I turned the page for him. “That’s Moselle. She doesn’t smile often, but she’s a considerate person. Their father’s name was Black Drum.”

I turned the page again. “And this is Coral. My pencil drawing doesn’t do her justice: She is very beautiful—her hair and tail are orange. She got that from her father, whose name was Garibaldi. Talulah drew this last one of me.”

Tor took hold of the tablet, looked from the portrait to me and back, then said, “Nope.”

“You don’t like it?”

“Doesn’t look like you. I can’t tell about your drawings, since I haven’t seen your sisters.”

I had found Talulah’s drawing of me rather humbling, so his flat statement came as a relief. He moved on to my fish drawings. “These are really good. You capture personality in fish.”

“It’s not that hard. Just like with birds, as you watch them you begin to understand them.”

I turned the page, but he was looking at me, his eyes wide and serious.

I didn’t want to ask, but I had to know. “What’s wrong, Tor?”

“We’re leaving tomorrow. My dad got a message from home. He has to return at once, so our family vacation is cut short.”

“Tomorrow?” My throat felt tight. “I won’t see you again?”

His head jerked away, and he said something I didn’t quite hear, something sharp. “My parents promise we’ll return next summer for two weeks instead of only one. But a year is a long time.”

“It is,” I agreed quietly.

“It’s your turn to teach me about fish.”

“Now?”

His mouth twitched. “Not unless you’ve got fish that glow in the dark.”

I looked up and realized that the sky had turned a deep blue and stars were appearing. I hoped he couldn’t see my blush. “The walls in our caves glow in the dark, but not the fish.”

His brows rose. “Wish I could see that. Kammy, next summer I want to see everything in your lake. I plan to study fish all year, on my own. I will finish my undergraduate degree next spring, and afterward I’ve planned to get a masters in ornithology. But maybe I’ll study ichthyology too, just for you.”

“I would love to study birds and fish,” I said.

“I could send you study materials,” he said. “I could pack them in plastic and . . .” He shook his head. “But I can’t mail stuff to a magical island.”

“Where is your school?” I asked.

“The University of Barbacha, on the coast of the Begaian Sea. They have an amazing science department and research center.”

I looked up at him in pleased surprise. “That’s where my father used to work with a scientist. They studied magical ocean life together .”

“Could you find out the scientist’s name?” Tor sounded eager. I could no longer see his face clearly, but his eyes glinted now and then.

“I could. The scientist gave Da books and things—I have them still. Nelumbo sometimes delivered letters.”

“Would he do that for us?” Tor asked.

“I’m sure he would! He likes gifts of fish in reward, but he doesn’t mind delivering things for free.” The lake serpent, hearing his name, reared his head out of the water nearby. “Thank you again for bringing me,” I called to him. “Nelumbo, would you be willing to carry letters and packages from me to Tor at Barbacha University?”

“And from me to Kammy,” Tor added.

“I could meet you at the base of the cliffs,” Tor suggested. “There’s a stairway from the campus down to the beach.”

Nelumbo moved closer, his eyes like flames in the night.

“When will you be at school?” I asked.

“It starts in three weeks. I can sneak down to the shore the first Saturday morning of each month and walk on the beach. Would that work for you, Nelumbo?”

The great spiky head bobbed up and down.

“Oh! You are the dearest serpent!” I gushed.

The monster flung his head back and slowly sank beneath the surface. I had to laugh. He returned drama for drama, but he did enjoy my appreciation.

Tor chuckled too. “I’ll have a letter ready the first Saturday of August, all right?”

“And I’ll send one with Nelumbo for you,” I promised. “Oh Tor, I was feeling horrible a few minutes ago, but now I’m happy. Even if my family’s in Singkiang again over the winter, I can still send you letters.”

“And I can let you know when I’ll be back here.” Tor sounded as eager as I felt. “I’ll be honest, Kammy. I didn’t want to come to Faraway Castle when my parents first told us about this holiday, and I dragged my feet about it the whole way. I despise social events, and this place sounded like one long party. The first few days were torture, but then, thanks to the turul, I met you. Now I don’t want to leave.”

“Three days together wasn’t enough,” I said softly.

His hands rubbed up and down on his legs, then he sat up very straight and blew out a long breath. He turned to meet my gaze, his eyes intent and dark, but then he backed off. “Guess I’d better say goodnight and head back. We’re leaving early. I would run down to say goodbye in the morning, but everyone would notice.”

“All right. Goodbye, Tor,” I said, trying to sound confident and cheerful.

“Goodbye, Kammy. Please don’t forget to write.”

In one quick movement, he reached out and covered my hand with his, gave it a squeeze, then shoved himself back into the water. I watched him swim to shore and wade out of the water. He sat on a fallen log and pulled something onto his bare feet. Then he stood up, gazed out toward me, and gave a quick wave.

I waved back.

He turned and almost ran back to the path and the castle.



Three weeks later, Nelumbo delivered Tor’s first letter.

I had sent a drawing along with my letter—a portrait of Nelumbo rendered with my new waterproof colored pencils. I had worked on both letter and drawing for three weeks before they seemed right to me.

My first draft was one long lament about how much I missed Tor, how life at the lake was incredibly dull after he left, and how my heart felt like a lump of mud. But after I read that letter over once or twice, I knew it was far too self-pitying to send. Not even I would want to read it!

Instead, I told him about the baby ducks growing up and learning to fly, and about some beautiful wading birds I'd seen in the marsh, and about a brief visit to the Andhran Ocean with Moselle to see her fiancé, Bream, and his family. In the margins of the letter, I sketched several fish I'd seen there.

It turned out to be a cheerful letter, and I hoped he would enjoy reading it even though I mentioned at the closing how lonely I felt whenever I sat on our rock without him. I sent love from Fathoms, too.

Now I carried Tor's letter, sealed in a plastic bag, to the rock, sat on the ledge, and just stared at it for a few minutes, savoring the anticipation. Fathoms swam up and bumped my tail with his nose as if urging me to open it. "Shall I read it aloud?" I asked him.

He shook his head and swam off, which made me laugh. Just as well. I wouldn't have shared my first letter from Tor with him anyway.

Dear Kammy,

Hope you're sitting on our rock to read this, since that's how I'm picturing you.

I've got my class list and textbooks, and attended my first classes yesterday. My apartment has a view of the ocean. It's small but has a balcony. My roommates are eighteen and always out with girls on weekends, but otherwise they're quiet. They know I have a girl to write to, but you can imagine why I haven't told them much else!

The next few paragraphs described the university and his classes. He wrote well and described things and people in detail. I could picture the white university buildings atop a cliff and the vast sea beyond.

Bittersweet tears spilled over as I read the closing lines:

*I plan to keep super busy, Kam, because it's going to be a long year. The morning we left Faraway Castle, I looked out toward Palau Kalah, hoping for one last glimpse of you. I wish I had something to remember you by. I wear the ring on its chain all the time now, because you wore it. Please keep all those merguys at a distance and remember me,
Tor*

Months passed slowly. I had set myself the imposing task of recording every variety of fish in Faraway Lake and every bird I saw, even those migrating through, which was interesting and satisfying work. While studying Da's books and papers, I learned the name of his professor friend and sent it to Tor in a letter. I also learned much about scientific methods for keeping track of the creatures I studied.

Tor became acquainted with Professor Marofit—even told him of his friendship with Bluefin's daughter. The professor encouraged Tor to study ichthyology, and he added several classes to his schedule for the second term. In January, Tor sent me two textbooks and described the projects he'd been assigned from them. I did my best to complete my own projects, using the limited resources available to me in Singkiang, and felt pleased with the results. Tor told me he could hardly wait to see my work when he came in July.

My family returned to Faraway Lake in March. As the lake ice thawed and humans swarmed around Faraway Castle, preparing it for the summer season, my heart sometimes felt so light that I struggled to hide my anticipation from my sisters.

Every month, wherever we were, Nelumbo faithfully delivered Tor's letters and mine. Moselle married Bream in April, and I was a bridesmaid. In May, Mother threw me a birthday party in Singkiang and invited every royal prince and princess near my age, along with my sisters and cousins. The highlight of that event: Talulah and I took everyone out to play with the spinner dolphins and showed off our skills. A merprince from a small island kingdom in the Dymanic Ocean asked me to marry him, which was amusing, since we were far too young to marry. I couldn't help mentioning this event in my June letter to Tor.

On the first of June, Nelumbo delivered that letter and brought me Tor's. His family would be at Faraway Castle the first two weeks of July, he said. The letter was short, but he did send me a photograph of himself, his little sisters, and an animal I recognized as a dog. I was thrilled to see his face again, yet seeing him at his home on land felt like a punch in the gut.

Tor was a human. He didn't belong to me. He never would.

I wished I hadn't mentioned the merprince's marriage proposal. It didn't seem funny anymore.

CHAPTER SIX



On the evening of the first day of July, a Sunday, I loitered near the covered boat-landing just outside the castle doors. It was a risky place to be, for many staff members bustled about in that area, but I wanted to see Tor as soon as he arrived.

But then, I thought, what if he had arrived earlier, when I wasn't watching? I rushed to our rock in the cove. He wasn't there. Then terror that he may have arrived while I was checking the rock sent me zipping back to guard the front door again. I did see people inside the lobby near the front desk when I returned, including two young girls—one with yellow hair, the other with dark hair. They looked like Tor's sisters in the photograph.

Even as I fretted, one of the lobby doors opened and Tor stepped out. Heart pounding, I slowly submerged and watched him through the water. Without looking in my direction, he sauntered over to the landing and gazed out across the lake. He wore baggy trousers covered in pockets, and his hands were jammed into one set of pockets. His shirt looked new and was buttoned up. He was not wearing eyeglasses, and his shaggy hair hung to his shoulders. He was even taller this year and still skinny, but he looked more solid somehow.

"Tor, come on," a woman called from the lobby door. His mother! I wished I could see her. "We need to dress for dinner."

He turned around, but paused and looked back, directly into my eyes. He pulled one hand from his pocket and deliberately dropped something on the dock before he walked away. As he stepped inside, I swam as close as possible to where the object lay, then slipped my arm up and over, snatched the crumpled paper, and ducked under the dock to read it in the fading light.

Meet at rock in two hours. T



Just in case he arrived early, I waited on the rock, lying flat with the end of my tail hanging in the water. I watched stars appear until the entire sky was filled. Nearly three hours passed before Tor showed up.

“Kammy?”

I sat upright. “Tor!”

He plunged into the water and swam out to join me. He climbed up on the rock, wearing his wetsuit but no flippers. “I thought I’d never get a free moment. I had to sneak out of the suite and use one of the back doors out of the castle. Some brownies saw me, but I told them I promised to meet you.”

“They won’t tell,” I said with a shaky smile. My heart was pounding so hard, I thought he must hear it. “You saw me at the landing today?”

“Yeah. I didn’t want anyone else to notice you, just in case. You got my note?”

“I did.”

He reached up to push hair off his face, and I saw his hand shaking. He was as nervous as I was! He still hadn’t really looked at me. “I can’t believe a whole year has passed,” he said. “Kamoana, I can’t tell you how good it is to be back! Everything feels different, but this . . .” He finally glanced at me. “This is good.”

“Are you ready to go on a fish hunt?” I asked. Teasing came easily. Serious talk, not so much.

“Yeah!” he said with a “No, duh!” emphasis that made me laugh. “My sisters are eleven now, and I told my parents I don’t want to play babysitter again. They agreed I could have free time in the mornings. I’ll be here early for a fish-watching session.” Then he paused. “I mean, if morning works for you.”

“I’ll be here.” I strove to conceal the magnitude of my delight, but my voice sounded breathless.

He leaned back on his hands, tipped his head back to stare at the stars, and heaved a deep breath. “I think this must be my favorite place in the world.”

“Really?” I often felt trapped in the lake.

He turned his head a little. “Don’t you like it here?”

“I do, but I would love to see more of the world.”

He nodded. "I get you. I enjoy traveling. I'm hoping to do more hands-on field work along with studying next year. Book learning isn't enough, you know? I'm eager to talk with you about . . . well, just about everything!"

"Do you still want to read my father's notebooks?"

"I can't tell you how much I look forward to seeing them! Prof Marofit says Bluefin was brilliant. He asked me to express his condolences to you, though quite late."

My throat felt tight, but I nodded. "It means a lot."

"Wish I could have met your father."

"I do too."

A moment of silence followed. I could hear Tor's quick breathing. Why did I feel so strange? This breathless excitement and joy was unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

"You aren't wearing your eyeglasses," I commented, then realized how random it sounded and blushed. Not that he could tell in the dark.

He shook his head. "I wear contact lenses all the time now." When I didn't immediately respond, he realized. "Sorry. Contacts are little plastic lenses that stick to my eyes and correct my vision."

I blinked hard. "Oh."

"Don't worry, contacts don't hurt." He studied my face in the darkness. "Kammy, I've got to get back, but I'll be right here, early."

I nodded. "I think you'll enjoy my fish lessons." I'd been planning all year how I could show him the most wondrous sights in the lake.

His smile flashed briefly. "I'll grab some fruit or something to bring along. And maybe hardboiled eggs? Have you ever eaten chicken eggs?"

"No." I assumed a chicken must be a bird but hated to ask. "I'll try whatever you like to eat." I didn't dare offer him kelp snacks or dried fish eggs. It would be interesting to taste human food anyway.

"All right. I'll pick up two packed lunches for our breakfast, and I'll be here about an hour past dawn." He stood up on the rock, looked down at me, then got a funny look on his face. "So, are you engaged to marry that merprince?"

"What? Oh, you mean Prince Hammerhead? No." I chuckled nervously. "I just told you about that because it was kind of funny. He's only fifteen."

“Good. I’m glad to be back here. Really glad.” Then he stepped into the water and swam ashore.

I slid down onto my bench, and Fathoms slithered into my lap for attention. “I know I’m crazy, Fathoms, but I don’t care. Tor is the best thing ever to happen to me.”



The caves were quiet when I got home. When Mother was away, my sisters usually went out for the evenings with their beaux. I could have brought Tor to see the glowing walls, but I felt uncomfortable about bringing him home at night while everyone was away.

I first went to my special cave, where Da’s notebooks lay on a dry ledge beneath the rock ceiling. I stacked them neatly and imagined Tor sitting here beside me, with plenty of light for reading. I shivered with anticipation.

Back in my sleeping cave, I hovered upright, smoothing my hair with a tortoiseshell comb while warm waves rocked me gently. Would I be able to sleep with so much on my mind? My private cave had only a few patches of phosphorescence on the walls, and usually I dropped off to sleep easily.

Before crawling into my bed of soft sand on a shelf in the wall, I swept it free of crawling creatures, as I did every night before lying down. The shrimp and crabs were harmless, but I dislike being crawled over while I sleep. There was a low ledge to keep the sand in place and prevent the waves from rolling me off during the night. A few little fish always join me in my little nook. They’re quiet and good company. As I lay waiting for sleep to come, I wondered what kind of bed humans sleep on.

Despite the darkness of my cave, I woke at first light. In summer the days are long and the nights are short, but I had slept well for several hours. Thoughts of Tor sent me rushing from the bed, startling my tiny bedmates. “You can sleep in, but I have a date,” I told them quietly.

I didn’t know what time my sisters had returned in the wee hours, but I knew Moselle had checked on me. The thought of my sister made me smile: Moselle was one of my blessings. She was often bossy and interfering, but she always meant well. She was eight years older and had loved taking care of me when I was a baby. Sometimes she seemed more like a mother to me than Mother did.

I wrote a note for her and tore it out of my pad. “Left early. I’ll visit you at Siren Rock after noon.” Tor would have to return to the castle for lunch. He was large, skinny, and growing, so food was a must. That thought reminded me to eat before I left the caves. Fruit and chicken eggs might not be to my taste, and today’s schedule involved a lot of swimming. Like every day did.

I changed into a fresh swimsuit top—orange, to complement my blue tail. I never knew where our clothing came from, but we always had a plentiful supply. Coral once told me that sirens and mermen traditionally wore no clothing at all, and some tribes and kingdoms still kept that tradition. I could not begin to imagine swimming around naked!

After a quick meal, I collected my satchel and headed out, passing quickly from the ocean’s warmth to the lake’s chill. Curious about the weather and time, I popped to the surface. The sky was silvery, brighter above the mountains to the east, and the lake was a huge reflecting pool. I submerged again and headed straight for our meeting place. I surfaced, and . . . to my surprise, Tor already sat on our rock, his elbows propped on his upraised knees. He wore the wetsuit again, and his swim fins, mask, and tube lay beside him on the rock. His large feet wore black socks, and his hair ruffled in a breeze.

“Good morning,” he said, and scrambled to his feet.

“Am I late?”

“Not at all.” He offered his hand, and I took it without question. He easily hoisted me into place, then sat beside me, his eyes studying my face. “I didn’t dream you. That’s a relief. All year long I kept waking up in a panic, afraid you were a dream.”

I wanted to say something clever, but my mind seemed blank.

“Kamoana,” he said, as if testing the word. “Kammy. I brought food, like I promised. A brownie packed the lunches for us and asked me to bring you her greetings. I can see brownies—little brown people who work all over the castle like smiling, friendly ants. No one else in my family can see them. Why can I?” He seemed nervous, letting out so many words in one burst . . . Something was wrong, but I didn’t know what.

“Because I spoke to you. You can see not just me, but magical creatures of all kinds. Or most kinds. I’m not sure of the extent. That’s partly why I’m not supposed to speak to humans.”

He looked directly into my eyes, his gaze intense. “If you hadn’t spoken to me, I would never have seen you? But you did. I don’t remember much about it—”

“Everything happened so quickly,” I put in.

His brows rose high, and his mouth twisted a little. "I hate to be blunt, but I have to ask: I'm not enthralled or whatever you call it, am I?"

My face felt hot. "You're not enthralled, but I did use my siren power to make you come to me. The turul would have caught and killed you if I hadn't."

He blinked, his eyes distant again. "You're probably right. If anything, I was enchanted by the turul. Which, for all I know, can really happen, since it's magical too." He focused back on me. "So you're not, uh, making me fall for you?"

My joy was gone. A painful lump stifled my breathing. "You have no reason to believe me, because no siren worth the name would tell a victim if he *was* enchanted." My voice quivered and broke. I had to draw a few breaths and swallow hard before continuing: "But no, I'm not using any magic on you. I don't collect humans like trophies. I've never even called one to crash his boat." I turned away, using my hair like a curtain to hide the hot tears tearing down my face, then wiped my cheeks with one hand.

I felt him stand up and heard the rustle and clatter as he collected his things. More tears fell, and my breath came short and fast. This was it then. The painful truth was out, and our friendship was over. He would have exciting stories to tell his friends. I had nothing but heartache and regret.

Then he sat down next to me again. Startled, I looked around. He extended a big hand with something on it. "It's a peach. I cut it up so you can try a slice."

I studied his profile, but he wouldn't look at me. "Go on," he said.

"You don't hate me?"

He snorted. "For saving my life? I feel like dirt for making you cry." His voice sounded irritated, but when I briefly caught his eye he looked worried, even regretful. "C'mon, eat something. I don't imagine you get cramps if you eat before you swim."

I took a slice of the peach and ate it. His brow wrinkled as he watched me. "What do you think?"

"It's the best thing I've ever tasted," I said quietly.

His brow cleared. "You're all right now? I mean, you'll still hang out with me?"

I nodded. "You don't think I've enchanted you?"

"Not with magic," he mumbled. Hot color climbed into his cheeks. "Here, take the rest of the peach. I've got another."

He also fed me a blueberry muffin, which I gobbled up, and a boiled egg sprinkled with salt and dark flakes he called pepper. The texture was odd, but I enjoyed the flavor. “That was good too,” I admitted when mine was gone. “What does a chicken look like?”

He smiled and blew out an amused huff. “It looks like . . . well, sort of like a duck but with no webbing on its feet. And its beak is pointed.”

“So, not much like a duck,” I said wickedly.

He looked skyward. “Chickens look like chickens. They lay lots of eggs and they’re good to eat.” He frowned. “Wish we could use cellphones here. I’d show you photos and videos of birds. But with my luck, I would drop mine in the lake anyway.”

I didn’t say anything, but he must have realized that most of his words meant nothing to me. “A cellphone is . . .” he began, then, “Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

He seemed edgy and frustrated. Hoping to soothe him, I suggested, “It’s still early for my surprise, but I’ll show you some birds and fish now, if you like.”

His expression brightened. “That sounds great. I’ll wrap up what food is left and save it for later. Unless some little beast finds and eats it while we’re away.” He hurried to stuff things into a pack, then swam to shore, holding the pack over his head.

I slipped into the water and waited.

CHAPTER SEVEN



When he returned, he climbed back onto the rock. “I’ll be right there.” I watched him don the fins, the mask, and the breathing tube. He then jumped into the water beside me.

I offered my hand, and this time he wrapped his long fingers around my wrist first. I swam on the surface to allow him to breathe through that tube. There was now enough daylight that I could point out and name the fish beneath us as we swam above forests of water weeds. I meandered along, simply enjoying the moment and the grasp of his hand. I called a few of the older fish closer so Tor could see them clearly. His eyes widened in admiration as the shining creatures passed before his mask. Roach, brown trout, bass, carp, bream, burbot, pike, whitefish, tench—one after another they displayed their distinctive traits.

At the surface he asked me questions about the varieties of fish and their habits. I answered as well as I could, wishing I had paid more attention to some of these details. But he didn’t complain when I had to admit ignorance, only murmured to himself as if committing certain facts to memory.

Looking at the sky, I calculated the time. “We should head to the island now.”

His head jerked around. “We’re going to the island?”

I nodded. “I want to show you some fish there, and maybe a few birds too. Once the tide is right, I have a surprise to share.”

We clasped wrists again, and I swam quickly, approaching the island from the northwest, where Mt. Ibu loomed over us and black-and-white birds dived from jagged volcanic rocks. We were still in smooth lake water, but ocean waves swelled around those rocks. “Even though these guys catch a lot of fish, I like them,” I said. “They look so serious, but they’re comical to watch.”

“The little pied cormorant, also called ‘little shag,’” Tor informed me. “How crazy is this? They live in the tropics on the far side of the world.”

“And that is where we are. Well, almost,” I told him, then dragged him a short way forward until we entered the warm, briny water and fought the pull of ocean waves. “Now we’re on the far side of the world.”

“Amazing,” he said. “Everything about this place is amazing. I don’t want to leave again. Ever. Think I might pass as a merman if I wear this suit and my swim fins?”

I merely smiled at him, aware that he already knew the answer.

While we rode the waves and watched the birds, Tor released my wrist, and when I let go in response, he slid his fingers down to my hand and interlinked his fingers with mine. I had never seen anyone do such a thing before.

He gave me a furtive sideward glance. “Do you mind?” he asked gruffly.

“No.” I inspected our linked hands. “They fit together nicely. Do humans do this often?”

His face went red again. His fair complexion betrayed his emotions, which was useful to me, since he said little and kept his face blank much of the time. Right then, for instance. “Sure.”

I didn’t know whether I believed him, but the hand connection differed very little from locking wrists, so I didn’t press him further. “Tell me about your family, please.”

He gave me one of those blank looks. “What do you want to know?”

“I know only that you have parents and two little sisters. I would love to know anything at all.”

“My father is a greve—that’s like a count or an earl in other countries. My mother was a baron’s daughter and has big ideas for her children.” He rattled off the information with little interest. “My little sisters are twins, and I like them a lot. Except when I have to watch them. Also, they’re tattletales . . . at least Nanna is. I can tell Vigga things, and she keeps secrets.”

“I think I like Vigga. Does she look like you?”

“Not much. Her hair is dark, like our mother’s.”

“Who are your friends?”

“I’ve told you about my friends at school, and I’ve known a few of the guys here most of my life. Royalty and nobility tend to socialize together.”

“What about girls? You never mention them in your letters.”

The look he gave me then was sharper. “I don’t talk to girls much. I’m no good at dancing or small talk, and I don’t keep up with fashion or movies or music groups. Guys are easier to be

friends with because they just hang out and don't have to talk about their hair or their feelings or who's dating whom."

I wanted to laugh but didn't dare. He sounded so aggrieved.

"I suppose it would be easier to not have to talk about such things. I doubt I would fit in even if I weren't a siren."

"Most girls would be envious, but there are some nice ones. And guys would definitely like you."

"Envious? Of what?" I suddenly noticed the sun's angle and said, "Oh! We need to go inside soon."

That got his full attention. "Inside, as in, inside the island?"

I nodded. "Into a cave. The tide is out now, so there'll be plenty of air. There are holes in the ceiling that let in air and light. But we must swim underwater to get there. I can tow you, like last year."

"Won't your mother and sisters object to a human inside their island?"

"Mother is away, and my sisters are out on Siren Rock." At least, I assumed so.

He gave me a hesitant nod but turned his back so I could take hold under his arms. He was broader than he'd been a year ago, and heavier. I felt him draw three deep breaths and hold the third one, then I dived over him and down . . . and our adventure began. I felt an extra push from his fins, but he kept his arms loose and did not interfere with my swimming. The waves scarcely moved the water below the surface, and it was beautifully clear. Fish and creatures approached us then darted away in fright to hide in crevices in the volcanic rocks.

The cave opening loomed before us like a round mouth; there was plenty of room for both of us to fit through. I swam quickly through the dark passages, angling upward. At last we reached my special cave, and I hurried Tor to the surface. We emerged from the water quietly, and I felt his chest expand in a deep breath. He was a lot fitter than he'd been a year ago. As soon as I knew he was all right, I let go and backed away.

He pulled off his mask and snorkel and looked around in wonder. "This is . . . amazing." His voice echoed. Fissures in the high ceiling allowed light to fill the cavern.

"It's one of my favorite places. Soon I will show you why, but for now come and see this." I led him to the ledge where I'd left my father's notebooks. "These are my father's notes about wildlife, magical and unmagical, in all the places he traveled around the world."

“What? You’ve got his journals? That’s awesome!” He hopped up on the ledge, tossed his fins and mask aside, crossed his legs in front of him, then paused with one hand extended toward a fat notebook. “You really don’t mind?”

“I brought you here to read them,” I said with a shrug. “It’s more fun to share.”

He picked up the notebook, removed it from its protective wrappings, opened it to the first page, and was lost to me. I watched his eyes flick back and forth, back and forth. I handed Tor his tablet and my pencil, and he began making notes. His long fingers flipped the pages with amazing speed. I tried to read a different notebook but had to keep a close eye on the sun’s position. Time passed quickly while he reveled in a world I was too nervous to enter just then.

Finally, it was time. “Tor,” I said, “I need to interrupt you for something important.”

He looked up, blinking. “What’s that?”

“Put your mask and stuff back on, and I’ll show you.”

Tor obeyed me, donning his swim gear with surprising quickness. The morning sun was now high in the sky and struck the openings in the rock at the angle I’d been waiting for. I sank down in the water, and Tor followed me, pushing upward with his hands. Numerous beams of sunlight quivered down through the clear water, sparkling like magic until they touched the cave floor and turned gray sand to gold. A school of small fish shimmered through these spotlights in an artless dance while we hovered in the shadows. Tor’s eyes followed the glittering fish with evident wonder. I could have floated there all day, simply soaking in the beauty while salt water flowed in and out of the cave’s various doorways, warm and soothing.

Tor had to surface for a breath, but he soon rejoined me, and I caught his quick smile.

The exquisite little fish were reef basslets, happy to hide together in this relative darkness away from predators.

Tor caught my hands and pulled me with him into one of the brilliant rays. We spiraled upward in a column of liquid light that turned his floating hair to gold. Tor smiled at me, showing his white teeth, and my heart swelled until I thought it might explode.

But then he had to surface, dragging me up with him. As we burst into the air, he pulled off his mask and laughed aloud. “This is mind-blowing! I can’t believe it—you show me one incredible thing after another.” He paused. “And you’re the most beautiful of all.”

We paused there, gazing at each other, still holding hands, and my breath came short. “We . . . we need to finish reading. The time . . .”

He tugged me closer and gazed into my eyes. “Kammy, I think . . . I think you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Ever.”

I nodded, breathless. “And you, you are the best thing for me.”

He smiled, looked away, his brow creasing, then moved out of the light. “You’re right. We need to read,” he said, and the magic was gone from his voice.

We perched at opposite ends of the ledge, which helped me to concentrate. Paging through my father’s notes opened my eyes to the breadth and depth of his scholarly work, and I had fun reading bits of it to Tor and listening while he shared interesting facts with me. Most of it dealt with a flourishing ocean ecology that included magical creatures.

“This is fascinating stuff,” Tor said. “This is what I want to study, Kammy—what I’ve always wanted but didn’t know it: The ocean with all of its creatures, magical and non-magical. The way it was intended to be.” He nodded, his expression earnest. “Fish are important in that equation, to say the least. If I could continue your father’s work, with Prof Marofit’s help . . .” He shook his head in wonder, gazing at me again. “You have no idea how much this means to me. I wish I could have met your father, but meeting you is even better.”

From Tor, this was quite a long speech, and the passion in his tone warmed me to my bones. “I would love to have you continue my father’s work. I wish . . . I wish I could do it with you.”

“I do too.” His voice sounded deep and earnest. “Maybe you will someday.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to touch him again, but I didn’t have the courage to scoot closer and take his hand. So I said the only thing I could think of. “We need to leave soon, in case my sisters return early.”

“Oh. Yeah.” The sun had moved on, and the light through the ceiling was no longer direct. Tor’s face was in shadow, but I thought it looked redder than usual. “So . . . where are we going next?” he asked without looking at me.

“Is something wrong? You’ve been as skittish as a squid all day.”

“Skittish as a squid?” He gave an amused sniff and looked up at the ceiling. “I guess I am. I told you, Kammy, I’m not much good with girls. I don’t say or do the right things.” He rubbed his forehead with one palm. “When we were outside you asked me if humans hold hands a lot. Yeah, they do, like I said, but not just anyone at any time. I held your hand because . . . because I like you.”

“I like you too.”

“Not just *like* . . . I mean, I like you *especially*, and I don’t know what to do about it.” He turned away, propped his feet on the edge of the rock, and pulled at the hair on top of his head with both hands. “Y’ might know that the first time I really fall for a girl, she’d be a mermaid. I can’t even tell my parents about you, and every minute I’m terrified I’ll say or do something that horrifies you. I horrify human girls that way,” he mumbled, “but generally I don’t care much.”

“You like human girls?” I felt a burn somewhere inside.

He shrugged. “Sometimes I think girls are pretty, but I can’t talk to them like I talk to you. And they bore me. A guy can’t spend all his time looking at a girl. If it’s going to last, they’ve got to be friends.”

“Are we friends?” I asked quietly.

“I’m your friend. Are you mine?” he asked.

The burn eased slightly. “Yes.”

He smiled, then swallowed hard, then frowned. “What do merpeople do when they like each other? Like, this kind of ‘like,’ I mean.” He rolled his eyes. “I don’t even know how to say what I’m trying to say. That’s why I never do this. Until today, I mean.” He mumbled something and wiped a hand down his face. “Guess I’d better shut up now.”

I felt light inside again, and my heart raced along. “I don’t know what merpeople do when they like each other. I tend to avoid my sisters when they’re with their beaux. What do humans do?”

“Well, they spend time together like we’re doing. And they talk a lot to get to know each other, and hold hands. And when it gets more serious, they kiss.” He didn’t look at me.

Kiss? I didn’t know what to say, since the word was strange to me. “Okay. Um, like I said, we’d better get going soon.”

“Right.” He picked up his mask and dropped it twice while trying to put it on top of his head. I saw his fingers shaking while he slipped on the fins. He was upset again, and I didn’t know why.

I slid into the water and waited for him. “Did I say something wrong?” I asked.

“Not you. I did. I shouldn’t have brought up kissing. I mean—Dang!” He thumped both palms on the rock ledge. “Vigga will kill me.”

“Your sister? Why would she kill you?” I probably sounded horrified.

He laughed, but it was humorless. “Not really kill me, just take me apart with words. It’s an expression. She would ‘kill me’ because I asked to kiss you the very day I got back.”

I paused. “If you asked me, I didn’t hear it. What does it mean?”

He’d been rubbing his face with both hands as I spoke, but now his head popped up.

“What? You don’t know what a kiss is?”

I shook my head, feeling unutterably ignorant.

“Merpeople don’t kiss?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they do, but I don’t know it.”

“Your mom never kissed you when you were a baby? On your cheek, I mean?”

I shrugged again. “I can’t answer your questions when I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He just stared at me. “I can’t tell you in words, it sounds too stupid.”

By this time, I was irked. “You are talking in riddles and wasting time. Either show me what it means or tell me, or just come on and I’ll take you back to the rock.”

He laughed, and this time it held a touch of genuine humor along with agitation.

“Seriously? You promise you won’t be angry if I kiss you?”

“I make no promise of the kind when I don’t know what you’re talking about. A kiss isn’t something painful or wicked or anything?” I sounded both irked and worried, since that’s how I felt.

He jumped into the water with a great splash, and the reef basslets scattered in fright. As soon as he surfaced, he snapped, “I wouldn’t ask to hurt you or do something wicked to you, Kamoana.” And he glared. His mask was on the top of his head, and the tube flopped near his ear.

“Then why all the fuss about this? You didn’t make a fuss about holding my hand.”

His glare faded. “Fine.” And he swam closer to me. “Like this.” He reached out and took my face between his hands. Then he pressed his salt-watery lips on mine.

He pulled back and looked at me, treading water.

“That’s it?” I asked.

His eyebrows quirked. “Guess I’m not so good at it,” he said quietly, but I saw disappointment in his eyes.

“I wouldn’t know. Let me try.” I took his cool, scratchy face in my hands and pressed my lips to his. To my surprise, his hands lifted to my shoulders to pull me closer, and he kissed me back, his lips gently moving against mine.

My heart pounded harder than ever before, pumping what felt like molten lava through my veins.

I pulled away, and he let me go. “Oh!” I said in a gasp.

His eyes stared into mine, flicking back and forth. “Now that was a kiss!” he said in satisfaction, and his mouth quirked up on one side.

“We . . . we need to go,” I said. He immediately turned around. I looked at his broad back. This time it seemed strange and rather frightening to touch him. After a brief hesitation, I wrapped my arms under his; I felt him draw deep breaths, but I could hardly catch one of my own.

As soon as he was ready, we passed through the cave together. My heart still pounded, and I wondered if he felt the same. The trip outside seemed to take longer than when we came in, but Tor was no more out of breath when we surfaced.

He turned around immediately, his eyes full of concern. “Kammy, are you all right? I . . . I didn’t intend to grab hold of you. It just . . . happened.”

“You didn’t hurt me. And it didn’t seem wicked.” I paused to catch my breath. “But I think we shouldn’t do it again soon.”

“You didn’t like it,” he said, and his face went blank.

“I think I liked it too much.” Before he could respond, I said, “Ready to go back?”

His brows high, his eyes alight, he nodded. “No, but . . . yeah, you’re probably right.”

I took him back to our cove, but instead of wading ashore, he took off his mask and tossed it to the beach. We faced each other without touching, and his gaze searched mine. “Kammy, I want you to know that I care too much to take advantage of you. I can control myself. I *will* control myself. I won’t even hold your hand again if you don’t want me to.”

I nodded, and a comforting warmth replaced that burning lava. “I like holding your hand.”

Hope returned to his eyes. “Tomorrow?” he asked.

“Tomorrow. Same time?”

He visibly relaxed. “Same time.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



I was at the rock even earlier the next morning, but Tor was there before me. I sat on my ledge, and he dangled his feet in the water beside me and smiled a slow, lazy smile. “Good morning.”

Oh dear! My heart started racing, and I couldn’t help thinking about that kiss.

I looked away and tried not to blush. “If we hurry, I can show you the lagoon before my sisters wake up.”

“Don’t you want to eat first?”

I shook my head. “We don’t have time.”

“You seem nervous, Kammy. Is this about yesterday?” His voice sounded strained again.

I nodded.

“Maybe we need to swim someplace cold and unromantic,” he suggested with a hint of humor in his voice. “Probably be good for both of us.”

Cold and unromantic? An idea popped into my head. “I know just the place!” I said with relief.

“I don’t know whether I’m relieved or scared,” he said. “You sound a little bit too enthusiastic. But let’s eat first, all right?”

I did feel better after another human meal. The strawberries were amazing, and a spicy pumpkin muffin tasted like heaven. I liked the chicken egg so much better the second time that I ate two of them.

No boats were out yet when we arrived at our destination, the very middle of Faraway Lake. Morning sunlight gleamed and glittered on the water. Every color seemed brighter than usual, and the brightness was nearly blinding. Tor blinked and shaded his eyes with his free hand. I let go of his wrist, and he released me. “Whatever your surprise is, Kammy, I’m sure I’ll love it.”

I smiled. "I hope so." My feelings toward my friend were strangely mixed. I wanted to be with him more than ever . . . and I wanted some space. Was this normal? I had no idea what romantic relationships were usually like between men and women, mermen and mermaids. My sisters undoubtedly discussed such things while lolling about on Siren Rock, but I had never cared to listen.

That kiss. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Tor was surprised that I'd never seen anyone kiss before. But mermen don't have soft, flexible lips . . . Mermen don't have white teeth that flash in rare smiles or foreheads that wrinkle in concern or thick brows that lower in frustration or scruffy cheeks that blush for any reason.

And merfolk seldom engage in physical contact. Almost never, actually. Maybe we really were more like fish than I had ever realized.

Maybe we'd been missing something special.

Today, everything about Tor seemed different to me, as if my senses perceived him in a new way. It was both appealing and frightening.

Fathoms suddenly popped up between us. "Good morning, buddy boy," I said, "will you help us visit the Grandfather Fish?"

"The what?" Tor asked.

"The largest fish in the lake. He's not as big as Nelumbo, but he's pretty huge. Nobody knows how old he is, not even my mother. Would you like to meet him?"

"Uh . . . sure. What kind of fish?"

"A wels catfish, like Fathoms." I rubbed my fish's head and made him purr.

"Where does he live?"

"Not far from here, but rather deep." I suddenly had second thoughts. "Now that I think about it, you'd better not try it without more practice at diving."

He set his jaw. "I've done some diving this past year. If I get in trouble, you can whip me back to the surface in a hurry, can't you?"

"Yes," I admitted. "But you'd better put the tube in my satchel."

"All right."

He did, and then we hovered over the spot while Fathoms swam circles around us.

I stared down into the depths. Tor looked at me.

"Kammy?" he said.

I didn't want to look at him, but I did anyway. His eyes were bright—so bright, so warm that I wanted to look away.

"Thanks," he said.

I couldn't speak. Happiness filled me from head to tail. But doubt followed instantly. He was a human. I could neither keep him with me nor enter his world. I dropped my gaze and simply nodded. "All right now. This will be like the dive into the cave, but straight down. If you get in trouble, grab my hand and squeeze. I'm going to take you down partway, then back up, and we'll see how you do."

"All right."

"When you're ready, nod."

He lowered his mask into place, drew several deep breaths in a row, then held one and nodded. I immediately dived, forcing him down, down. I felt him kicking, making us descend quickly. The green light faded around us. Halfway, about thirty feet down, I flipped upright and returned to the surface.

Tor spewed a quick breath and panted a little, smiling. "Wow, it gets dark fast. Wish I had an electric torch."

He meant a light source, no doubt. This wasn't going to work the way I'd planned.

"I could go get a torch now and come back," he suggested.

"I know!" I said. "I'll send Fathoms to ask the Grandfather Fish to come partway up."

"Would he come?"

I lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. "I don't know, but it's worth a try. He's mild-mannered, like Fathoms. You must promise never to tell anyone about him," I added doubtfully.

"I won't tell," he said. "Some crazy fisherman might try to catch him."

My love again burned bright. "Wait here!" I went under and called Fathoms, who'd been orbiting us, frequently swimming off to inspect interesting scents. He appeared, swimming in place with all fins wriggling. "Will you ask the Grandfather Fish to come up partway? I would like to introduce him to Tor."

Fathoms gave me a look, swam down a short way, then looked back up at me and wriggled all over.

"You want me to come with you?"

He did.

I looked back up at Tor, who watched us from the surface through his mask. "I'll be right back," I said, using my magical voice to help him understand me. Then I followed Fathoms to the bottom, a good sixty feet down.

The Grandfather Fish was feeding in his leisurely fashion not far from his usual nest, and he greeted me with waving whiskers and a ripple of his long ventral fin. I explained my request and saw the old fish look to Fathoms, who assured him of Tor's goodwill. With a push of his tail, the great catfish followed us upward. He stopped around twenty-five feet below the surface.

"I'm sure that is close enough," I said. "Thank you so much! We'll be right back."

I zipped to the surface. "He came, Tor! He's right down there below us. Are you ready?"

He blinked. "Will I be able to see him?"

"I think so. He is nearly white, so he shows up very well."

Tor looked hesitant. I took him by both hands. "You can do it. And remember that I'll bring you straight to the surface if you get into trouble."

He nodded, replaced his mask, and once more began taking deep breaths through his mouth. Excited, I clasped him firmly from behind, and as soon as he nodded, I plunged down into the green depths. I soon saw the Grandfather Fish below.

I knew exactly when Tor caught sight of the enormous fish, for his body stiffened, a few bubbles rose from his mouth, and his strong kicks faltered. "It's all right," I assured him as we drew level with the old fish. "He is very gentle." I released Tor and moved to his side.

Now that I viewed the fish from his point of view, I understood his reaction. The Grandfather Fish was at least half again as long as Tor was tall and must weigh many times more. His mouth was wider than my arms could reach, and his whiskers spread further still. Tor seemed frozen in place, floating there in the dim greenness, his eyes staring past me . . . past the fish?

"Thank you, Grandfather Fish," I said politely. The great fish wiggled his fins and sank back down toward the bottom.

Just then Fathoms zoomed toward us, his body language warning me to flee. Tor gripped my hand hard, turned, and kicked toward the surface. I saw bubbles escape his mouth, and his face held an expression that shocked me into action. I caught him under his arms again and bolted for the surface, aware that he no longer kicked to help me.

“Tor,” I cried, even as I swam. “Hold on! We’re nearly there.” I almost flung him up into the air then held him against me from behind, his head on my shoulder. Was he breathing? Yes, I felt his lungs expand in a long, shaky breath.

I pressed my cheek to the side of his head. “You’re safe, I promise. Grandfather Fish is harmless. Are you all right? I was so afraid you had drowned and it was all my fault!”

But then he jerked away and turned on me. His eyes held something like horror. “Beyond the fish . . . I saw something.” His grasp on my forearms was painful.

“What do you mean?” I twisted my arms until he realized he was hurting me and let go.

“Sorry!” he said, still gasping for breath. “I saw . . . glowing eyes and . . . and . . .”

“Pardon the interruption, my dear child.” A new voice spoke and I cringed, squeezing my eyes shut. “But I believe the human might be attempting—and failing—to describe me.”

My mother was home.

CHAPTER NINE



“Hello, Mother,” I said, and looked to my right.

Queen Pukai of the merfolk bobbed on the surface, simultaneously gorgeous and terrifying, her dark eyes narrowed in fury. I reached for Tor’s hand underwater and linked our fingers. I felt gentle pressure in return and heard his quiet sigh.

“Mother, this is Tor, my friend. Last summer I rescued him from a turul, a huge mythical bird. He studies fish and—”

“Kamoana,” Mother said, moving closer, “you should be aware by now that news spreads quickly in the magical community. Last summer the council received word that a turul complained of an unprovoked attack by a lake serpent matching the description of Nelumbo. It also reported a siren swimming in company with a human.”

My temper flared, never a useful reaction. Without releasing his hand, I shifted to place myself between my mother and Tor. “Unprovoked? The horrid bird failed to mention that it was hunting the human on Faraway Castle property and also tried to kill me! If Nelumbo had not attacked it, I would most likely be dead now.”

Queen Pukai’s eyes widened slightly, then narrowed again. “The Gamekeeper banished the bird long ago. I thought you might be the siren but trusted you not to repeat your error. My trust was evidently misplaced. Come to my council room immediately. I will escort the human.” She tossed me aside with a tiny wave of her hand, then took Tor by the arm and vanished.

Staring at the spot where he had been, I sank beneath the surface, too stunned even to swim. Fathoms approached me hesitantly. I reached out to take him in my arms and pressed my cheek into his smooth back. “She will send him away, Fathoms. I’ll never see him again.”

I felt like crying, but what good would that do? I sped to the island, through the underwater chambers, and up into the large cave where my mother waited. Queen Pukai had taken her

human form and wore a wrap dress that flattered her slim shape. One abalone comb held her masses of black hair atop her head in perfect order—magic, for certain.

She held Tor by one elbow. He wore his blank expression but stood tall, shoulders back, fists clenched. He watched me haul myself up to sit on a ledge that lined one of the glowing pools dotting the chamber floor.

Mother's cave is unmistakably magical; its very walls glitter, and strange quiverings in the air hint at spells and portals beyond my understanding. A waterfall curtains a large opening high in one wall, its roar muffled to a murmur. Mother keeps furniture on hand for people of many sizes and shapes, so she might have offered Tor a chair. But she didn't.

A large ocean crab scuttled under a stone table and peered out at me with its eyes on little stalks. I wished Fathoms could have come with me for moral support.

"Kamoana," Queen Pukai said, a rebuke in her tone.

"Mother, Tor has done nothing wrong," I said, panting from my sprint. "Please don't punish him."

"I am aware that the human is not at fault, but the consequences of your actions will affect him as well as you."

"My actions? I saved his life. Would you have wished me to stand by and allow the turul to murder him? It had him pinned and would have caught and killed him had I not interfered. As I said, it nearly killed me! Tor saved my life that time. But in the end, if not for Nelumbo, it might well have killed us both."

Mother looked at Tor. "Is this true?" Her magic made truth compulsory.

"It is all true," he said, his voice cracking. "She did save my life."

Mother's face softened almost imperceptibly. I had no idea why. She turned back to me. "Is this the only time you have spoken to a human?"

"No. I once told a resort lifeguard about some boys who were fishing in the lake. She could already see me anyway."

Mother's lips compressed again. "I can forgive and even commend your rescue of this human. But the rescue was last summer. Explain to me why you are together again today." Disapproval still laced her voice.

This question was harder to answer. I briefly met Tor's eyes. Did he now regret meeting me? "Last summer Tor taught me about birds, and this summer I was teaching him about fish," I said simply. "He is my friend."

Mother's expression darkened into censure. "You do know that such friendship is strictly forbidden?"

"But you associate with human enchanters, Mother. My father associated with a human scientist. Tor is a scientist, and we can learn from each other. Why should I not associate with a human scientist too?"

"You are children, not scientists. This boy's association can only harm you."

"How? He is here with his family for a few weeks. Why can we not talk and share notes and knowledge during this brief time?" A knot formed in my chest and made speaking difficult. She would never let me see Tor again. Why did I dare to argue or hope?

"It is evident that powerful romantic attraction already exists between you. Such a path can lead you only to disaster and heartbreak, Kamoana." I saw concern and love as well as anger in my mother's face, which made it all worse. "I want better things for you, my child."

I nearly blurted out my opinion of Prince Pike, her "better thing" for me, but hot words would do me no good. She was right, after all: What future could I have with Tor when I couldn't stay out of water for even one hour?

"Will you give us a few moments to say goodbye?" I asked humbly. "He is a good boy with a kind heart and meant me no harm. He deserves that much."

Mother hesitated but gave in. "A few moments." She gave Tor a little push. "Go to my daughter and say your goodbye. You will soon forget all about her."

He took a few steps then turned back to face the queen. "Forget her? Never."

The little smile that curled my mother's full lips made my heart sink low. "Yet so it will be," she said. "Go on now. I need to prepare."

Tor walked across the black rock floor then slipped into the water to sit on the ledge beside me. "So, this is it," he said, his tone laced with anger and frustration. "We can't see each other anymore?"

"No, and my mother will wipe your memory of everything to do with me," I said. "But I will never forget you, Tor."

He looked directly into my eyes with no hesitation or shyness. “I don’t want to forget you.” His laid his closed hand on the rock between us, fingers up.

I laid my hand over his, and he uncurled his fingers. I felt something in his palm. It was his gold ring on its chain. He whispered, “For you.” He was giving me his ring?

I closed my hand around it and returned his earnest gaze. I found it hard to talk, and my words sounded stiff and strange. “You will forget me, but I will never be sorry that I rescued you. And I will study birds and fish both. Who knows? Someday maybe humans and merfolk will work together again.”

He gazed at me, his expression soft. “Maybe you’ll laugh to hear this, but I guess it doesn’t matter since I won’t remember, so I’ll say it anyway: I would even be a fish-headed merman if I could be with you for always.”

“With no kissing?” I said, but my chuckle turned into a sob. I wished I could kiss him once more but lacked the courage to try it in Mother’s council cave.

He smiled and ducked his head. “Yeah, that part wouldn’t be so great. Kammy, you’re my friend like no one else can ever be, and you’re the most wonderful, beautiful girl—the most beautiful *anything*—I’ve ever seen.”

I smiled and frowned and blinked back tears. “I wish I could be human.” My voice rasped and choked up. “I will miss you terribly, Tor. You’re the best boy, human or merman, I’ve ever met.” I heard my mother returning so spoke this last in a rushed whisper lest she overhear.

I think she knew what we’d been saying, for her expression was sour. “Stand up, boy,” she said firmly.

He gently squeezed my closed hand, then released it, awkwardly climbed out of the water, and rose to his full height. He was much taller than Mother yet seemed smaller. But then, nearly everyone seemed diminished in Queen Pukai’s presence.

“Look into my eyes,” she commanded, and when he did so, she laid her hand across his forehead. There was no flash of light. Mother didn’t speak or use a potion or do anything strange. Yet when she removed her hand from Tor’s face, his eyes had a lost expression that nearly broke my heart.

Mother didn’t comment on my tears. “Take him ashore, leave him there, and then make no attempt to regain his attention before he leaves the resort. No speaking on the way—not one

word from you, my girl,” she warned. “Do you promise? If not, I will send one of your sisters with him.”

“I promise,” I said, and wiped my cheeks, secretly delighted to be allowed the privilege of escorting Tor to our little cove.

“Take him underwater—he will be safe from drowning until he reaches shore.” Mother then took Tor’s chin in her hand and looked into his blank eyes. “Swim underwater with this mermaid until you reach shore, and there you will fully recover your senses.”

He nodded briefly, pulled his mask over his face, walked to the edge of my pool with his swim fins flopping, and plunged in.

“Remember.” Mother laid her finger over her lips, a warning glint in her eyes.

I submerged beside Tor and pointed to the hole in the floor of the pool. He swam willingly beside me, his hair glimmering in the phosphorescent light. My heart felt like a weight in my chest, and I swam slowly. There was no need to hurry, since Mother’s enchantment protected Tor.

His eyes no longer looked completely blank. He observed his surroundings with wonder and sometimes regarded me with similar confused interest. I briefly thought of yesterday’s hours in my special cave, and my tears mixed into the salt water. There could be no detours; Mother would know. We emerged from the caves into the crystalline ocean water amid colorful fish, then crossed into the cold lake. Again, I saw Tor staring around in wonder from behind his mask.

I took his hand and linked my fingers with his. He looked at our hands, then at me, and his eyes widened with wonder. He didn’t protest, so we swam hand in hand through the lake. I pointed out a huge pike, a sunken boat filled with baby fish, and the skeleton of a tree. Nelumbo found us and swam alongside Tor for a few minutes, his expression inquisitive. Tor was frightened at first but looked to me for reassurance and relaxed. I shook my head at Nelumbo and pointed at my mouth to let him know that I couldn’t explain. His strange eyes expressed understanding, and he soon disappeared into the golden-green distance.

As the lake floor rose beneath us, I swam even more slowly. Tor no longer knew me, yet he was still Tor. I turned and studied his face as we swam. When his family left the resort, would he ever return? Would I recognize him if he did? I tried to memorize his features, but I knew he would change in coming years. The boyish face with stubble on the chin and cheeks would

harden into a man's face. Would his awkward sweetness disappear into a man's cynicism and pride?

He slowed and returned my scrutiny, his expression openly admiring, even awestruck. On a whim, I pulled him close, once again took his face between my hands, and kissed him. The swim mask made this even more awkward than before, but I didn't care. As I drew back, I thought I saw a flash of awareness in his eyes, but it lasted only an instant then was gone.

I gave him a shove toward the shore and saw his fins flop around until he got his feet beneath him and climbed the rocky slope.

Goodbye, Tor. More of my tears mixed with the lake water. I love you.

Not until he was digging through his pack did I remember the items in my satchel.

EPILOGUE



Tor floundered up the rocky shore, removed his mask and swim fins, shook out his dripping hair, then sat down on the rocky bank. He felt exhausted to his bones. He was starving. Snorkeling was better exercise than he'd expected. He drew a deep breath and expelled it forcefully, propping his hands behind him to gaze out across the lake.

Such a beautiful day! His blood was racing hot and his spirit felt light, even exultant. This was a day he would never forget. Glorious wilderness, fascinating fish, birds dancing in the sky. He was at the beginning of a new epoch in his life, ready to attempt new challenges and succeed.

He scrambled lightly to his feet, picked up his mask and fins, limped across the sharp rocks to his hiding place, and dug out his shoes and backpack. He opened the backpack and paused at the sight of two crumpled lunch sacks. Hungry, he dug through both brown bags, but nothing was left but eggshells and muffin wrappers. He felt inexplicable sadness, holding those empty bags. Why?

He shrugged it off. Where was his snorkel? He turned back to see if he'd dropped it. No luck. Slowly he shoved the fins and mask into the pack. Why was nothing making sense? Then he heard a soft thump behind him and spun around. His tablet sprawled on the rocks, pages curled under; then it settled flat. Had he somehow knocked it out of the pack? The pocket he usually kept it in was zipped shut. He tucked it away, securely this time, and a moment later heard the rattle of plastic and rocks scattering. More slowly this time, he turned to see his snorkel on the ground, dripping lake water. He picked it up and stared out at the lake. Ripples lapped at the shore and spread out into the lake . . . He stared at that flat-topped rock for a long moment, then shoved the snorkel in with his other gear. That should be everything.

But he couldn't leave. Slowly he sat down on a log and tried to think. Something was wrong. He had forgotten something extremely important. He unzipped that pocket again, pulled out his tablet, and held it protectively in one hand. It was slightly damp, as if someone with wet

hands had handled it. He pressed it to his heart and sighed. But that blank space in his mind persisted.

Well, it would come to him sometime, whatever it was he'd forgotten.

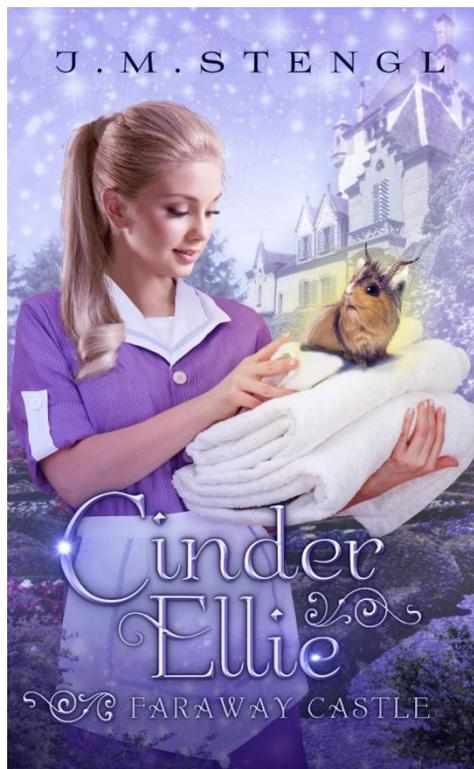
Forgotten things have a way of coming back.

*Don't worry, dear readers! Kammy and Tor will be back this summer
in J.M. Stengl's upcoming novel:*

THE SIREN AND THE SCHOLAR

A Little Mermaid Romance

In the meanwhile don't miss out on her newest release:



Read on for a sneak peek . . .

CHAPTER ONE



It was early morning, so early that few guests had yet emerged from their rooms when Ellie Calmer hurried up the service stairs, clutching a stack of fluffy white towels to her chest. Just as she stepped out of the echoing stairwell, a small brown creature wearing a uniform much like hers popped into view on the thick red carpeting of the corridor. Ellie stopped short with a gasp. “Oh! Sira, you startled me!”

Great dark eyes in a mournful face gazed up at her, and the brownie’s long fingers twined about the hem of her apron. “Miss Ellie, I am so sorry about the towels!”

Ellie shook her head and started walking with Sira trotting along beside her. “It isn’t your fault. I’m quite sure the towels you brought were perfectly clean.” She spoke softly for fear of disturbing any sleeping guests as they passed along richly paneled halls lined with fine artwork. A marble griffin with outspread wings posed at a T-intersection, and here Ellie briefly paused. Along the corridor to the right was the suite where the royal family of Khenifra were currently staying. Ellie gave that corridor a wistful look but dutifully walked straight ahead.

Royal families usually reserved the suites here in the east wing of Faraway Castle. But one extremely wealthy widow of a visconte from Vetricia claimed a luxury suite for herself for three weeks every summer and made life miserable for the resort staff every single day of her holiday.

“But Lady Beneventi is displeased with my work!” Sira sounded heartbroken.

“I’m positive your housekeeping was as flawless as ever. Everything will be fine.” Ellie spoke just above a whisper, and not only because of sleeping guests. It was always wisest to keep one’s gaze straight ahead and whisper when talking to brownies in public places, since most humans could neither see nor hear them.

Ellie was unlike most humans and could easily see the brownies, dwarfs, imps, and other strange yet charming magical beings that abounded both in the castle and on its surrounding lands. She and the other human summer-staff members at Faraway Castle had all been born with

magical powers—Ellie could use her voice to affect emotions—but they lacked the income to pay for the training necessary to develop their talent into real skill. Most of them were ordinary *hembez*, the lowest and most common magical-ability ranking (under *burvae*, *carovnae*, and the dreaded, exalted *sahirae*), but here at the castle they could at least associate freely and learn from each other. They were forbidden to use their magic in the presence of human guests, and were particularly banned from using their magic *on* a human or beast except in emergency situations, but otherwise they were free to experiment, study in the library, and share living space with magical beings of many varieties.

Most of them appreciated this benefit and worked hard. Ellie’s summers at Faraway Castle were the happiest and best days of her entire life. Not for anything would she risk losing this priceless opportunity.

She stopped before a door of solid walnut inlaid with a mosaic of flying dragons. She rapped the knocker twice and stepped back.

A weary-eyed servant opened the door and looked Ellie up and down. A sniff expressed her opinion more clearly than words. “Come this way, child.”

Ellie and Sira followed the woman into the suite and along yet another corridor, this one featuring parquet flooring and exquisite hooked rugs. The maid ushered Ellie into a formal sitting room, where Lady Beneventi stood waiting.

“Thank you, Giovanna. That will be all.” The servant curtsied, stepped into the hall, and closed the door.

Sira, who had slipped in alongside Ellie, looked up at the viscontessa with genuine deference, the top of her head no higher than Ellie’s knee. Ellie bobbed a curtsy, still clutching her fluffy burden. “I’ve brought your fresh towels, my lady.”

“Better to have provided them yesterday than oblige me to request them today,” Lady Beneventi said, her voice edged with accusation. “The towels currently in my washroom are completely unacceptable. One of the hand towels was folded improperly, and when I used another, a piece of lint fell to the washroom floor.”

“Oh no!” Sira’s shrill gasp expressed genuine dismay that might have pleased the lady had she heard it.

“I imagine that was unpleasant, my lady,” Ellie said.

“Well,” Lady Beneventi huffed, “the person I spoke with this morning seemed to think lint towels were no problem at all, but I hold to a higher standard. If towels smell stale, leave lint behind, do not absorb water, or are improperly folded, I shall spurn them and demand replacements!” Her voice rose in volume as she waxed eloquent, and her pale eyes threw sparks.

Taking pity on devastated little Sira and fearing the woman might cause herself harm, Ellie spoke quickly, wishing she might add a dash of soothing magic to her response: “I believe these fresh towels will please you, my lady. They are still warm from the sun and smell like summertime.”

Despite her intent to restrain her magic, a sprinkling of it slipped through. Lady Beneventi’s eyelids fluttered slightly. “Indeed! Well. That does sound very nice.”

“Oh, they are very nice!” Sira assured her. “I do hope you will like them.”

Ellie returned to using her natural rather than magical charm. Had Sira noticed her slip? “Such details are a vital part of the Faraway Castle experience. And speaking of attractions, I trust you will enjoy the wedding banquet tomorrow evening.”

A slight smile curved Lady Beneventi’s thin lips. “I expect I shall. Though I hold no high hopes for the happiness of the marriage, the culture of Szolnok being so barbaric while Lady Evangelina is used to finer things. *My granddaughter, if ever I’d had one, would never have chosen to marry the heir of so backward a country . . .*”

Ellie allowed Lady Beneventi to drone on for a time then, catching a pause in her monologue, said, “I beg your pardon, my lady, but I must return to work now.”

After changing out the fresh towels in her arms for some equally fresh yet unacceptable towels in the washroom then gently forestalling another lecture, Ellie accomplished her escape. Once the door closed at their backs, she said, “Now please don’t let this worry you, Sira. We all know you do your work perfectly every time.”

Which was no exaggeration, for the brownies of Faraway Castle kept the place sparkling from basement to turrets. No speck of dust survived long on the gilded frames of priceless paintings; no mouse could find sustenance on the kitchen’s crumb-free floors. Every windowpane sparkled year-round, and the ballroom floor shone like mirrored glass.

“I do try, Miss Ellie, but some guests don’t agree with you.” Sira dabbed tears from her eyes with one corner of her spotless apron.

“If Lady Beneventi really thought the service was poor, she wouldn’t return here year after year and stay for weeks.” Ellie gave Sira a reassuring smile, and the little creature did her best to return it.

But brownies found smiling difficult. Ellie had not yet completely adjusted to meeting mournful brown eyes in somber brown faces wherever she walked within the castle walls. Yet behind the sorrowful looks were happy and contented minds. Brownies enjoyed working so much that each one took a hand in every job within the castle, from kitchen to laundry to cleaning to record-keeping. A dwarf disguised as human ran the front desk, and all-purpose maids like Ellie showed their faces to reassure guests that humans were in attendance, but nearly every other task in Faraway Castle itself was accomplished by brownies. Most guests never knew.

Just before they reached the marble griffin at the intersection, Ellie heard boisterous voices ahead and her heart gave a hopeful little flutter. Sure enough, a giggling toddler rounded the corner and ran toward her, his eyes sparkling. Then a girl, perhaps five years old, followed him. “Karim!” she called, then gave a delighted scream when her baby brother turned back to clutch her with both chubby arms.

Recognizing two of King Aryn of Khenifra’s numerous offspring, Ellie felt her heart rate speed up. Both children were as brown of skin as Sira, but unlike the brownies they had happy faces, chubby cheeks, and glossy black hair. For three years now, since her first summer working at Faraway Castle, Ellie had considered this royal family the most beautiful in all the world.

A moment later her joy was complete, for a young man appeared around the corner, his expression mildly concerned. “Hush, you two. People are still sleeping,” he warned his little siblings, then caught sight of Ellie.

He stopped short.

So did she.

Heart pounding, she formed her lips into a smile and said, “Good morning.”

It was Omar Zeidan, prince of Khenifra, Ellie’s first and only crush.

“Good morning,” he said in return, even as he picked up his baby brother and took his sister by the hand. Then he straightened and looked at Ellie as if intending to speak, but after a pause only gave her a nervous smile and walked away. The little boy waved to Ellie over his brother’s shoulder. “Goo-bye!” he called.

Ellie waved back, feeling both exhilarated and crushed. Prince Omar had spoken two words! To her!

Ellie had been twelve years old when Arabella the burva, her guardian and magic tutor, sent her to work at Faraway Castle three summers ago. While grilling sausages during a beach cookout, Ellie had first noticed Omar, then not quite fifteen, playing games with a bunch of young children, including his own little brothers. Omar laughed and teased yet was gentle with the little ones, helped them put balls through hoops, and let them catch him during tag. He was so cute and sweet and funny that Ellie could hardly keep her eyes off him.

That first year he hadn't noticed her, but since then, each summer when his family came for their month-long holiday, she had caught him looking at her time and again. Yet never once had he tried to speak to her

FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT!



Jill Marie is a native of southern California who, after a whirlwind life as a military wife, now makes her home with her husband in North Carolina, where she serves at the beck and call of two purebred cats and one adorable granddaughter. Obsessions include all things animal rescue, fairy-tale romances, knowing the lyrics to the best songs from old musicals, and perfecting the perfect pastry crust.

During her former career as a historical romance novelist, Jill Marie won both the Carol Award and RWA's Inspirational Readers' Choice Award. Now she prefers her novels to include a dash of magic along with the heart-melting romance.

Visit her website at www.JMStengl.com
Be sure to find her on social media: [Facebook](#), [Goodreads](#)