

Rayellyn

Paul Kershaw
(2/16 - 2/17/03)

“Sirens, damnable and blessed, may you tear my brain from my skull and my heart from my chest and dash them both against the sharp stones on which you perch, lest I wander down the path again where first your sister seduced me.”

The sailor at the bar tossed back his shot, eyed the empty glass, and slammed it down, upside down, on the bar. “Keep! Another of the same!”

“When you’ve paid for that one,” Sanchez said, his back to the sailor. He knew that Harris didn’t have the money in him, and that was just fine, because he didn’t need any more whiskey.

“More! Keep! Is this the abuse I deserve? Will you turn your back on me just like those damnable unseeleie bitches?”

Sanchez ignored him; that was the best thing, when he’d gotten this far. Every night, it was the same. Harris owed him now for about a hundred shots of whiskey, but it was easier to just let him get drunk and listen to his babble than try to argue with him.

“I’ll cover him,” a different voice said. Sanchez looked into the mirror over the bar. It was the new guy, he’d introduced himself as Tucker, and he looked green behind the ears. An excitable young lad from the city, no doubt, who’d decided to try to romance of a fisherman’s life. By the time he learned there was no real romance to it, it would be too late.

“Butt out, Tucker,” Sanchez said. It was rude, but he didn’t care. This was his bar, and his rules.

Tucker set a Franklin down on the bar. “I’m willing to buy a story. And give me a beer, while you’re at it.”

Harris looked at the bill, and poked it as if it had teeth. “You heard him, keep! Keep the water flowing!”

Sanchez turned around to stare Franklin in the eyes directly. He looked Tucker over: Young turk, indeed, throwing away Daddy’s hard-earned money, and for what? Maybe Sanchez had misjudged him: Maybe Tucker was one of those graduate student types, looking to score a story from a drunkard so they could call it a folktale.

Yeah, that would be a rip all right, Harris' alcoholic ramblings appearing in an academic journal somewhere as if it had been told for seventeen generations.

Tucker took his hesitation as a request for more, and set another Franklin down on top of the first one.

Sanchez swept them both up, and eyed Harris. "Ok, Tucker, you can have him, but get him away from the bar, and he's your problem if he gets out of hand."

Tucker smiled and nodded. "Just keep it flowing, and I'll take care of the rest."

Harris looked around, confused, only vaguely aware that his fate was being determined without his input. If it meant more whiskey for him, he wasn't sure he minded, especially if it turned out to be free whiskey.

"Come on, Captain," Tucker said, holding a beer in one hand and a double shot of whiskey in the other. The whiskey he dangled like a carrot, and Harris followed him back to a table in the far corner.

Sanchez watched them for a moment, then shook his head and clucked, and went back to washing out glasses.

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"Tell me about the woman," Tucker said as Harris settled in around his whiskey.

"You don't want to know." Harris stared down at his whiskey. "The things I've seen..."

"I want to know everything."

Harris gulped down about half the whiskey, and shook his head as it kicked back. That felt better, and each drink made it all that much number. He looked at the young lad, seemed like a nice enough fellow. "What do you want to get messed up with these things for, sonny? Go back to your pappy so he can wipe your ass and tell you to mind your money better."

"It's my money, and it's my right. I bought your story, now give it up."

Harris shook his head. "You don't want it. You just think you do."

Tucker moved the whiskey out of reach. "You want the rest of it, you'll give me a story."

Harris looked longingly at the whiskey, and thought about going back to the bar and trying his luck with Sanchez again, but he knew that was pointless. He looked at Tucker again. "You already know what you're going to believe. Gimme." He reached out for the drink.

"I want to hear it from you. I want to know how to find her."

"Find her? Find her? You don't find her, and you don't even try to. If she finds you, you curse the day you were born."

Tucker eyed him up, and then started to move as if he were going to drink the whiskey himself.

"Stop! Stop! Gimme that, and gimme two more, and I'll tell you. But don't you ever tell me I didn't warn you off, son. She'll have your skin and devour your soul."

Tucker handed him the drink back. "It's my skin, and my soul."

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By the time Sanchez was ready to close for the night, Harris had passed out on the table, and the youngster had left, talking on a cell phone on his way out. It sounded like preparations of some sort, and it was a heated argument, but Sanchez hadn't been able to make out many details. He only had a passing curiosity, in the way that he had a curiosity about anything that happened in his bar.

Wayne and Dancing Feather were nice enough to help Sanchez drag Harris, chair and all, out of the bar. They left him propped up against the outside wall, and closed up for the night.

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"Play it again." Joshua Harkin, twenty-something CEO of Aqua Entertainments, sat at one end of an ostentatiously large boardroom table that was still factory-fresh waxed so cleanly that its surface made a passable mirror.

Pete Tucker, VP, Acquisitions, rewound the tape to the beginning, and set it to play. Harris' voice echoed in the empty boardroom: "For three years, I chased that heathen siren, and for three years she taunted me on. I would catch a shadow of her, here and there. She could swim fast, faster than my boat would go, and then she would wait for me to catch up. A cruel game."

"But did she finally let you catch her?" Tucker's voice said on the tape.

“Aye, and when I thought my nightmare had ended, it had just begun.” Harris’ voice was gruff and slurred.

“What was the problem?”

But Harris’ voice became wistful. “She was even more beautiful than I could have imagined. Everything about her was perfect. Her eyes were as deep as the ocean, and the color of an ice floe... there was a beauty in her eyes that should not be shared. Her hair rolled down her shoulders like threads of silver and gold. Her lips... ah, those lips, so sweet, the flavor of salt-water taffy, and just as soft. And her body... boy, you’ll never live so long that you’ll see breasts like those.” Harris paused; Tucker made a hand motion to Harkin like someone throwing back a shot. “Two teardrops, that’s what they were. The tears of a thousand sailors seduced into resting their heads in that bosom.”

“What was the problem?” Tucker repeated on the tape.

“But the prize, the real prize, the thing that sends sailor after sailor out after her. Oh, sonny, you can’t know, you don’t want to know. Firm like a carp it was, and strong too, from her waist on down, you’d not believe it. Shimmering like a thousand coins of silver, and the color of seaweed and youth.” Another pause, this one longer, growing pregnant as the cassette player ticked away the time. “Once you’re lain with a siren, you’ll never want to touch another woman as long as you live.”

Tucker watched Harkin, who watched the tape as a long silence set in.

“Tell me how to find her,” Tucker on the tape said.

Harkin turned off the tape recorder. “He’s drunk.”

Tucker sighed. “Yeah, but listen to him. He’s seen one, that’s why he’s drunk.”

“Or he’s drunk because he wasted his life trying to find one.” Harkin leaned back in his chair. “You want a lot of money to chase something that isn’t even scientifically feasible.”

“Yes, but can you imagine if I find her? Aqua Entertainments will be the toast of the world. Forget Sea World, they only have dolphins. Who wants to see a trained dolphin when you can see a mermaid?”

“I’m not sure I can afford to have you gallivanting off after a drunkard’s wet dream.”

“Right now, Aqua is a two-bit marine distraction for white trash too broke to go to someplace real. I’m not sure you can afford me not to do something to turn this around.”

Harkin looked down at the tape. For over twenty years, his father had strung the park along, letting it barely subsist while he spent the meager profits on wretched excesses. Now, a Lear jet crash and two months of probate later, it was his responsibility, and the creditors were starting to bay and scratch at the door.

“Tell Marjorie what you need, and try to keep the costs down.” In response to Tucker’s sudden kid-in-a-candy-shop excitement, he added: “You have two months. Do it or get out.”

“I won’t need two months,” Tucker said, smiling.

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Christine was a little harder to convince.

“How long will you be gone?” she asked, standing in the bedroom doorway as he packed, her hands on her hips.

“If everything works out ok, only a week or two.”

“And if everything doesn’t work out ok?”

He shrugged. “You know this is important to me. This could be my big break.”

“How big?”

Tucker sighed and turned to face her, a sweater in his hand on its way to his suitcase. “Big.”

She pursed her lips. She wasn’t convinced. “Big enough for us to get married?”

“And then some.” He put the sweater into the suitcase and turned to get some socks out of the dresser.

“Then what is it?”

“I can’t tell you. You wouldn’t understand.”

She raised her eyebrows threateningly. “Peter Tucker, is this about a woman?”

The question caught him out of the blue, and he stopped in his turn. “No,” he said firmly, but he’d waited too long.

“It is!”

“No,” he said impatiently. “Well... not really.”

“There’s no ‘not really’ here, Pete. Are you seeing someone behind my back?”

“It’s not like that,” he told her, even though he wasn’t completely convinced himself. “I’m not sure you’d believe me if I told you.”

She raised her eyebrows again. “I’m almost certain I wouldn’t, not after a comment like that.”

He closed his eyes. “You know I love you. This is about work. It’s something special I’m getting for the park.”

“A woman?”

“Well... kind of...”

A wave of shocked epiphany came over Christine’s face. “You’re not going after a mermaid again, are you?”

His excitement at the subject overpowered his common sense. “Yes, but this time, I’ve got a really good lead. I found someone who knows where one lives... he gave me directions.”

“You’re an idiot,” she said quietly, cutting him off. Then, in a voice then didn’t reveal even a hint of forgiveness: “Be home soon, and you better be right this time.”

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On the drive back to David’s Port, Tucker listened to the tape again.

“You have to go alone,” Harris was saying, his voice even thicker with the effects of alcohol. “She’ll know you’re coming, and the more noise you make, the faster she’ll run. You have to sneak up on her, and you can only do that if you go alone.”

He’d thought about hiring a second hand to try to cut her off if she tried escaping, but he didn’t want to blow this. Besides, he wanted to be the one to catch her. This had been driving him on since childhood. He’d long known that mermaids existed,

but it was proof that the world wanted, not faith. And it was proof that the world would get.

“How do I find her?” Tucker asked on the tape.

“If you’re lucky, she finds you. You can’t chase the unseele.”

“Why not? Do they always get away?”

“If you’re lucky. They never let themselves get caught, not unless they mean to do you harm.”

“What did she do to you?”

There was a long silence. At the time, Tucker had worried that Harris had fallen asleep. “You don’t to find her, sonny. Go back to your safe little suburban world and leave the fey to the people who understand it.” His voice drifted off to a mumble.

“I need to know.” Tucker had said, but Harris really had fallen asleep.

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Tucker got to David’s Port a little bit after dusk, and thought about getting a room at the inn for the night, but decided to get started. Harris said it was a two day trip, at the least, and that was if she decided to show herself.

Marjorie had rented a yacht already, and it was waiting for him, fully appointed. He would be going hunting in style. Despite Harkin’s hesitation, he was being generous.

After settling his things into the cabin, he set sail.

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The second night, she came to him a dream. She was even more beautiful than Harris had described in his stupor, and he was swept up into her beauty.

“At last, you’re coming to me, my love,” she said in a voice that moved not into his ears but into his mind, wrapping around him like the smell of fresh bread, or the swaddling of an infant.

He reached out for her, and she took his large hand between her two small ones. Her skin had the silkiness of rose petals, and she gently kissed each of his fingertips.

“I want you,” he said, his voice trembling.

“Yes, my love. Soon.” She stroked his cheek, so softly that she didn’t even touch his skin; only the fine hairs on his skin registered her touch.

He could feel his pulse quicken, and an ache throbbed inside his chest, deeper than he’d ever felt. She floated towards him, and for the first time he realized that they were both underwater. This thought did not bring him panic, but a calm comfort that he was where he’d always been meant to be.

As her face neared his, he closed his eyes and pursed his lips for a kiss. She was close enough that he could feel the warmth radiating from her skin, but the kiss never came, and when he opened his eyes, she was gone.

He woke up slowly, pulling back to consciousness on a slow curve, so slowly that he wasn’t sure where the dream ended and reality began.

His forehead was damp with sweat, and his penis was harder than it had ever been.

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The weather was poor, and it wasn’t until the morning of the fourth day that Tucker finally came upon the island that Harris had told him about. “If she wants you,” Harris had said, “it’ll start on Siren’s Island. That’s where it always starts. That’s where all the sirens call from. Every sailor who’s ever caught a mermaid has started there.”

“Every sailor?” Tucker asked. “How many more stories are there?”

Harris shook his head at that. “I’m the only one that’s still alive. Leastways, of the ones who come back.”

“The ones who come back?”

“Aye. The lucky ones.”

It seemed to Tucker that the lucky ones would be the ones who’d gotten to stay, especially if the mermaids were all as beautiful as the one who had visited him.

As Tucker approached the island, he could hear what at first sounded like the chirping of birds. It became clearer, and its ominous undertones called out to him. His first impulse was to turn around and go home: After years of looking forward to this moment, now that it was becoming real, he was terrified of it. Had he in his

youthful exuberance thrown caution to the wind? How much did he really believe? And what if, after all was said and done, the warnings that he'd failed to heed had been correct?

Worse yet - or was this a "worse yet"? - what if it was all a delusion? This was his last chance: Christine had made that clear, and so had Josh. Time to act like a grown-up.

"Peter, my love," the birds were singing, in a complicated polyrhythm that swelled around him. The waves that rocked his boat were imbued with the sound waves, and reverberations echoed up from the cabin.

"Come to me, my love," the birds sang. "I want your touch."

Tucker looked at the small island, more a group of rocks that jutted up from the sea. Or crystals, shimmering in the sun: That's what they were, stalagmites of quartz that rose up above him, thirty feet into the sky with no flat land for him to pull ashore.

At the base of them he could see fish rolling around in the shallow waters, and women sunbathing naked on the sharp crags, and it was only when he got closer that he saw that the fish and the women were the same.

They saw him, and scattered in a flurry. All except one, who sat still on a broken ledge and smiled gently at him.

"Hello, Peter," she hummed in a high-pitched voice that came to him from all directions at once, and from nowhere at all. It was the song of the dolphins, the chirping of cardinals, the splash of the ocean against his heart.

"Hello, Rayellyn." His own voice was clumsy and human. And how had he known her name?

She smiled and slid headfirst into the water, her tail slipping under the surface before her head broke it again next to the bow. He hadn't realized that he'd drifted so close to the rocks.

Rayellyn put her hands on the railing of the boat, pulling herself out of the water, and the sun hit her eyes. The sunlight didn't reflect: It was pulled in, deep into the ice floes of her irises, and was built up into it was released, strengthened.

Tucker steadied himself. This was beyond his imagination, and now that he was here, it was nearly beyond his tolerance. Perhaps he was asleep again: This was a dream. But it had such depth and detail, and was so far beyond his senses, that he

knew it couldn't have been a dream. He couldn't have created such a vision with his own mind.

By now, she had pulled herself entirely onto the boat, and was sitting on the desk, her long, glimmering tail curled around her.

"You ran from Harris..." was the first thing his lips chose to say.

"It wasn't me, and she ran because he wasn't hers." She blinked slowly, caressingly, and he noticed that she had double lids, a clear set under her opaque set. As she exhaled, gills on her throat vibrated. But, other than that and her tail, she looked every bit a woman, and the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

"Are you mine, then?" he said, floating and barely cognizant of his own words.

"No, my sweetest love, you're mine."

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For three days, they made love.

Three days later, there was no more Christine. There was no more Josh. Even the boat seemed less than solid. He ate, he slept, he used the bathroom. Every other moment was spent in sexual bliss.

She fed him. She spoon-fed him, and he let her. She spread his lunch out on her body, and he consumed it, licking her skin clean and then kissing those water taffy lips, her tongue rolling around his. Her canines grazed his lips, even cut them open now and then, but he didn't care. The taste of his blood accentuated the sweetness of the taffy.

When he slept, she curled around him. He knew she was strong, stronger than she should have been, but she held him with a gentleness of a featherbed. He nestled his face between her teardrop breasts and cried from joy, and regret that it had taken him so long to find this place.

When they had sex, it was more than mechanics and physics. He'd wondered in the days leading up, indeed ever since the obsession had first taken hold of him years ago, about how the mechanics would work, but they slid together more naturally than he'd ever fit with Christine. With Christine, there had been a mass of legs, but not with Rayellyn. He slid into her, and they became one, her tail curling around his legs and holding him close.

They would lay like that for hours, motionless: Him inside of her, her around him, his head nestled against her shoulder, her breasts, those delicious breasts pressed against his chest. Her warmth, the aroma of her hair, the delicateness of her skin, as if he were wrapped up in the petals of a giant rose. Even when she suckled gently at his neck, the pain was divine.

In that time between time, Tucker let the days drift away, until his mission and his girlfriend were nothing but forgotten memories on the edges of his consciousness.

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In the dream, Tucker was sitting in the bar, talking to Harris. Christine and Josh were at the next table, eating salmon steaks. They were quite engaged in their meal, completely oblivious to Tucker and Harris.

“What happens to the ones that don’t come back?” Tucker was asking. The tape recorder was rolling, even though the machine was empty.

“They don’t come back,” Harris said, throwing back a double shot of whiskey and putting the empty shot glass, deftly, on top of a sizable pyramid of empty glasses.

“Yes, but what happens to them?”

Harris shrugged. He was dead sober, so he had another shot of whiskey. “You want to bring one back, don’t you?”

Tucker’s silence was his response.

“What do you think they would do with one?” Harris waved his head in the general direction of Christine and Josh.

Tucker watched as Christine took a big bite of salmon, and gently dabbed the edges of her mouth.

“So I won’t come back,” Tucker said. “I’m happy here.”

“You are now.” Harris downed another double shot, and reached up to put the empty glass on top of the pile.

Tucker turned his head to see where Harris was pointing. On top of the bar, passive sailors lay side by side as mermaids rode them, their teardrop breasts bouncing in a vulgar display of pure lust. The sailors had sallow skin, and their eyes had receded into their skulls.

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Tucker jumped awake.

Rayellyn's eyes fluttered open, one set of lids at a time. "Oh, my darling, my sweet love, it was just a nightmare."

He rubbed his eyes, and looked around the cabin. The sleepiness receded, but the anxiety was still there. "What am I doing here?"

She took a long time to answer, and there was a sadness in her eyes. "I love you," she said, almost too quietly to be heard.

He pulled away from her. The events of the last few days whirled around his head, and he went from ecstasy to shame: Had he really had so little self-control? The dream had snapped him back to reality, and the reality was: He had responsibilities. He had come here on a mission, and he was going to complete it.

She moved to put her arms around him in a gentle caress, but he stood up quickly and stepped away from her. "What are you doing here?"

She blinked catlike, eying him over, and his nudity washed over him. What had he done? What hold did she have over him?

He turned and bounded up the stairs to the deck before she could react, and slammed the door shut behind him. He sat with his back against the door, and looked up at the morning sky. It was dawn, and the boat rocked gently in the water.

He hadn't anchored the boat, but in the lost days of sex and lust, it had stayed put next to Siren's Island.

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It was noon and he was starving, but he still sat against the door. He knew that the door opened into the cabin, but somehow he felt more secure here, as if he were actually holding her in.

And part of him realized that she was trapped, because he had trapped her. The fey had their own rules, and this was one of them: Box them in, and they're trapped, no matter how easy it would be for them to get out.

"Peter, my love, open the door." Her voice was tender and forgiving, a birdsong chirping in the hindmost part of his mind.

“No, I need to take you back.”

“You know you can’t do that.”

“What will you do to stop me?” he asked, his voice shaking with rage to block out the lust and passion that was building up inside of him.

“Nothing, sweet one. There is nothing that I can do to stop you.”

Her voice was filled with wilted tragedy.

He sat with his back against the door for some time more, the silence weighing in until it passed into background noise.

Late in the afternoon, he stood up and took the helm, steering the boat away from Siren’s Island and heading back towards David’s Port.

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The weather was in his favor on the way back, and it only took two days. He’d found some jerky and a bottle of water on the deck, but he was still naked, and his stomach ached. He had been relieving himself into a bailing bucket which he dumped into the water: The sole bathroom was in the cabin, along with his clothing and most of the food and water. He wasn’t opening the cabin, because he feared the seduction. He was fairly certain that she couldn’t leave now without his permission, but he wasn’t sure that he could be trusted not to give that permission if he gave her the chance.

His dreams were fitful, and the nights had been cold and unforgiving. Even the moon had been a harsh mistress, hiding her face from him. That seemed fitting: He lay out under it to sleep, feeling filthy and ugly and intensely human. The shadows of night were still more charitable than the rawness of the sun, baking his flesh as the boat drilled onward towards his goal.

His goal: Vindication. Proof. Financial reward. He’d be rich, and all the doubters would have nothing to say to him. He’d been right, he’d have the proof.

Rayellyn was quiet. Tucker had expected her to beg, or cry, or something, but she did nothing. In his fear, he worried that somehow, she’d slipped out when he was asleep, but he blocked out that fear. He couldn’t open the door, he couldn’t even look into the cabin, lest she try to seduce him.

So she stayed where she was, a Schrodinger’s cat inside her treasure box.

He also wondered if she was dead, if she had died in there. Small matter to him: She would still be proof. That's what he wanted, after all, proof.

He thought about her in the cabin, sitting on the edge of the bed, looking wistfully up at the sky or feeling the comforting rocking of the sea that she'd never feel again.

But he wouldn't let the thoughts get to him. She'd seduced him, she'd used him, it was right for him to use her. It was in her nature, it was in his nature.

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David's Port was a point on the horizon, growing larger. An hour away, and then he'd open the cabin door, and Shrodinger's cat would be seen by everyone.

He was weak, weaker than any person should be. But he was strong, iron-willed.

"Peter?" Rayellyn's tenderness emanated through the door. "One last request: Be sure this is what you really want."

Tucker sat on the deck, watching David's Port growing in the distance. He thought about bringing Rayellyn back to the city, showing her to Joshua. Putting her on display at Aqua. The lines, the lines! Take that, Sea World!

And Christine, she was the worst of the doubters. She'd see then, and then what would she have to say?

Yes, this is what he wanted.

"Know this, Peter, my dearest love: I will live as long as you do, I will love as long as you do, you are mine and I am yours."

"Shut up! You were going to devour me!" Tucker curled up more, putting his head on his knees. What had he done? He'd nearly let her destroy everything. She deserved nothing from him.

"I can see the port, Peter. Only a little while longer."

And then he thought about the lines of people pointing at her, treating her like the freak that he'd been treated like. Naked to their attentions.

There was a beauty in her eyes that should not be shared.

Dizzy from hunger, his lips chapped from thirst, his bowels aching and his bones tired to the marrow, he stood up and opened the cabin door. “Go,” he said.

“I wish we could be together, but you know we can’t,” she said, a single tear edging down her cheek.

“Go,” he said again, turning his back.

A moment later, he heard a splash off the starboard side, and she was gone. He waited five minutes before he opened his eyes, lest he catch a glimpse of her gold and silver strands bobbing in the water.

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Sanchez looked the man over. He looked vaguely familiar, but ten years older than he’d been a few weeks ago.

“I need a double shot of whiskey,” Tucker said, sliding up to the bar.

He heard a familiar chuckle next to him. “One of the lucky ones, now?”

Tucker looked at Harris. It was a slow, deliberate look, and he realized he was looking into a mirror, a magic mirror that cast shadows into the future.

Harris nodded to him. “Now you understand.”

“Yeah,” Tucker said wistfully. “I got the moment, and I’ll never have it again.”

“It’s ok,” Harris told him. “Get yourself into the whiskey. It’ll make you forget.”

Tucker sat silent. “Barkeep,” he said at last, “make that a water.”

He didn’t want to forget.