

FISH TAILS & LADY LEGS

AN EROTIC NOVEL

Pascale Kavanagh

1 UNDERWATER

She let out a deep sigh, the bubble containing her would-be sound floating all the way up to the surface, untouched. There it lingered for just a moment before popping softly, heard by no one. There were numerous sounds deep in the ocean, but none of that variety. A sigh was not a productive issuance from a mermaid and so dissolved into nothing.

It was another day in the cold, dark ocean for Lalune. Another day yearning for anything outside her watery home.

"Lalune! Where are you?" She could hear her sisters calling for her. Or more accurately, she could feel the vibration of the sound. She supposed it was time enough to get started with the day. Floating around wasn't going to grow her legs any faster.

Lalune was partially glad to have her reveries interrupted. Pondering the hopelessness of her life did not make for a wonderful start of the day. There was plenty to do to keep busy in the vast ocean, and many creatures to keep her occupied and even entertained. Maybe a bit of distraction would be helpful.

"Lalune, why are you always hiding out in Nori Cove? Do you have treasure back there? I just can't imagine what could be so interesting??!"

"I like to have a little private time, for my thoughts. Is that so bad? I'm not hiding anything, I promise." Did anyone believe her? Did she believe herself?

"That sounds terribly boring, sister. And it makes you morose. Who's ever heard of a sad mermaid?? It's just not natural. We are the most beautiful and interesting creatures on the planet. What is there to be sad about?"

"I'm not sad, necessarily. I just like to think about things. And I think all of the world's creatures are beautiful and interesting. Even... the land-walkers." She knew this statement would not be taken well, but said it anyway.

"Ughhh. They are just awful! Clumsy, rude, unkind. Haven't you seen how they act? Thank goodness they could never be in our world. And I would never want to go out there. Especially since everything is perfect down here."

Lalune nodded, pretending she agreed. In her heart, that was the furthest from the truth. Most mermaids had nothing but disdain for the land-walkers, but Lalune felt differently. In her eyes, they were beautiful.

Not that she knew this from any personal experience. The stories she heard from her friends and family were amplified to grand proportions by her own imagination. An entire fantasy lived in her head, about their charmed lives, and the wide variety of experiences they must be having. The one that was most intriguing, of course, was their ability to make music. She could hear it sometimes, all the way from the distant shore, vibrating through the water. It was mesmerizing.

Many of the creatures in her world could make music – she especially loved the whales' song – but it was not the same. There was a sense of joy in the land-walker's music, not just utility. The land-walkers made music for the sheer pleasure of it, not just for basic communication. Lalune knew this had to be true based on how the sounds she heard made her feel.

Despite all the others thinking it was reckless and ridiculous, because only land-walkers sing and sea creatures hum, Lalune loved to sing. The pleasure of hearing her sound, carried on the soft breeze above her home, made her feel alive. Yet her song was stifled and muted in the sea, where she was supposed to keep herself hidden. She knew that on land it could be heard in its fullness, from the few times she had snuck over to the island and let herself sing. She knew, without knowing why or how, that it would be on land that her voice, and her life, would find its purpose. Each day, it became more and more difficult to stay silent in the depths.

Lalune had known since she was a child that she had been built for something different than the life she was living, if only she could figure out how to get it. What she wanted most in the world, enough to give up everything she currently knew, was to be a land-walker. To have two beautiful legs that would carry

her around on the land, and to hear her song, her true voice, carried through the air. This would be her salvation.

Still, the ocean contained everything she knew. Why couldn't she be satisfied with that life? Why did she come to believe that her only hope was to leave everything behind? No one else seemed to suffer this same malady, this discontent. Her friends and family were perfectly happy with their magical kingdom.

A large tail flapping in front of her once again startled her out of her daydreams. Her sisters had swum away and she was supposed to be following them.

Off she went to live another day in the life of a magical mermaid. There were adornments to create, games to play, and beautiful scenes to explore. She and her sisters were close (other than the big secret Lalune carried) and had a vast repertoire of diversions to keep them occupied. Occasionally they would sneak up towards the surface and watch the land-walkers fumble around in the water. It caused no shortage of giggles, except from Lalune, who observed with awe.

She could see herself, wiggling those legs and needing that funny facemask to breathe. All their awkwardness was endearing, and she could only imagine how poorly she would do in their environment. It would be impossible, actually.

She wanted to know the feeling of sand between her toes, sun on her skin and the beauty of her song in the faces of those who heard it. Could she find her boldness, her voice, and take her place in the other world?

The legends said it was possible to transform, to grow legs where her tail used to be, but what if it wasn't true? What if Lalune was destined to live out her days swallowing this secret, ashamed and unheard?

It was too easy to hide in the darkness, and nearly impossible to live with her desire. Without being able to sing freely, all the magic in the ocean was useless to her. Her beauty, her talent, even the love in her heart, were all wasted.

There was no one to talk to about this, and certainly no guides she could ask for help. The land-walkers knew of song, but not of mermaids, and the mermaids knew nothing of a two-legged life. It was a leap of faith, to believe all the pieces would come together, but what choice did she have?

Lalune's search for someone to guide her, someone who knew the way, had to be done in secrecy. No one could discover her desire to leave their underwater kingdom. There were severe consequences for mermaids who tried to cross over and did not succeed. Making it all the way through to the other side would be her only option.

What scared her most was knowing she could never come back. The comfort and familiarity of her dark depths, as unsatisfactory as they were, would be lost to her forever. She would live or die as a land-walker.

2 MONIQUE

"Mama!!!"

Is it wrong to wish that your children were mute?

"MAAAMAAAA!!!"

Ok, maybe it would be easier if I was deaf.

"MAAAAAAAAAAMMMMMMAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!"

Somebody better be about to lose a limb over there, I think as I stomp over to the bedroom.

"Yes! What requires so much yelling?" I ask as I realize I am also yelling. They are startled by my testy response. I feel immediately guilty.

"Mama, Lola was doing a perfect handstand! She did it, she really did it! Oh my God, it was so amazing. She just balanced there like her hands were her feet. It was so cool..."

My sweet Claire is jumping up and down, just like her aunt Lizzy always does.

I look over at Lola, beaming. She has been working so hard to do this, and now can't even talk. She's happily accepting the accolades from her usually critical big sister.

"Let me see," I say with a smile I can't help.

The girls set themselves up near the wall and Claire positions herself as the spotter. She begins coaching her little sister, telling her when to breathe and how to adjust to keep the balance. She is encouraging and supportive.

I look at my baby girl, standing so powerfully upside down, not even using the wall for balance. I feel a tinge of jealousy, which I have to release as Lola comes smoothly down. Lola has an uncanny sense of her body, so graceful and strong, and so unlike the gangly, clumsy one I carry around. Except when I dance. Then my body expresses all the grace I imagine a woman should have.

"How did it look, Mama?"

I almost don't have the words.

"It was beautiful baby. You totally nailed it. Like a flagpole. I really liked how you held your arms really strongly and pointed your feet. Wow! I am totally impressed.

And you, Claire... what a great coach you are! I didn't know you could do that. You guys are incredible."

I wrap my arms around my girls. My strong, beautiful, talented girls. I am happy. And lucky. To be their mother and to have this life and to witness their greatness. I bury them with deep squeezes and slurpy kisses.

"Who's hungry?"

We all scramble to the kitchen so that I can finish making their dinner. This is our brand new life. It still feels awkward, even after more than a year, but I pray it will feel natural before too much longer. I have to get used to this new way of being. Like relearning how to ride a bike, the process is causing some soreness in tender places.

My knives are getting dull. I'm frustrated about the extra effort I have to put in to get through the carrots. I have gotten so lazy, after having been so fanatical for all those years. Everything is harder, now that I am out of practice. But the girls love it anyway. They don't complain that my vegetables aren't perfectly diced, or that my sauces are lumpy instead of silken.

This meal, however, is all delicious flavors and sweet little-girl giggles. With every smile and compliment from them, I remember how un-accommodating I had been to their calls just a short while before. And all they wanted was to celebrate with me. My companions of shame and inadequacy settle in to either side of my squeaky chair at the kitchen table.

I can't even claim that motherhood is new to me – Claire is 11 and Lola is about to turn 7 - but the learning curve just isn't letting up. Sometimes I revert to being the selfish little girl who has always been in the middle of all my siblings' needs, and just wants her own time and privacy. I don't want to share and I don't want to be responsible. Sometimes, all I want is to be invisible.

This little girl has grown up and is now somebody else's mother. For how much I adore my own girls, I can't seem to get past my own self-centeredness. What, I wonder, has made me so selfish and needy? Why can't I just be the person I want to be? I hardly allow the answer to fully form in my head.

My phone starts singing the pop song Claire installed as my ringtone. It's Nora, my older sister.

"What's up?" I ask, startled out of a potential spiral.

"Can you come over tomorrow night?"

"I guess... is something going on?"

“Nope.” The answer is a bit sharp. “We just want to see you. I know it’s been a shit-storm over there. Just come over, OK?”

I’m not really in the mood to hang out with my sisters. They’ll want to talk about all the drama, and it’s just too exhausting. I’d much rather avoid and deny, frankly.

But there’s no getting out of this, I think. When Nora wants something, she gets it.

“Fine.” I know I sound ungracious. “Thanks Nora. See you tomorrow.”

Family. Mine is better than most, I have to admit, but we are an odd bunch with such diverse interests, strengths and personalities. Of my siblings, Nora, the oldest, was given an extra portion of brains, Danny got the best personality and Lizzy, the baby, got exuberance. My gift? A strange affinity to blades and flames, and the ability to create something from nearly nothing.

That skill served me well in the kitchen, but kept me constantly in the world of my imaginings. It made me a daydreamer, like our mother. It also allowed my hypersensitivity to blossom into fantastical stories that helped me easily escape the world, for better or worse. Family, however, was something I had yet to successfully escape.

Bedtime is easier than usual. The meal seems to have shifted us past my earlier grumpiness, and everyone is in a good mood. I don’t allow the worry about going to my sister’s tomorrow night to consume me, although I can feel it trying to make it’s way to the front of my thoughts.

The girls and I fall into bed playful and snuggly, a tangle of little bodies and big bodies, all vying for the best patch of bed and the most comfortable corner of pillow. We don’t do it as often anymore, but when we pile into my enormous bed, I have a glimpse into the feelings I used to have... that everything, in fact, is perfectly fine. The next thing I realize, we’ve all fallen asleep. As it’s been for so many nights, sleep does not last.

I squint at the clock across the room. *Shit*, my eyesight seems to get worse by the day. Does it say 2 or 3? Does it matter? I’m awake. A few attempts at re-settling don’t prove useful, so I undertake the task of untangling myself from my babies and heading downstairs to my little office. There’s nothing so urgent that it needs my attention in the middle of the night, but still I feel it’s important to use this rare stretch of peace and quiet fully. Might as well get some work done.

I can’t shake the bad feeling about tomorrow. Sure, I’ve been avoiding my family since all hell broke loose in my life. Everyone else seems to be doing so well in their lives, and it’s been one disaster after another for me. After such an illustrious start, too. Oh well, I know it’s just temporary. At least I hope so.

I just don't want to get lectured. Or questioned. I know they disapprove of my career change, leaving my soul's calling. They want me to live the grand life I used to, the rising star chef whose life is all passion and glory. I don't know how to be that woman anymore and I just don't have the strength right now. My girls have to come first. My sisters just don't understand.

It's no secret that I had walked away from the only area in my life in which I had consistently felt successful. I was flying, then cut my own wings off to be with the other land-dwellers. Here, on the hard ground, I am hardly good for anything other than cooking, which I'm not doing any more. My relationships are pathetic, I am never satisfied with how much time or attention I give my girls, and the work of suppressing my primary creative outlet has left me tired and grumpy. But I can't see any other choice. At least for right now. I'm a single mom now – I need a paycheck and a career that does not have me out all night, every night.

The job at the magazine, I have to admit, has been a godsend. It not only pays the bills, but also lets me do something that's useful to the world. I can live in the inventions of my imagination, a place I land in quite often, and am happy enough to be writing. Sure, it isn't the same passion I feel for cooking, but it's good enough. It's the right choice for my family.

The bright lights of my screensaver remind me that the article about romantic meals in the city needs finishing. Having already done the research on restaurants offering the most unique Valentine's Day meals, all that remains is to include recipes for people to cook at home. Romantic meals are a part of my distant past, at this point, and I could just as easily be researching Mars.

I rarely let myself feel the depth of my loneliness, but it is always with me. It has been a string of failed attempts at love since my failed marriage. I have to be thankful that Jeff and I are now on good terms, but the road getting here nearly destroyed me.

All the stories – my divorce, the end of my career as a rising star in the restaurant world, the recent deaths of my brother and parents – stream before my eyes like a personalized movie from which I can't pull myself away.

So often, life, in all its dimensions, is too much for me to handle. It has been feeling like that quite often these days. When I slip into the stories in my head, or on the page, life is Goldilocks' version of *just right*. I become brave, kind and utterly capable. I stop betrayal in its tracks, and dish out a healthy dose of whatever's needed for any situation. My fantasies replace my relationships and my time in the kitchen. No need for lovers when the ones in my mind are always perfect.

A blade of light begins to cut through the darkness of the night. I am surprised to see that I am still sitting in front of my computer, believing instead that I traveled back in time to relive the tumultuous events that still shake everything around me. It's a good story, I think

to myself. I wonder if I will ever write it down. For now, I must complete those darned recipes, before the sun rises and a new day begins.