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Magic and Mermaids: Fairy Tales Revisited

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The Porrectus Pearl

Everything was quiet as Jamie walked down the cracked pavement of the old service road that wound around the back edge of town. There were a few houses on the left, old and falling apart from disuse, with overgrown lawns threatening to swallow the structures whole. The forest was on the right, huge and imposing. The trees were old and tall, their overlapping branches tied together by trailing vines, and the ground was packed with undergrowth. Despite its intimidating appearance, local teenagers were often caught sneaking into or out of the forest. Some of them went on their own, dared by their friends and eager to prove that they weren't cowards. The stories of what happened to anyone who ventured too closely to the house on the other side were well-known. Many were couples, sneaking off in search of privacy. Jamie snorted. Nothing says romance like fear and rule breaking.

Of course, Jamie didn't really understand relationships. Teenage flings never lasted, so why bother putting one's limited amount of time and energy into a relationship that would no doubt end as quickly as it began? Even most of the married adults in the town seemed to tolerate each other more than like each other. Everyone says that love makes people irrational, and that all the confusion and jealousy and heartbreak that may have occurred will have been worth it in the end. Jamie certainly agreed with the first part, but the rest was just nonsense. If the images of spurned lovers drowning their sorrows in chocolate and drunkenly cursing their exes were as common in life as on television, then Jamie was definitely better off never loving at all.

Jamie's long skirt waved in the wind as a breeze blew by, sending several leaves rustling across the road. It was early August and school would be starting soon. Only one more year of high school and then Jamie would be free to leave, to see cities unimaginably bigger than this small town. Towns like this were a dime a dozen in the South— small collections of houses and

shops, where everyone knows everyone else and secrets are impossible to keep. Jamie, like all the other teenagers here, knew this town inside and out and was now growing restless, eager for more.

Another breeze swept across the bare sides of Jamie's newly-shaved head. For a brief moment, Jamie was overcome by the sound of cicadas screaming from the trees. The rumors about the forest weren't true, of course, but Jamie couldn't help but move a little faster. The stories had likely started as a tactic to scare children into behaving, but the imagination always makes such tales far more frightening than any telling. The story was simple. An old woman lived alone, deep in the forest. She was a witch. She, like every other witch, was wicked and bitter, and hated the children that played in the woods, flaunting their youth and their beauty. Ms. Pearce, the adults called her, but to the children she was simply The Witch. They said that whenever a young boy ventured too closely to her home, he was instantly frozen. He would be forced to remain a living statue, until the witch found him and made him swear to never return. Whenever a young girl approached her home, however, the girl was transformed into a bird, yet still unable to fly to safety. The witch collected the birds and took them to her home, never to be seen again. Some said that the witch kept these birds for her companions. Others claim that she cooked them for her dinner.

Jamie found the stories absolutely absurd. Not a single girl in recent history had gone into the forest and not returned. This town was small enough that any disappearances would be noticed immediately. Sure, half the kids in town claimed to have an aunt or great-aunt that hadn't been seen in decades, but that's part of the scare tactic. Adults create missing family members in an attempt to make their children take them seriously. It wasn't even a good attempt. These rumors were clearly not keeping anyone out of the woods. If anything, they made the teenagers

more eager. Jamie didn't understand the appeal at all. What could these teenage couples do in the woods that wouldn't be safer and more comfortable somewhere else?

There was an odd noise and Jamie peered into the trees, trying to locate the source of the sound. It had sounded like a shout; was someone calling for help? There was barely time to register the movement and rustling in the shadows before a heavy figure sprang from the trees.

Jamie groaned, hitting the ground hard. The boy who had run into Jamie pushed himself up from the pavement and stood with some effort, brushing bits of dirt and gravel off of his bare arms. Jamie stood and inspected the skirt for holes before doing the same.

“What the hell, dude!” Jamie yelled. “Steven?”

Sure enough, standing before Jamie was Steven Shepherd, a classmate. He was the standard high school jock type, a football player. Jamie hadn't liked him when they were eight and on the same tee-ball team, and though they saw less of each other as Jamie lost interest in sports, that had never really changed. Unfortunately, Jamie had been seeing a lot of Steven lately, as he had recently started dating, Ashley Fulton, Jamie's neighbor and best friend. Jamie didn't understand why Ashley could possibly like the guy enough to date him, but had promised her they'd play nice nonetheless.

Jamie stared at the boy in question. “Steven, what are you doing out here? Is Ashley with you?”

Steven jumped slightly. He kept glancing at the woods, massaging his fingers as if they were stiff. “I— Ashley, she— The witch!”

Jamie took a deep breath. “Steven. You did not just leave Ashley in the middle of the woods, alone.”

Steven surged forward, grabbing Jamie's arms. "Jamie, man! You gotta help me. The witch! She took her!"

Jamie jerked out of Steven's grasp. "Steven. You know that isn't true. Now, we need to go find her. Please tell me you were at least near the path."

Steven stomped his foot like an angry toddler, and Jamie tried to ignore the disgusting *squelch* which came from his muddy sneaker.

"I'm telling you, I *saw* her. She took Ashley, and she's gonna turn her into a hen, and kill her!"

Jamie groaned in frustration, turning around to look for the old dirt road which led through the woods. "That isn't even how witchcraft works!"

Steven hesitated before following. "Jamie, I know what I saw. Besides, everyone knows. Girls get too close to the witch and they disappear."

"That's not—"

"We've seen it happen."

"It's never happened."

Steven glared up at Jamie, who stared back unimpressed. The two were standing at the edge of the road, toe to toe with their arms crossed. Steven wasn't short but Jamie towered over him, thin and neatly groomed where Steven was thicker and entirely disheveled from running through the woods.

Jamie broke eye contact first, heaving a sigh. "Have you even tried *calling* Ashley?"

Steven made an impatient noise and gestured at his empty pockets.

Jamie briefly considered wringing the boy's neck. What could Ashley possibly see in this boy, who, Jamie might add, just *left her in the woods*?

“Okay. Fine. It’s fine. You know what? I’ll fix this myself. I’m going over there. Let’s go.” Jamie started down the dirt road.

“Jamie, wait!”

Jamie didn’t slow down or turn around, but heard Steven’s shuffling footsteps dragging further and further behind. Jamie stopped and turned around, waiting with crossed arms.

When Steven finally caught up, he grabbed Jamie’s arms. “You can’t go over there, man. The witch is dangerous.”

Jamie glared at Steven, who was nervously scanning the trees around them. “I’ve had enough of this. I’m going to go talk to *Ms. Pearce*, ask if she’s seen Ashley. Who you abandoned. Are you coming or not?”

Steven paled and snatched his hands back, shaking his head violently.

Jamie scoffed and hurried down the old dirt path alone, jumping when a large twig broke underfoot with a loud *snap*. *Get ahold of yourself*, Jamie thought. *There’s nothing to be afraid of. These are perfectly normal woods. The trees are dense because they’ve been left untouched for decades. Crows are completely common in these areas, even if there aren’t usually seven of them in one spot. The toads are on the path because they’re everywhere. The real trick is finding somewhere without them. And for goodness sake, the path isn’t grabbing your feet; it’s simply sticky and muddy from all the recent rain.* Jamie’s heart was pounding. An owl cried out in the distance.

After a few more minutes of walking, Jamie paused, breathless. Despite all efforts, Jamie’s treacherous body refused to move, fingertips tingling as if an electric current was running through them. Jamie had the bizarre urge to sing. Perhaps Ashley would answer.

No! Jamie heaved a huge breath and snapped out of the daze. Jamie was not about to let all of those silly stories act as a deterrent after making it this far. Ashley was out here somewhere, either in the forest or in the old woman's house, and Jamie was going to find her. Jamie marched onward.

It wasn't long after that the teenager began to see the dark outline of a large house through the trunks of the trees, and soon Jamie was standing at the edge of the woods. The old dirt path didn't lead to the front of the house, as Jamie had expected, but rather came up beside it. The path was now considerably thinner, and thorny weeds and blackberry vines clung to Jamie's now mud-lined skirt. Facing the house was a wide expanse of shrubs and saplings, a young forest reclaiming what was one farmland. Jamie could see the bright flowers of asters and goldenrods tangled among tall grasses. The building itself was an old plantation house, not the biggest Jamie had ever seen, but still fairly large. It would have been beautiful if anyone had bothered with the upkeep. The formerly white building was now tinged a dirty green, and the paint was cracking and peeling. The wooden bannister on the upper patio was broken in many places, and a large chunk of it was missing at the corner.

Jamie tried the first step, wary of the wood's rotten, cracked appearance. It creaked dangerously and Jamie quickly stepped down again. Jamie began up the steps once more, this time being careful to stay on the outer edge where there was more support. The boards of the patio looked equally distrustful, but Jamie decided that there was probably no danger of falling through, and quickly strode across. Jamie paused in front of the door. The dilapidated state of the house and the overgrown shrubs and ivy vines surrounding the entrance certainly did add to the creepy effect, but Jamie knew that Ms. Pearce was just an old woman who couldn't keep up with all the maintenance a house like this requires. That was all.

Jamie looked over at the windows. This house had been built long before it had become customary to put screens in the windows, and it looked as though the glass panes hadn't been opened in years. There were cobwebs in the corners, both on the outside and the inside, and dead flies rested on the windowsills, legs curled skyward. Jamie grimaced. There was no discernable movement through the closed curtains, but Jamie could clearly hear the chirps and warbles of various birds. Some other teenagers must have made their way up to the house itself and heard the birds, which would explain at least that much of the rumors. Jamie thought of Steven, sweaty and panicked at first, and then pale and terrified. Jamie took a deep breath, head held high, before knocking on the door.

The door jerked open a crack immediately after the first knock, and Jamie blinked in surprise at the small elderly woman peering out, half Jamie's height and thin as a twig. She was hunched over, resting her weight on a parrot-headed cane, and was roughly eye-level with Jamie's abdomen. If it weren't for her expression, Jamie wouldn't have been able to understand how anyone could see her as a threat at all. Her nose was long and hooked, curving downward to meet the outward point of her chin, cracked lips resting between them. Her wispy hair was pulled back into a small bun.

"Who are you?" She demanded.

Jamie smiled nervously. "Um, hi. I'm Jamie. Jamie Jameson. Terribly original, I know. You must be Ms. Pearce?"

The old woman threw the door open wide and lurched forward, jabbing Jamie with her cane. "What are you doing on my patio?" She screeched. "You never should have come this far! What's the matter with you?"

Jamie tried to sputter out a response, startled by the sudden assault. The old woman was circling Jamie, examining and prodding the teenager. After a sharp jab to the ribs, Jamie finally lost all patience and grabbed the end of the cane.

“Look, lady, I’m not here to bother you!” Jamie snapped. I’m just looking for my friend.”

Ms. Pearce gawked at the teenager in surprise, wide eyes almost comically huge through her wide round lenses.

Jamie gently released the cane and took a couple of breaths. “I’m sorry. I’m just trying to find my friend. She was out here with her boyfriend earlier today, but he just ran back without her, and I think she might be lost. Please, have you seen her?”

The old woman scowled, holding the cane close to her chest. Jamie thought there might have been a brief hint of a smile on the old woman’s face, but it could have been a trick of the light.

Jamie coughed. “So have you? Seen her, I mean?”

Ms. Pearce harrumphed and continued to stare at the teenager. As the silence stretched on, Jamie shifted and began to fidget nervously, examining the peeling doorframe, the splintered wood of the patio, the hole on the door where presumably a knocker once hung. Finally, Jamie’s gaze settled back on the old woman. She was still staring, never breaking eye contact or giving any indication of her thoughts. It was all rather disconcerting, Jamie thought.

“Alright,” the old woman eventually grumbled, opening the door completely. “Your friend’s inside. Come in.”

“Oh. Thank you.” Jamie wondered why the old woman hadn’t just said so to begin with, but followed her inside anyway. The interior of the house was surprisingly tidy, compared to the

outside. Sure, the yellow wallpaper was peeling in some places and the plaster ceiling had a few cracks and missing pieces, but other than that, the house seemed to be in good condition. Jamie could hear the birdsong more distinctly now, though the sound was still muffled. Wherever the birds were, there were clearly a great number of them.

Ms. Pearce moved quickly, and despite her size Jamie had to hurry to keep up with her. Finally she stopped in front of an open doorway, smiling. Several of her teeth were missing.

“Here you are, dearie,” she said with a sweeping gesture. “Your friend’s right inside.”

Jamie entered a small sitting room, decorated with rosy wallpaper and faded pink curtains. On the wall were a few painted portraits in oval frames and an old round mirror, which had apparently been hanging for so long that the glass had begun to distort, giving Jamie the impression of a funhouse mirror. In the middle of the room, surrounding a short coffee table, were two armchairs and a loveseat, all overly plush and covered in a hideous pink and orange floral pattern. There was a vase in one corner full of dried brown plants, a once loving offering left to wither and die.

On the table was a domed birdcage, a small brown nightingale trapped within its silver bars. No Ashley. The bird saw Jamie standing in front of it and began to thrash against the sides of its cage, chirping wildly.

“What is— Hey!” Jamie spun around to face the old woman, but was met instead with a face full of rough powder. Jamie sneezed and sputtered, trying to wipe the powder off.

“What the hell is your problem?” Jamie yelled. “And what the hell have you done with Ashley?”

With the last of the powder swept from Jamie's eyes, the teenager could see the old woman clearly. She was furious, her face beet red and her knuckles white where she clutched a small burlap pouch, fingernails digging into the cloth like talons.

The old woman shrieked. "What are you? Why won't you change?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Jamie shouted back. "Where is Ashley?"

The witch tossed the pouch onto the floor with a scream, the powder spilling out in a dusty cloud. She lurched forward and grabbed the front of Jamie's shirt with one hand, using the other to point one bony finger at the birdcage.

"There's your friend!" she cackled. "There's your precious Ashley!"

Jamie tried to push the old woman off, but her grip was surprisingly strong. "Ashley is not a bird! That just isn't possible!"

"That bird was your friend, but now she belongs to me!" Pearce dug her fingernails into Jamie's arm and leaned close. "And you're going to be my prisoner too, unless you leave this place and swear never to return."

Jamie grimaced at the old woman's foul breath, but refused to break eye contact. "I will not," Jamie declared. "I'll call the police. I am going to find Ashley."

The witch laughed again and shoved Jamie toward the door. "Go ahead. I've already told you where she is. But the police won't find anything here."

Jamie's retort died as something glinted on the table beside the birdcage. It was a necklace with a small faded purple flower. Below the flower was the word 'friends.' Jamie had given that necklace to Ashley when they were six years old.

The old woman noticed the shift in Jamie's expression, and her gap-toothed grin broadened. "Don't bother coming back, unless you just happen to find a porrectus pearl."

The witch's coarse laughter echoed with the nightingale's shrill cries as Jamie fled from the house and back into the forest.

* * *

Jamie ran to Ashley's house first, but found it empty. Jamie had called her cell phone multiple times, but it went straight to voicemail every time. After checking their usual hangouts—the diner, the park, even the gazebo in the middle of the graveyard—Jamie had finally gone to the police.

They, of course, had been no help at all. When Jamie had run in, as frantic as Steven had been earlier, most of the officers just laughed. The older officers looked serious, exchanging wary glances.

“Alright, son, tell me this,” Officer Jean had said. He was an older man, mostly bald with an unkempt beard. Bits of food were constantly stuck in the wiry hair and his shirt, stretched over his enormous belly, was covered with food stains.

“If them old stories is really true, how come you wasn't affected?”

Which, alright, he had a valid point. Jamie continued to insist that the old woman was holding Ashley hostage, however, but the officers wouldn't budge.

Finally, Officer Ryan came forward. He was a nice guy, shorter than Jamie with neatly parted brown hair. He was only a few years older than Jamie and Ashley, and they had been in high school together for a year.

Ryan slung an arm over Jamie's shoulders. “Just calm down, darlin'. Ashley's probably just fine. Maybe she got fed up with somethin' Steven was doin' and decided to pull a little prank on him, yeah? Now why don't you let me drive you home, and if there's still no word from her tomorrow, we'll send out a party to search the woods.”

Jamie had finally relented, seeing that they wouldn't change their minds. Now at home, Jamie was pacing diagonally across the living room, wondering what to do. Going back to the witch's house would yield no better results a second time, and if that bird really was Ashley, it wouldn't do Jamie any good to steal her if she couldn't be changed back into a human.

Jamie sneezed. In all the panic, the witch's strange powder had been entirely forgotten. The powder still coated Jamie's shirt, face, and hair, dusty and vaguely green. Now that it had been brought back to Jamie's attention, the scent was overpowering. It smelled like mint and perfume and old churches.

After a quick shower and a change of clothes, Jamie sat down at the family computer. A quick Google search yielded links to several witchcraft blogs, and Jamie soon found a fairly thorough list of herbs with magical properties. Spearmint and peppermint, frankincense, and even rose could all be used in spells for transformation. That must be what the witch uses to trap her victims. When it hadn't gotten Jamie in the woods, she went for the more direct approach.

If it transformed Ashley— and, now that Jamie thought about it, Steven had been moving strangely, maybe the after effects of being frozen?— then why had it proven useless when applied to Jamie? Except there had been that strange moment at the edge of the woods. Perhaps, Jamie thought, the magic was confused? In all the stories, men are frozen into statues and women change to birds. It's always one or the other. Maybe the magic only worked on people with binary identities.

Jamie's stared blankly at the computer screen, stunned by the realization. If the magic only worked on men or women, then Jamie was immune! It made sense; the old woman had lived her entire life in that old house outside of town, so she'd most likely never met a nonbinary person before. Hell, she'd probably never even considered that a person *could* be anything other

than strictly male or female. If all of her magic was similarly gendered, then Jamie might be able to save Ashley, after all!

The witch had said something before Jamie ran away, what was it? ‘Don’t come back without—’ some kind of pearl? A portcullis pearl? No, Jamie thought, that doesn’t make any sense. A poorectis pearl?

Google suggested *porrectus*, but the results were all odd, something about Gregorian chants? No, here was the dendrophylax porrectus, the jingle bell orchid. Something about that sounded familiar.

Jamie pulled the list of magic herbs back up. There it was, listed right below jasmine. Apparently the orchids only grow in a specific part of Florida, and they only bloomed in late August, early September. They seem to rarely survive outside of the wild, and the flowers are tiny, only a few millimeters wide. According to this site, though, if a plant is raised successfully in the right conditions, certain spells are said and the plant gets specific lighting, it will produce larger flowers, the biggest recorded flower being two centimeters wide, which bloom to reveal the pearls inside. These pearls can then be used alone or in spells to break powerful curses or hexes.

As the information went on, Jamie’s heart began to sink. This sounded impossible. No wonder the old witch had sounded so smug. Jamie thought of the bird— Ashley— thrashing against the bars of that tiny cage. And there had been others, too. A whole mass of birds which could be heard singing through the house, or calling for help. Jamie was the only person who could rescue those girls. Jamie opened a new tab. *Google, don’t fail me now.*

After a few hours of searching, Jamie had a lead. Following link after link finally led Jamie to the website and blog of Phoenix, a witch from Florida who specialized in rare magical plants. Jamie worried that a pearl would be unavailable this year, or too expensive, but decided the risk was worth it. Jamie dialed the phone number on the website, hoping that the green witch would answer.

“Hello, this is Phoenix.”

Jamie was relieved, but was now unsure what to say. “Um, hi. My name is Jamie. I was, um, looking for a porrectus pearl, and I found your website. It said to call for availability?”

“You’re in luck. I just got two good blooms last week.”

Jamie sighed in relief.

“I’m gonna have to ask what you need the pearl for, though.” Phoenix continued. “These things are only used for serious magic, and I don’t know if you read my faq, but it’s my policy not to sell items to be used for harmful purposes.”

Jamie hesitated before responding. “I’m, uh, not a witch. I actually never though magic was even a real thing. Um, no offense. But, I think a witch turned my friend into a bird, and I read online that a porrectus pearl can undo curses?”

Phoenix whistled, long and low. “A transformation curse? Damn. I’d look like a pretty awful person if I told you no, huh?”

Jamie’s stomach was knotting with anxiety. Was that a yes or a no?

“Well, kid. Are you a kid? You sound pretty young. Anyway, here’s the deal. These pearls are pretty rare. Not quite unicorn hair rare, but not far behind. Now, I’m guessing you don’t have the kind of money I’d usually ask for something like this, so how about a trade?”

It took Jamie a moment to catch up with everything Phoenix had said. “Wait, you mean, you mean you’ll send me one?”

Phoenix laughed. “Yeah, kid. What kinda person would I be if I refused to help a couple of kids in trouble? Now, is your friend the only one, or has this bird witch snatched other kids too?”

Jamie thought about it. “I don’t actually know of any others, but there’s all these stories...”

“You know, us witches get a bad rep, but I’m willin’ to guess if this witch o’ yours took one girl, she’s probably got more. So here’s the deal. I’m gonna send you the pearl, you’re gonna be a hero and save the bird people, and as payment for the pearl, why don’t you send me a box full of the feathers these kids shed when they change back?”

“Feathers?”

“Yeah. The feathers’ll carry some magic. I’ll have to cleanse them, of course, to get rid of the bad vibes, but then I can use them for other spells. So what do you say, kid? We got a deal?”

Jamie laughed. “Yes! Of course!”

* * *

After nine days of agonized waiting, the box arrived. It was a small usps box, nondescript, giving no indication of the value of the object within. Jamie carefully cut the box open, pulling wads of brown paper aside to find a small cloth drawstring bag. There was a note on top of it, “Good Luck” written in neat cursive letters. Jamie pulled the bag open and gently pulled the flower out. It was yellow, barely the size of a dime, with long, thin petals. In the middle, where the stamen should have been, was a tiny pearl. It seemed to shimmer, changing colors as Jamie stared at it.

Now that Jamie had the pearl, the teenager was prepared to go to the witch's house, already dressed in practical jeans and sneakers. Jamie grabbed the little pouch and headed out the door. The last time Jamie had gone through the woods, magic had only been a fantasy. Now Jamie knew better, but the woods were no longer frightening. This time, Jamie knew exactly what was waiting on the other side, but Jamie was invulnerable. The sun was beginning to sink when Jamie reached the edge of the woods, and the teenager passed through the static tingle of magic without batting an eye.

The plants around the house had gotten even thicker since Jamie's last visit, despite the fact that most of them were dying back for the winter. The dead stalks and blackberry vines snagged Jamie's clothes and left scratches on Jamie's hands and face as they were shoved aside. Finally, Jamie was standing on the doorstep.

"Open up!" Jamie pounded on the old door, but there was no response. With a huff, Jamie tried the doorknob. As dilapidated as this old house looked, it couldn't take too much to knock the door open. The door was unlocked, and it creaked as Jamie pulled it open, because of course it did. What's a spooky old house without a creaky door?

"Pearce!" Jamie yelled. "Where are you, you old witch?"

Jamie walked quickly, checking every room. Eventually Jamie came to the sitting room the witch had left Ashley in before, but it was empty now. Jamie followed the muffled sounds of birds upstairs and down a narrow hallway. Jamie entered the last door and stopped, staring. The room was full of birdcages of all sizes and materials, each containing at least one bird. They ranged in size from small finches to a single stately parrot, and Jamie could only identify a few of the species— parakeets and blushing cockatiels, turtledoves and nightingales.

The teenager couldn't believe how many birds there were; there must have been a few hundred. The walls of all the adjoining rooms must have been knocked out to make room for them all. Jamie wondered where they all came from. Surely they couldn't all have been humans? The sounds of them all were deafening this close, a mixture of songs and chirps and coarse calls. Jamie could hear a parakeet somewhere whistling what sounded like "Oh My Darling Clementine."

Jamie scanned the room. There were several nightingales, but they all looked alike. Finally, Jamie saw the domes silver cage beside the open window on the side wall. Easing through the multitude of cages, Jamie made it to the far side and released the bird from its cage. She landed on Jamie's shoulder and the teenager carefully pulled the flower out, touching the pearl to the nightingale's beak.

There was a bright light and Jamie had to look away, and in the next moment, a pair of arms was squeezing Jamie tightly. Ashley was changed back, looking exactly as she had when she disappeared. Jamie hugged her back, both of them crying from the relief. Without warning, the birds all began shrieking and flapping their wings, and the pair looked up to see the old woman standing in the open doorway.

She was staring at Jamie and Ashley in shock, her eyes and mouth both gaping wide.

"You!" She finally screamed. "What are you—? How did you—?"

Jamie glared at her, silently holding up the flower.

The old woman's eyes seemed to be bulging out of her face, and she was as red as the caged cardinal beside her. "That isn't possible!" she screeched. "You should have spent the rest of your life searching for that pearl!"

"Yeah, well, I didn't," Jamie said, still glaring.

The witch rushed toward the pair and Jamie jumped between her and Ashley, holding the flower up where the witch couldn't grab it.

"I have had enough of you and your magic," Jamie spat. "Now I am going to free everyone you have trapped, and you are going to leave. I have never hit an old woman but I am willing to make an exception."

The crone glared silently up at Jamie for just a moment longer, before pushing past the pair to leap out of the window.

Ashley gasped, and Jamie held out an arm to stop her from running to the window to see the old woman's fall. They never heard her hit the ground, but Jamie saw a dingy grey owl fly out over the trees.

Jamie watched the owl until it was out of sight, and then hugged Ashley again. They were both shaking, Jamie realized, with adrenaline and fear.

"It's alright now," Jamie murmured into Ashley's hair. "You're okay."

Waltz of the Flowers

Laurence entered his apartment and leaned against the door to shut it behind him, his arms full with the large duffel bag he was carrying. He kicked his hiking boots off, tossed his wallet and keys on the kitchen counter, and then placed the duffel bag on the dining table. He took his time unzipping it, being careful not to snag any of the petals on the flowers within.

“Look what I brought for you, Ellie!” He began pulling the flowers out, one by one.

“Here’s a pair of red roses, your favorite!” He brought out a few more roses, pink and yellow and white, and a bunch of small wild roses. “Those yellow roses were hard to find, you know. Watch out for the thorns, especially on the little ones. Those were hard to cut without pricking myself.”

Next he brought out lilies of every color— white lilies with purple eyes, small red lilies and orange lilies bigger than his hand, yellow lilies with red eyes and throats that reminded him of peaches, and delicate, lacy, pink lilies.

“Daylilies aren’t really lilies, you know. They’re not in the same family. They want to be like the lilies, but they’re fragile. Each flower blooms in the morning and dies in the evening, with another to take its place the next day.” He paused there, staring down at his feet, his hand still hovering over the cut stems.

Laurence shook his head and gave a small smile, returning to the bag. “Ah, here we go; the dancers!”

He pulled out irises and chrysanthemums, tulips and hanging bunches of wisteria, starting to flatten from the weight of the flowers that had been resting atop them. Laurence arranged them so that they were fanned out in a neat display, and then he pulled out the last two— a marsh flower and a canna lily. He set them on the stems of the first flowers and removed two cattails

from the bag and laid them at the bottom of the fan. The bag was now empty, save for a few spots of pollen, broken petals, and other unidentifiable plant debris.

He stared down at the blooms. “You know, Mom doesn’t think I should still be doing this. Says tracking down all of these flowers is a waste of my time and money. I think it really upset her last time, when she came over and saw all of this. And Dad, well, Dad didn’t say anything. He never does. But I can’t stop now, it’s a tradition! We can’t just stop a tradition!”

He fell quiet again, staring at nothing.

After a few moments, he shook himself back into movement and grabbed the duffel bag. “Alright. Anyway, it’s getting dark out. I’ve got to jump in the shower and get to bed. I’ve got work tomorrow. Goodnight, Ellie.”

Shouldering the bag, Laurence put a disk into the CD player in the living room and turned off the light. The sounds of a quiet waltz began to fill the air, mixing with the cloying scent of dying flowers. Laurence turned his back to it and walked to his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

A waltz was echoing through the library, and little Ellie was twirling around her brother. The skirt of her dress spread into a wide circle as she spun, and her giggles were louder than the music.

“Alright, Ellie, I think that’s enough!” Her brother laughed. “Any more spinning and I’ll be sick!”

“Oh, Laurence, please!” she begged, “Just one more dance? One more and I’ll leave you alone!”

Laurence walked in an unsteady line to the table in the corner and collapsed onto one of the wooden chairs. “No more, Ellie. But here, I’ve got something else for you.” He turned the pile of heavy books on the table so that he could read their spines, and then dumped the whole pile to reach the one he was after.

Ellie ran to the table and pulled out a second chair, sitting on her knees so she could see the book Laurence was holding. “What is it? Is it another picture?”

Laurence smiled. “You have to guess.”

“Oh! I hope it’s a castle! Or a mermaid! Or a boo— a bow— a bunch of flowers! Or a sleeping cat in a little cat bed!” She leaned forward as she spoke, until she was practically lying across the table.

“Laurence, show me! Why won’t you answer?”

He lifted an eyebrow, still smiling, and she sat back on her knees with a loud sigh.

“Laurence, will you please show me the picture?”

“Well,” he paused.

Ellie stared at him with her best puppy-dog expression.

He chuckled. “Okay, since you asked so nicely, I *suppose* I’ll show you.”

Ellie squealed and clapped, leaning across the table once more.

Laurence opened the cover of his book and removed a sheet of paper cut in the shape of a heart, with the silhouette of a lady with a large skirt and a parasol cut out of the middle. He handed it over to Ellie, who let out a little breathless ‘oh’ and held the paper between her thumbs and index fingers.

“Laurence, she’s *beautiful!*” Ellie whispered. For a few moments, she admired the paper in her hands without speaking, and Laurence watched her with a satisfied smile.

Without warning, Ellie's smile changed to a look of confusion, and she looked up at her brother. "Laurence, what's this word?"

He leaned over to see the word she was pointing at. It was in the block of text on the woman's skirt, 'protoanemonin.'

Laurence shrugged. "I dunno."

"Oh. Okay." She was quiet for a moment.

"Laurence?"

"Yes?"

"Why are my flowers sad?"

He blinked. "Uh. What?"

Ellie laid the paper heart on the table and smoothed it with her hand before she turned back to Laurence. "My flowers! The ones from the garden! They were pretty when I went to sleep last night 'cause I told them goodnight so I remember they were, but now they're all floppy and sad!"

"Oh, well that's because—" He looked over her shoulder, where he could see the bright flowers in the garden through the window. Next to the window was the record player, now playing a much faster song. "Because they were dancing!"

Ellie wasn't convinced. "Flowers can't dance, Laurence."

"No, you've never *seen* them dance. They don't want anyone to know, you see, so they only dance at night, while all the humans and animals are sleeping."

"But they don't have legs."

"They don't need legs. They can fly. They use their petals like little wings, so they can fly just like fairies or butterflies."

Ellie was still uncertain. “Okay, but why are they sad if they were dancing? Dancing’s supposed to make you happy.”

Laurence shook his head. “They’re not sad; they’re tired. They had to travel a long way for the dance and they were up all night. Dancing makes you happy, sure, but it also makes you sleepy.”

Ellie was leaning on the table again, the paper heart under her elbow now forgotten. “A long way? Where do they go?”

Laurence leaned back in his chair. “Well, our garden is very nice, but it’s much too full for dancing. You know that field on the other side of the woods, the one where we go for picnics sometimes?” He waited for her to nod. “Well that’s where all the flowers go for their ball! Not just the flowers from our garden, but all the flowers from all the gardens, and all the wildflowers are invited too.”

Ellie giggled. “That sounds so pretty! All the flowers dancing! But who leads them?”

“Well the roses, of course. They’re the royal family, and the lilies are the members of the court. The irises and the violets are the gentlemen, and they dance with the pretty hyacinths and daisies, and the gladioli and the tulips are the ladies who make sure everyone’s behaving.”

Ellie hopped out of her chair and resumed her twirling. “I want to go to the dance, Laurence! I’ll sneak out of bed, and I’ll wear my new dress, and I’ll follow my flowers, and I’ll dance with them! And I’ll be a princess! And we’ll have music, and food, and it’ll be so much fun!”

Laurence laughed along and watched his sister as she danced, so neither child noticed their father enter the room. Ellie halted as suddenly as the music did, falling over as she did. Both children turned to their father where he stood with his arms crossed.

“What sort of nonsense are you feeding her now? Dancing flowers? Both of you have better things to be doing than goofing off and playing make-believe. Laurence, you should be reading those textbooks, not cutting the pages out of them! Ellie, go play in your room. Your brother needs to study.”

Laurence scowled, but sat straight in his chair and opened his biology textbook without a word. Ellie stood and brushed off her skirt, grabbing the paper heart as she made her way out of the room. In the doorway, she paused and looked over her shoulder, but Laurence didn't look up at her. She heard her father begin speaking again as she walked to her room, but she didn't stop to try and listen.

Back in her room, she taped the paper heart to the wall beside her bed, in between a paper castle and a fairy made from magazine clippings. Ellie then picked up the bunch of flowers lying on her dresser, cradling in her arms like a baby doll before placing them on a pillow in her bay window.

She climbed up to sit beside them. “Here you go, you'll be much more comfortable here. I know you went dancing the other night. I bet you're really tired now. You can sleep right here, and then you'll be all ready to dance some more tonight! Here!”

She hopped down from the window seat and grabbed a cloth doll from her bed. “This is Charlotte. She'll sit right next to you and make sure no one bothers you while you're sleeping!”

Ellie propped the doll against the pillow and gazed out into the garden. “I wish I could go to the dance. I think they wouldn't mind, if I just didn't step on anyone. If I wore my pretty dress and Mommy made my hair curly and put the fake flowers in my hair like at Easter! Then I'd look just like the flowers and I could dance with them!”

Ellie dashed out of her room and through the door in the kitchen, running to join her mother in the garden. She found her mother kneeling beside a flower bed pulling weeds, her dirty jean overalls and haphazard bun a stark contrast to her husband's tidy, groomed appearance. Her mother continued pulling weeds as Ellie raced toward her.

“Mommy! Mommy! Will you make my hair curly again? I need it to be pretty!”

“Curl your hair? Are you going somewhere?”

Ellie sat on the ground beside her mother. “Mm-hm! I want to go to the flower dance! Laurence said my flowers are sleepy because they danced a lot and also they had to fly a long way, but the flowers at school are a long way away so I bet they're *really* sleepy but they don't want anyone to know, but I guess we know now but it's okay 'cause I won't tell anyone else so that way it can be a secret.”

Her mother stared at her, bemused. “Is that so?”

“Yeah! And I really really want to see the flowers dance, so I have to look pretty so they don't get scared and fly away.”

“Well, I'm afraid the flowers aren't going to do much dancing while I'm here in the garden.”

Ellie shook her head. “No, they dance at night at the field where you take us to have picnics.”

Ellie's mother crossed her arms. “And you want me to let you go through the woods, in the middle of the night, all alone?”

Ellie looked down and played with the hem of her skirt. “Well, I guess, maybe not.”

Her mother laughed and continued pulling weeds. “I'll tell you what. Maybe we'll go out some other time, after dinner.”

“Okay!” Ellie grinned at her mother. “Hey Mommy?”

“Yes?”

“How do flowers talk? They don’t have mouths.”

Her mother thought about it for a moment. “They use sign language. They make sign with their leaves to talk to the other flowers whenever they want, and if any people see them, they think they’re just being blown by the wind.”

Ellie gasped. “Really?”

Her mother nodded. “That’s right. In fact, there was once a thistle who was signing to a pretty little iris, telling her how beautiful she was and how much she loved her, but there was a man who saw them and knew that they were talking. So the man grabbed the thistle’s leaves to stop her from signing, but she stung him! And the man didn’t bother the flowers again.”

Ellie giggled. “I want to go see the flowers talking!”

“Alright. Just be careful not to bother the plants, or they might sting you too!”

Ellie laughed and stood up. “I will!”

She skipped around the garden, watching the plants wave their leaves at each other. She greeted each plant as she passed, walking through the lilies and being careful to avoid the rosebush’s thorns. She stood under the camellia bush and admired the butterflies flitting around the buddleia and lantana. A few flowers she picked up and carried with her— a still-fragrant rose that had fallen off a bush and a daisy she picked at the edge of the fence. Finally, she stood at the gate separating her mother’s garden from the rest of the backyard and the trees beyond. She looked back, but her mother was hidden behind the many bushes and trees in between them.

If I can’t see the dance tonight, Ellie thought, I’ll go to the field now, and pretend I’m dancing with the flowers!

Ellie dropped her flowers and stood on her tiptoes to unlatch the gate, and with one last glance to ensure her mother didn't see, she slipped through the gate. Now free, she made a dash for the trees, running as fast as she could down the path. As soon as she was in the trees, she let out a loud laugh. The path had not been cleaned in a few weeks and she stepped on twigs and acorns, but she was too excited to regret not grabbing her shoes. At last she burst through the trees and into a wild expanse of green, running into knee-high grass as the path ended. She laughed as she spun through the grass, and she imagined she could hear music in the breeze.

She saw the other flowers approaching as she danced— two enormous red roses wearing matching golden crowns, and smaller roses following behind. Next came lilies of all varieties and colors. The deep purple irises paired with the wisteria flowers and the violets danced with the hyacinths, and the tulips watched from the side. The little daisies and wildflowers flew right up to Ellie with no hesitation, and she giggled as they surrounded her. The king and queen signed for the dance to begin, and the entire field became a blur of colors and movements.

Ellie danced as lightly as if she were flying herself, and soon she found she was dancing with her very own flowers, no longer wilted or tired at all.

“Oh!” she cried, “How did you get out without anyone seeing?”

The flowers might have answered, but their movements were too quick for Ellie to follow.

As their dancing brought them toward the far end of the field, Ellie could see more flowers by the large stream, nodding along with the music but not dancing.

Ellie grabbed an armful of little yellow flowers, kissing each individual. “Come on, little buttercups! You have to dance! You'll miss all the fun!”

She danced a few steps with each buttercup before sending them to join the others, and then realized that she had missed her lunch and was quite hungry. Luckily, she had some candies in the pockets of her dress. After eating each one, she moved closer to the stream so that she might send the canna lilies and jewelweeds to dance as well. She approached the canna lilies, fanning their large orange and red petals like butterfly wings, but she found she didn't feel much like dancing anymore.

"I think my candies were bad," she told the flowers, scratching at her palms. "They tasted a little funny. But you don't have to stay with me! Go have fun with the others!"

She scratched her arm. "Now my throat hurts too!"

The jewelweed flowers were fluttering all around her now, as if trying to get her attention.

"No, it's okay," she told them. "I just need some water."

Ellie climbed down the stream's rocky bank so that she could get a drink of water, but her foot slipped in the mud and she fell in entirely with a shriek.

"Oh no!" She coughed, wincing at the pain it caused. "Mommy and Daddy are going to be so mad!"

She tried to climb out of the stream, but the marsh flowers and peach gingers had joined the jewelweeds flying around her.

"Please, stop it!" she cried, swatting them away. "Go away! You're in my eyes!"

Ellie tried to swat them out of her face, but she kept missing. She slipped in the mud once more, and there was a sharp crack as her forehead hit a rock. She slid back into the stream. A few broken buttercup petals were washed out of her hair, and the water carried them away.

By The Sea

Kailani and Geia were sitting in a corner booth at the Hwy 55. The only other people in the restaurant were the bored cashier, a couple sitting on the barstools in the front, and an acne-ridden teenager sweeping and wiping tables. Kailani always ate in the early afternoon, right after the lunch hour rush. The place was usually packed around noon, especially now that most of the surrounding seafood restaurants were closed for the winter. She looked around as she chewed, taking in the bright green and pink seats, the neon lights overhead reflecting off the chrome embellishments on every piece of furniture.

“I’ll tell you what, this place could use a little less color.”

Geia laughed. “Nah, it’s the fifties aesthetic, y’know? I like it; all the old style without most of the old prejudices.”

Before she could reply, Kailani was distracted by the man who had just come in, now approaching their table. He had an average height and build, with short blond hair and wide brown eyes, and he was wearing jeans and a red hoodie. Overall, he was pretty bland; there was nothing striking about him. Kailani smiled.

Geia noticed her distraction and turned around. When she saw the man, she rolled her eyes and turned back to her burger.

“Hey!” he exclaimed. The couple at the bar briefly turned to stare at him. “You mind if I sit here, Geia?”

Without waiting for an answer, he slid in beside her and dropped his backpack to the ground beside him.

He frowned at their trays. "I can't believe you're eating that. Do you know how much grease is in those things?"

Kailani snorted. "Yeah, yeah. You keep reminding us."

"They're super gross." He glanced at Geia's tray again. "But can I have a fry?"

Geia glared at him. "Not if you want to keep all your fingers."

He leaned back. "Well so-rry!"

Kailani slid her own tray toward him. "You're late, Calder."

"Yeah, Olivia was sick this morning, so they asked me to come help with feeding. Hey, what ish that?" he asked through a mouthful of fries. "Ish that a bunch'a shrimp on a bun?"

"It's a shrimp burger, and it's good."

Geia laughed as Calder shook his head in disbelief.

"You guys are weird," he said. "Anyway, haven't seen you in a few days. How's everything been going? Any new jobs, Geia?"

She smiled at him. "Nope, nothing for the next couple of weeks. But don't worry, the house is big enough you won't even know I'm there. You and Kai can do whatever you want."

It was Kailani's turn to roll her eyes. "Why do you always say weird things?"

Geia turned to her, wide eyed. "What? I was just saying."

Calder cleared his throat. "I'm actually pretty excited to see your house. Didn't you say you live right on the beach?"

Kailani nodded. "We're on the sound, technically, but Topsail Beach is just on the other side of the strand."

"Okay, cool." He took another handful of fries.

When the women finished their food, they followed Calder to his dusty blue Subaru and directed him to their home. After a few minutes of driving, he pulled into their driveway and stopped.

“You’re joking.” He leaned over the steering wheel to stare at the tall yellow house, and then looked back and forth between Kailani beside him, and Geia in the backseat.

“You have got to be shitting me. This is your house?”

Kailani smiled. This was more or less the exact reaction she had been expecting. It was not dissimilar to her own initial reaction, for that matter. The house was certainly quite the sight, tall and yellow with three stories and two front patios, sitting atop a garage and a boat shelter. The blue house to their right was even bigger, but it didn’t make this house look small in the slightest.

“You can pull in that shelter there,” she said, pointing. “Geia’s car is in the garage.”

Calder inched the SUV forward, still staring. “This isn’t a beach house, it’s a fucking mansion. Is that three stories? How rich *are* you two?”

Kailani laughed at his dazed expression as he parked and followed the women up the stairs to the patio.

When they entered the house, Geia patted them both on their shoulders. “Alright kids, you have fun. I’m going upstairs.”

Kailani took her shoes and coat off and left them on the racks behind the door, and after a moment, Calder did the same. He was looking around the house in awe, the entryway and connecting rooms brightly lit from all the windows. The walls were the same pale yellow as the house’s exterior.

“You alright?” she asked. “I’ve never seen you so quiet.”

“I, yeah. This is. Wow.”

She laughed. “You want a tour?”

He nodded. “Hell yeah.”

“Well, we’re in the dining area and you can see the kitchen and the living room, and there’s the back patio. There’s a bathroom through that door there.”

She led Calder up the stairs and to the right. The room before them was lined with bookshelves on two walls, large windows and a sliding glass door on the other two. In one corner was a hanging skeleton, similar to what would be found in a biology classroom. “This is essentially my floor,” Kailani said. “That’s technically a bedroom, but we’ve made it our library.”

He whistled. “That’s a lot of books.”

“Yeah. Most of them are Geia’s. She’s been collecting them for a while. I haven’t even read a quarter of them, probably.”

He frowned at the skeleton. “And that?”

She laughed. “Also Geia’s. This is a small room here,” she said, gesturing to the door behind them, “but it’s mostly just junk in there. More of Geia’s knick-knacks and curiosities.”

She led him to the other side of the hall. “This one’s my bedroom, and there are bathrooms attached to it and the library.” Kailani fidgeted with her hair as Calder walked through her bedroom and looked through the sliding doors at the second patio and the sound beyond it. Even Geia didn’t usually enter her bedroom.

He stood a little taller to look over the patio railing. “Do you have your own pier?”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah. Most of the houses on the sound do. We don’t have a boat, though, so we don’t really spend a whole lot of time down there.”

He turned around. “That’s right, didn’t you say you can’t swim? And you live on the ocean!”

She shrugged. “I never learned. Can’t ride a bike either, just couldn’t ever get the hang of it.”

He laughed at her and turned to admire the pictures on her wall: a woman in a white dress sitting in a shallow boat, surrounded by flowers; a group of nymphs surrounded by water lilies, pulling a man down to join them; a mermaid combing her hair; a man admiring his reflection in a pond.

“These are really nice,” he said. “I feel like I’ve seen them before.”

She moved to stand beside him. “You probably have; Ophelia and Hylas are both pretty popular. They’re all Waterhouse paintings. Geia has a few in the library— the Circes, Lamia, Medea.”

He nodded. “And there’s still one more floor, right?”

“Mm-hm, the aerie. But that’s mostly Geia’s space, we don’t need to go up there. There’s a couple more bedrooms and bathrooms, and the third patio.”

Calder laughed and shook his head. “I can’t believe you each have your own *floor* of a beach house. If you can afford this, what in the world are you doing working at a souvenir shop?”

“This is Geia’s house, she pays the bills. I work a couple months out of the year so I don’t feel like a total freeloader, plus I get restless. I’ve never been one to just sit at home all day.”

“How on earth does she afford it? She’s just a wedding singer, right? A musician for hire? How much money do musicians make?”

Kailani smiled to herself. “Well, if you must know the truth, there is something else.” She waited a moment before continuing, ensuring that she had his full attention. “Geia isn’t human. She’s a siren. When she sings, her audience has no choice but to do what she wills. It’s a miracle she doesn’t bleed the poor people dry.”

Calder laughed. “Ah, that explains it.”

Kailani chuckled with him. She knew he wouldn’t believe her.

He looked around again before grinning at her. “So, the tour’s ending in your bedroom, huh?”

She groaned at the subject change and shoved past him to grab the sweater on her bed, pulling it over her head in one quick motion. “I’m going outside.”

He laughed and followed her onto the patio. Kailani sat in one of the wicker chairs, her legs curled underneath her, and Calder leaned against the railing beside her. She took a deep breath, enjoying the familiar smell of the salty air.

“This is really something, y’know?” Calder said.

She smiled. “I know. I’m glad I found Geia. I never had this kind of space back home.”

“Where *are* you from?”

Kailani sighed and gestured at her dark face and kinky hair. “Do you have any idea how often I get that question every summer?”

“That’s not what I meant,” he exclaimed, and Kailani laughed. “I know you’re from Hawaii. I mean, which island? What town?”

“My family lives on Oahu, in Kailua.”

Calder dropped into the chair beside Kailani. “You don’t say? I used to go to Kailua Beach all the time when I was a kid. My dad was stationed right there in Kaneohe when I was born, then we moved when I was nine.”

“Oh?” There had been some mention of their past homes when they had first met, but Kailani had never made the connection before. “We were practically neighbors, then.”

He nudged her with his elbow. “Hey, maybe we even met when we were kids. That’s why we were such fast friends when we reconnected here!”

Kailani laughed. “I doubt it. My family was always rather... private. We didn’t really spend too much time with anyone but each other.”

He nodded. After a second he laughed again, quieter this time. He turned away from Kailani, and she thought he looked embarrassed.

“You wanna know a secret?” he asked. “I can only remember one friend that I had in Hawaii, and I’m pretty sure she was imaginary.”

Kailani raised her eyebrows. “You had an imaginary friend?”

He covered his face with his hands and removed them again. “It’s awful, right? My only friend was imaginary? But yeah, I remember my mom would let me explore the beach on my own, and I’d run as far away from all the people as I could get. There was this one place I’d go to, past a bunch of rocks no one ever crossed. I’d go there and pretend I had a friend who would meet me there, and we’d play until it was time for me to leave.”

“Why do think she was imaginary?”

“Uh, well.” He was definitely blushing now. “She was a mermaid.”

Kailani was stunned. It was ridiculous, she knew, but she was still suspicious. Surely, it couldn’t have been? She forced herself to keep smiling. “A mermaid?”

He laughed. “Yes, a mermaid! I don’t remember her name, I don’t remember what she looked like. Actually, it’s the weirdest thing. I’m trying to remember, and I want to say she had stripes. A mermaid with stripes!”

Kailani made herself laugh with him.

Calder turned back to the sound. “Anyway, do you ever miss it? Hell, *I* miss it, and I can only barely remember it. The ocean was beautiful. I’m not sure why you would move here, of all places.”

Kailani watched Calder, startled by his sudden seriousness. He was still half-smirking, the blotches of red on his face beginning to fade. A strong breeze ruffled his hair, blowing her own wiry curls into her face. She tried to brush the thick mass back over her shoulder as she answered. “It was strangling, always being surrounded by my siblings at home, the Oahu traffic in public. The east coast was as far away from all that as I could get without a passport. The Atlantic here is cold and dirty, but it’s the ocean, and that’s all I really need.”

He turned back to her. “But Surf City?”

She laughed. “Even full of tourists, it’s nothing like Kailua. It’s nice, living in a small town. But I actually chose this place because of Geia. We met online. I was looking for a place to live, and she invited me to come here. But what about you? How did you get from Oahu to Surf City?”

Calder shrugged. “Cause of my dad, mostly. After Kaneohe, we lived in Germany for three years, then he was stationed in Jacksonville, and he never left. I’ve loved the sea and everything in it since I was a kid, and I definitely still plan on going to grad school. You know Duke has that marine lab over by Beaufort. But, I had some... personal issues, after I got my

Bachelor's, and I decided to take a couple years off. And so I found a cheap apartment and came here to work with Jean and her turtles, and that's where I met you!"

She laughed. "I just wanted to see how the turtles were doing, and I got stuck with you instead."

He grinned. "And you'll never be rid of me."

When it started getting dark, Calder and Kailani moved into the kitchen. He sat at one of the bar stools while she poured them both glasses of water from the pitcher in the fridge.

"So they pulled up this leatherback," he was saying, "and this thing was huge. I'm talking five feet long. And it's got this fishing line all wrapped up in its beak. So you've got two interns trying to hold the thing down, another two holding its mouth open, and here comes Chris, about to stick his arm down the poor thing's throat to get the hook out."

Kailani covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh no. Don't tell me."

Calder nodded. "Oh yeah. So Chris's got his arm down in there, and this turtle is not happy, let me tell you. He's thrashing around, the interns are trying to hold him, and one of them loses her grip. His mouth SNAPPED shut, right on Chris's arm!" Calder clapped his hands together in imitation, and Kailani jumped.

"Fractured the radius and the ulna, and his hand was *torn up*. Have you ever seen a Leatherback's throat?"

Kailani nodded, still clutching her hands in front of her face. She was in pain just thinking about what that must have felt like.

Calder laughed. "Those spines are awful. And people think shark's teeth are scary. But there you go, that is why Briana is terrified of feeding the leatherbacks."

She shook her head and took a drink of water. “Can’t say I blame her, after she saw that.”

There was a creak from the stairs, and Kailani looked up to see Geia emerging from the stairwell, wearing nothing but her underwear and a tank top.

She groaned when she saw them in the kitchen. “Ugh, you’re still here?”

Calder turned around to retort, snapping back around toward Kailani after seeing Geia’s state of undress. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to inconvenience you. Guess you gotta put your clothes back on now, huh?”

“Nah, I’m good.” She walked past them to grab a soda from the fridge.

Kailani couldn’t help but laugh at Calder, examining the cabinets in great detail.

“Hey, where are those cookies we just bought?”

Calder’s eyes flicked to Geia, then to the living room.

“Cabinet above the microwave.”

“Aha, thanks.”

“Hey, is that another one of those Waterhouse paintings?” Calder walked over to one of the paintings in the living room. A woman with finned legs and a harp sat on a stone in the ocean, staring down at the man drowning beneath her. It was one of Kailani’s favorites.

“It is. *The Siren*, it’s called.”

Beside her, Geia growled. “It isn’t. A siren.”

Calder walked back to the counter. “How can you tell?”

“She’s a fish!” Geia yelled. “Sirens are birds!”

Calder blinked in surprise, clearly not expecting that strong of response. “Uh, right. Silly me. Mermaids are the ones with fish tails, of course. And they’re not the same thing?”

Geia didn't justify that with a response. She grabbed her drink and the box of cookies, glaring at him as she moved to the couch.

Kailani sighed. "Of course they're different. And not all mermaids look like that, you know. Those paintings are all rather inaccurate, not to mention discriminatory."

"Discriminatory?"

"Mermaids are always skinny and pretty, with neat little fish tails. There are as many varieties of mermaids as there are creatures in the ocean, and they are not all pretty."

Calder laughed. "What are you, some kind of mermaid expert?"

"Maybe I am," she huffed.

He raised his hands. "Alright, sorry. I'm not questioning your expertise. And hey, a little inside knowledge could come in handy when I start studying, right? Maybe we can visit Hawaii and find some striped mermaids."

Kailani saw Geia's head snap up at that, staring at the back of Calder's head. She looked alarmed. Kailani smiled, but didn't meet Calder's eyes. She put her glass next to the sink, checking the time on the microwave.

"Oh, is it really ten o'clock already? Shoot, don't you have work tomorrow?"

Calder pulled out his phone. "I didn't realize it had gotten so late. I can stay a little longer, though."

She shook her head. "No, no. If I keep you here, you'll fall asleep on the job tomorrow and get your arm broken by a turtle!"

"I won't—"

"Go home," she interrupted, smiling. "Go get some food, and get to bed. You can call me tomorrow."

He stood. "I guess, if you want me gone that bad."

"We do," Geia added from the next room, looking down at her laptop again.

Kailani walked with him to the patio, watching him drive away after several minutes of goodbyes.

When she reentered the house, Geia was watching her. The bright light of the computer screen in the dim room cast shadows on her face, accentuating her long nose and sharp cheekbones and giving her face an inhuman and almost birdlike appearance. Kailani sunk into the armchair beside her with a heavy sigh.

"Striped mermaids?" Geia asked, her voice flat.

"It's nothing."

Geia stared at her, but Kailani refused to give anything away.

"So how was your date?" Geia asked without moving. She didn't look at all comfortable, lying on the couch with her head on the armrest, her neck bent at a sharp angle. The laptop was on her stomach, the open box of cookies on the floor beside her.

"Wasn't a date," Kailani answered.

Geia snorted, looking back at whatever was on the screen. "Hate to break it to you, babe, but you and that nerd have been dating for a while now."

Kailani didn't answer, and Geia finally looked up. "Look, you've been meeting the guy every day for months, he takes you out to dinner every week, he's constantly, blatantly flirting with you. Dude's got it bad."

"I haven't done a single thing with him that I haven't done with you. We haven't even kissed. We're just friends."

Geia shut the laptop. “Kai, you’ve been my best friend for the past seven years and I love you, but that dude is clearly head-over-heels for you. C’mon, even you can’t be this blind.”

Kailani crossed her arms and leaned back into the cushions. “He can’t love me. You know that.”

Geia groaned. “Oh come on! You’re not really worried about *that*, are you?”

“You know he can’t—”

“Kai, you will be fine! If you’re worried about secrets, just tell him. If he doesn’t take it well, I’ll help you dispose of the body.” She flashed Kailani a big grin, but Kailani didn’t smile back.

Geia shook her head and moved her computer to the coffee table before sitting up and stretching.

“Look, I’m serious. If worst comes to worst, I’ll take care of him. All it’ll take is a few words, and he’ll be out of the picture. But you have to talk to him first.”

Kailani crossed her arms. “I can’t let you do that to him,” she murmured.

“Alright, fine. Be like that. Whatever. I’m thinking about running over to the beach later. You going swimming tonight?”

Kailani shook her head.

* * *

Two weeks later, Calder and Kailani agreed to go out to dinner. He picked her up at home and they headed to Sears Landing. It was expensive, but the location made it one of Kailani’s favorites. The restaurant was on a pier, allowing customers to park their cars on one side, or their boats on the other. Of course, Kailani would never use the waterside parking, but it was a neat feature, and provided an excellent view.

They chatted about the past few days as they waited for their food. Calder told Kailani about the newest turtles at the rehabilitation center, one of whom he'd affectionately named 'Lil Dude'. Nothing new had happened with Kailani, as she was unemployed during the offseason and there was little for her to do, but Geia was getting ready to up to Illinois to sing at a wedding. Their food arrived, and they waited for the waitress to walk away before they swapped food, Calder pushing his scallops onto Kailani's plate as she slid her salad across the table.

"I love the coast," he said, "but it's so hard to find a restaurant with decent vegan options."

"I bet," she laughed. "But that just means more seafood for me! All those vegetables don't sit well in my stomach."

"Hey, I'm just glad I can help you get something better than all that garbage Geia likes."

They stopped talking as they began eating, but Kailani couldn't pay attention to her food with Calder sneaking glances at her the way that he was. He probably thought he was being subtle, but his quick looks every few seconds were obvious, as was the smile that he kept trying to hide.

After a few minutes of this, she dropped her fork and sighed. "Alright, what is it?"

He looked up, with wide eyes and a face full of lettuce.

She laughed. "Just say whatever it is you clearly want to say."

Calder perked up, excited. He looked like a puppy, Kailani thought. He swallowed his food and drank some tea before grinning at her.

"I got something for you!" He put a box on the table, too large to have fit in his pocket.

Kailani wondered where on earth he'd been keeping it. She reached over and pulled it closer. "Thank you?"

He only grinned wider.

Cautiously, Kailani opened the box. She stared blankly at the object within, and then at Calder. She regretted coming here with him. She regretted inviting him to her house. She regretted meeting him at the sea turtle rehabilitation center the previous summer.

When it was obvious that Kailani wasn't going to touch the thing, Calder reached over and plucked it out of the box himself, setting it upright on the table between them.

Kailani stared at the atrocity once more. It was a bobbling dashboard ornament, a cartoonish mermaid in a grass skirt and seashell bra, wiggling at the hips. Its garish smile mocked her, waving back and forth and back and forth. Kailani couldn't decide which was worse—the plastic features of its terribly molded face, or the neon pink and purple tail.

Slowly, Kailani lifted her gaze back up to Calder. She could tell by his grin that he was disgustingly pleased with himself.

“I hate you,” she said.

Calder faked surprise, the corners of his mouth twitching as he struggled not to laugh. “What? You mean you don't like it?”

“I truly and genuinely despise you.”

He slapped one hand on his chest. “I am hurt! I spent my hard-earned money on this gift especially for you, and this is how you thank me?”

“Oh dear,” she said, “how will I ever thank you for this gift, a figurine which has managed to be an insult to Hawaiians and mermaids both. Thank you so much.”

Calder burst into laughter, unable to hold the façade. Kailani continued to eat her fish without a hint of a smile. The patrons at the other tables were staring at them.

“I’m sorry,” he finally wheezed. “I’m sorry, I just. I saw it and I know how much you hate those things, and!” He started laughing again. “And you just look so offended! How could I not?”

Kailani didn’t answer.

“Oh come on, don’t be angry. It was only a joke,” he laughed. “Kailani!”

Eventually, she quietly laughed as well. “You are the worst, do you know that?”

He grinned. “Nah, I think I’m pretty great. I mean, not as great as you, but a close second.”

Kailani shook her head, blushing slightly. “I’m going to get you back for this,” she promised. “I don’t know how, but I will.”

She continued eating, but Calder was still watching her. His smile was softer now, less mocking. She blushed a little more and tried to ignore him, but he just kept staring.

Finally, he spoke. “You are pretty great, you know.”

“Thank you. I do know.”

He laughed. “I mean it. You’re wonderful, and beautiful, and smart, and funny, and.” He paused. “And, I kinda want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Kailani set her fork down. The amusement she had felt was gone. Now she felt like she’d been punched in the gut. “What?”

Calder leaned back, flushing a deep red. “I mean, that wasn’t a proposal or anything!” The words spilled out of him in a rush. “I just meant, I really like you, and I think we should date? This is technically a date anyway, but I mean like real dates, official dates. Because I think I might be just a little bit deeply in love with you?”

He kept talking, apparently unable to stop the words now that they'd started, but Kailani didn't hear any more. She couldn't hear anything but ringing in her ears. Her vision blurred, and her chest felt tight, like she couldn't breathe. This was exactly what she didn't want, exactly what she had been afraid of. She'd let him get too close, and now everything was going to go wrong. He was going to find out, he'd hate her, she'd have to leave home, Geia would be in danger, her *life* would be in danger—

“Kailani?”

She snapped back into the present. Her hands were clenched into fists, her fingernails digging into her palms. Calder was leaning toward her, concerned.

“Dammit, I'm sorry, I didn't mean for it to all come out like that, I swear. I was going to wait, I was going to be cool, shit. But, do you think—”

“I need to go.”

Calder recoiled. “What?”

“This was a mistake. I should go home.” She grabbed her purse, rummaging through balled-up receipts to find her wallet.

Calder reached across the table. “Kailani, wait.”

“No, here.” She slapped a twenty dollar bill on the table to pay for her food, knocking the mermaid figurine over in the process. “I'll walk home.”

Kailani stood and walked out of the restaurant as quickly as she could, not giving the stunned man time for any more protests. She could feel the eyes of the other patrons on her as she fled, but she didn't look back.

Geia was perched on the barstool, silently watching Kailani pace back and forth across the living room. “Do you want to talk about it?” she finally offered.

“There’s nothing to talk about!” Kailani snapped.

Geia was silent. It was rare for Kailani to ever have this sort of emotional outburst, and Geia had no idea what the outcome would be.

“It’s just,” Kailani exclaimed, “he doesn’t understand! And I, I can’t keep this up! This was a mistake, I never should have spoken to him in the first place. He needs to go. I’ll just tell him— What am I going to tell him?”

Kailani wasn’t pacing in a line anymore, so much as making a beeline around the furniture, walking in circles and loops that were making Geia dizzy to watch.

“Calm down, Kai. You’re overreacting.”

Kailani stopped in her tracks. “Overreacting? You think I’m overreacting?”

Geia tried to keep her voice as calm as possible. “I’m sure it isn’t as big a deal as it seems right now,” she soothed. “You just need to take a break for a few days, maybe spend some time in the water, and I’m sure you’ll think of a solution.”

“I already know the solution. He has to go.” Kailani dropped into the chair behind her, burying her face in her hands. “No, I can’t do that to him. He has a life here. I should go. I can go back to Hawaii, or to Florida, or California.”

Geia let out an exasperated sigh and crossed the room, sitting on the arm of the chair and draping herself over Kailani’s shoulders. “Now you’re just being ridiculous. Calm down. Breathe. The boy is in love with you, and maybe you don’t want to admit it, but I think you love him too. Just tell him the truth.”

Kailani slid out of Geia's embrace and stood, swinging around to face her friend. "Tell him the truth?" she yelled. "What am I supposed to do? Sit him down and tell him I've been lying to him this whole time? That this person he thinks he loves isn't even human? Maybe toss some confetti and yell 'Surprise!'"

Geia blinked. "Umm. Yes?"

Kailani scoffed and resumed her pacing. "He'd never believe me. And even if he did, he'd hate me for lying to him. Besides, he is a *marine biologist*, Ligeia. He studies marine creatures, and *I am* a marine creature. You know what scientists do when they don't understand things, when they find new animals. They toss the thing in a cage, ship it off to some lab, and torture it for information. Killing me and dissecting me is probably the least painful thing they'd do to me."

Kailani stopped moving and sighed, her head and shoulders sinking with the action. "I don't know why I ever thought it could end any other way than this," she muttered. She returned to the armchair and sunk back onto it, this time leaning into Geia's open arms as the smaller woman murmured comforts into her hair.

* * *

It was the middle of the night, and Calder was leaning on the edge of the pier. The sky was clear and the stars were bright above him. He breathed in the salty air, listing to the rhythmic crashing of the waves behind him. He hadn't heard a word from Kailani since she ran out on him nearly a week ago. She wasn't answering his phone calls or texts, and he'd stopped trying to contact her after the third day. He'd decided that she needed her space, and he'd try again in a week or two.

Calder sighed. He couldn't image what could have caused Kailani to freak out like that. He though their relationship had been developing just fine, and she'd never struck him as the type to have such serious commitment issues that she'd disappear the moment he said the word love. Sure, he had panicked and blurted out every single thing in his head and made a bit of a fool of himself, but that couldn't have been the whole problem.

A loud splash startled Calder out of his thoughts. The pier extended far past the breakers, so no waves should have been crashing at this end of the pier. There was definitely something in the water. Calder rushed over to the right side of the platform just in time to see the dark silhouette of a woman drop down from the railing and back into the water with a loud gasp. Cold as it was, it was unusual for anyone to be out here this late at night, on the pier or in the water. He'd probably given quite a fright to a woman who thought she'd be alone. Calder shoved his gloved hands into the pockets of his thick, padded jacket. He was cold already, he couldn't imagine being in the icy water.

A few minutes passed, and Calder saw no further sign of movement. The woman didn't try to come up again. It was possible she had swum further inland. He leaned over the railing to look into the water, and he saw a dark shape between the support beams under the pier.

"Hey," he called out. "You can go ahead and climb up. I can give you a hand if you need it. I, uh, didn't mean to scare you."

The shape didn't move.

Calder pulled off a glove and reached into the breast pocket of his jacket, fishing out a small flashlight. He clicked it on and aimed the light at the shape. It wasn't the woman, as he had thought, but a duffel bag wedged between two beams, its strap tied to one of them. There was a flash of movement and Calder instinctually moved the light to follow it, though it was too cold

and too dark for any fish to be this close to the surface. In the murky water he saw a pale shape swaying against a beam, slowly obscured by a dark cloud. Hair.

Calder stepped back and dropped the flashlight, yanking off his other glove and fumbling his way out of his jacket. They were on a fishing pier. He'd startled the woman and she'd fallen, gotten tangled in some stray fishing wire. She'd been under for over five minutes now. Calder kicked off his shoes and jumped over the side, nearly tripping over the flashlight on the way.

He dove into the water and was momentarily stunned by the icy temperature, but he quickly remembered his purpose and swam down to where he had seen the woman. The salt burned his eyes and it was too dark to see regardless, but soon his hands found wood and then flesh. He grabbed the woman's waist and tried to pull her up to the surface, but she was stuck in place. He continued to tug with no results, and he felt her hands on his arms, trying to pull them off of her. At least she was still conscious. Dimly, it occurred to him that her hands felt odd, as if something was stretched between her fingers.

Pulling wasn't going to work. He tried a new tactic, trailing his hands down her hips and legs in order to find the wire. He could apologize when they were both safe on land. He continued further down and her hands grew more insistent, clawing at his shoulders and back as she leaned down over him.

This woman may hold the world record for breath-holding, but Calder could only hold his breath for so long. He frantically groped for the wire, but he didn't seem to be reaching any lower than the woman's thighs. He should have been at her ankles by now, but he couldn't see a thing and his fingers were practically numb. He bumped into the beam the woman was clinging to, and there was a blaze of light above them. His flashlight had fallen into the water.

As the light slowly sank into the sea, Calder was able to see the woman he was trying to save. There were strips of silver where the light hit her, and though he could see her leaning over him, there was nothing but vast blackness where her eyes should have been. Her mouth was open in a silent gasp, her lips stretched impossibly wide and her teeth white and sharp. The burning in Calder's lungs was becoming unbearable, and as the light sank and began to flicker he realized that he was not holding the woman's legs at all, but a long sinewy tail wrapped around the beam. Water filled his lungs as he tried to scream, and the last thing he saw was the fuzzy outline of the woman reaching for him before the light went out completely.

Calder woke suddenly and painfully, coughing and heaving seawater out of his lungs. He was curled on the slick wood of the pier, shaking uncontrollably. Someone draped his jacket over his shoulders and he clung to it gratefully, pulling it tightly around his chest. When he caught his breath he tried to sit up, the hands gently helping him. He turned to thank his rescuer, and his breath froze in his lungs.

All at once, he remembered the figure in the sea, the woman who was not a woman at all. He would have brushed it off as a dream, a hallucination, anything but reality, were he not sitting directly before her. *Kailani was right*, he thought. *Mermaids look nothing like smiling cartoon caricatures. Mermaids are terrifying.*

Her upper body resembled that of a large woman, clearly muscular despite the layer of blubber. There was no line between body and tail, no distinction between human flesh and brightly colored scales, like there are in the movies. Her entire body was covered in alternating black and silver bands, the scales on her chest and stomach slightly lighter than those on the upper side of her tail, a long serpent's tail coiled around her body. Its end was resting on the pier,

stretched and flat like a paddle. He looked back up to her face. The black void covering half of her face had terrified him in the water; he now saw that she had black markings surrounding her black eyes, curving down to her neck. As he stared, her nictitating membranes retreated to the corners of her eyes, revealing the whites and giving her a slightly more human appearance. She was wringing her webbed hands, and every muscle in her tail— her tail! — was tensed, as if she were ready to spring back into the sea without a moment's notice.

With a start, he realized that *she* was afraid of *him*. This mermaid, twice his size with claws and fangs, who could drag him down to the depths of the ocean never to be seen again, was afraid of *him*!

The two sat motionless on the pier for what seemed like hours, simply staring at each other, waiting for the other's first move. Calder realized that the duffel bag had also moved, now lying open beside the woman. A towel was balled up beside it.

“Do you— Do you live here?” he finally asked.

She looked away and covered her face with her hands, mumbling.

“I'm s-sorry? I didn't, didn't catch that.”

She shot a glance at him, quickly looking back into the water. “You should leave,” she said, her voice muffled though her hands. “You'll freeze to death out here.”

Calder realized he was still soaked and freezing. His hands and feet were numb, and his teeth were chattering. “B-but! Who are you? You speak English? The bag! Do you live on land? How? Your t-tail! Your stripes!”

It didn't hit him until he said it out loud. “I-it's you! The striped mermaid!”

She whined, wringing her hands once more. She looked at Calder and turned away again several times before seeming to come to a decision. She sighed and seemed to deflate, dropping her hands to rest on a coil of her tail, her shoulders drooping. She hung her head.

“Why does everyone ask me that?” She asked quietly. “Why do so many people take one look at me and assume I can’t speak English? I’ve always hated that.”

Of all the responses she could have given, Calder was not expecting that one. But her voice was familiar, as well as the sentiment. She sounded like— Calder’s stomach dropped as realization sunk in. She had stripes, a tail, but her overall build was the same, her eyes were the right shape, her hair was wet and plastered to her neck, but it was the right length.

“Kailani?”

She looked up, finally meeting his eyes. “Surprise?”