

I decided to take my gap year after I graduated. Things were pretty busy during those 6 years of college, as I had to work to pay for my school while I went to class. Sure, it took me a little longer than others, but it really was the best time of my life...so far.

Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself, I'm Abby Nash. I'm 25 and originally from Michigan. I majored in Communications with a minor in Historical Studies. Let's see, what else? I've got dark brown hair that needs to be cut back, as it has grown well beyond my shoulders and down my back (but who has time and money for that, right?). I have brown eyes, but I got these contacts that make them look blue (sort of). Petite would probably describe my size, which sounds better than saying I'm 5 foot tall and weigh less than a hundred pounds. Actually, one of the reasons I grew my hair out is because I got tired of being mistaken for a boy. And if you can keep a secret, I bought one of those inflatable or fillable bras. I keep water in them so it looks like I got more up top than I really do. I know, I know...you probably think me shallow, but since I have been wearing it with my longer hair, no one has mistaken me for a boy on campus (lately).

Squirt! Right now, as you can see, I'm slathering sunscreen on myself as I lay on the beach. After spending every summer in Michigan, I decided my gap year would be someplace tropical. So, here I am in sunny Aruba. Here, I'll take a pano and show you. Click! Now you can see the rocks on my right from the reef, the crystal blue water in front of me, the expansive beach to my left, and the path behind me that I walked down to get here. It is not a private beach, but it feels like it. Well, it is time for my second afternoon nap, so if you excuse me, I'm gonna lay back on my towel on top of the warm sand, now that I've reapplied my sunscreen.

Vrrrrr! What's that sound? Sounds like a motorboat...oh, there it is...Harry's Harpoon Tours...I think I've seen that boat at the wharf before. He gives tours along the beach every weekday. You would think he would work on the weekends, too, but I've never seen him before on Saturdays. His boat is open in the back for people to sit and enjoy the wind and ocean spray. He usually stands towards the front in the boat house, which isn't much more than a short wall with a windshield.

Yawn. Well, since I'm awake, maybe I'll wander back to the boardwalk and get myself a smoothie. I'll just shake my towel out and stuff it in my backpack. Don't forget the sunscreen and my water bottle. Where are my sunglasses? Oh, dummy, I'm wearing them. Haha, good thing no one is around to see that.

It's a nice walk up the path. Palm trees on my left and right, with rocks just beyond them to the left. And there's my flipflops, right where I left them on top of my skateboard. It is

great being able to leave stuff in public and it still be there when you come back. Left foot sandal, right foot sandal, step on the board, and away we go.

Ah, the wind in my face as I board down the paved walkway. This is so much better than Michigan. The roads were always so rough, and I could only get to the skatepark a couple times a week. The campus sidewalks were wide enough for me to board to class, except in winter. Ugh, I don't miss the snow.

And rounding the corner that follows along the beach's edge, there's the wharf. The common hangout place and like something out of a movie. It has shops in huts and old boats tied up to the various docks and piers stretched out into the ocean water. Lots of people here and there along the beach playing and sunning themselves. I love beach life. I can't believe I've waited so long. I know I can't do this forever, but for this year, I'm in heaven.

Slurp! Mmm, the mango-guave-pineapple smoothie hits the spot. I'll just carry my board as I drink this icy drink. Last time I tried to board and drink, I...well, let's not think about that.

"Excuse me, miss?"

"Huh?" Oh, I had my mouth full...ugh, making a mess on myself again...where's my napkin...

"Sorry, didn't mean to disturb you."

"No," gotta wipe this sticky smoothie off me before it slides all the way down my short body, "It's fine, I enjoy throwing sugary ice on myself to cool down." Oh, I think I recognize him.

"I'm Harry. You might have seen my boat going out each day."

Sheesh, this guy is tall, even for me. Shaggy black hair stuffed under a red ballcap that has his logo on it. He has cargo shorts on with a faded polo shirt that was probably red at one point. His dark eyes and deep skin tone fit this area, as he probably spends more time in the Sun than me, but uses no sunscreen.

"Sure," he seems nice enough, so I'll keep talking, "I see you whenever I'm down on the beach."

Nodding his head, he continues quickly, "I thought I had seen you there. Not that I was looking for you, but since I saw you here, I had a question for you."

Saw me? Was he staring at me sunning myself? Question? Hmmm, let's not be hopping in any vans here, Abby. "Shoot," play it cool and don't look like you are making sure there's plenty of people nearby, "I got time."

He smiles and continues, "I just recently lost my one and only employee. No," seeing the look on my face, "Not at sea. She had to go back home for the summer. Sick mom or dad...can't remember. Anyway," he says while removing his hat and then putting it back on in the same way, "I had noticed you before and I was wondering if you are here for the summer and might like a part-time job."

No mention of a creepy van and he has made eye contact the whole time, so maybe he is on the level. "Wow, I'm flattered, but I'm taking the summer off from stress of school and work." That is true, but I've been here over 3 weeks now, so how many days can I spend on the beach alone? I had hoped I'd meet someone or find a summer buddy, but nothing yet. I'm enjoying the time off, but maybe I need something else to do.

"I got that," he says, like he had been hearing my internal conversation, "So what I need is not that much time consuming, so you can still have most of the day off." I was going to decline again, but he continued on. "I take three tours out each morning, and it would be helpful to have someone untie the ropes each time and then tighten them again when I return. I could use help loading the boat, too. It would be 3-4 hours each day...tops."

Really? That doesn't sound too bad. A little extra cash for a morning of easy work? "And you are paying, right? This is not volunteer work or food coupons at the fish shack?" Surely he meant money, but better make sure. I worked a month at the local grocery store before I found it was for a \$30 food voucher that didn't apply to items on sale.

"Yep, I normally take 10-12 on my boat each time. You get one passenger's fee for the work, and I keep the rest. So if I have 10 passengers, you make one passenger's ticket price, while I make 9. If I have only 6, then you still get the one, while I get the remaining 5." He smiles broadly again and adds, "And I got some other ideas, too, to help sales, so I might be willing to add a second passenger's ticket price for that."

Loop left, loop right, loop left, pull tight. "It's all tied up!" Sweep my arms to the same side of the dock, so hopefully they get the hint to get off the boat. "Thanks for

coming...please come back." Smile...be friendly...wave. Wow, these past 2 weeks have just flown by. I can't believe how quickly I've fallen into this lifestyle.

Harry jumps to the dock, "Ready for some lunch? I'm starved." His long legs carry him quickly, so I better pick up the pace to keep up. "Aye, aye, skipper. Been another busy day." Make a quick adjustment to my blue striped shirt that's cutoff at my midriff, showing my narrow and obvious female waist, but does not nothing for my nearly flat and more boy-like chest. "Yeah, I guess," he replies, I like my baggy faded-blue shorts, as they are cutoffs and make me look a bit like a castaway.

Still no sign of payment, so...ahem! I'll clear my throat loudly before we get to the food shacks. He looks at her and says, "Oh right, your pay for the day." There's the usual wad of cash coming from his pocket and my payout, which does not seem to diminish the size of the wad. "Thanks, I'm not sure my good looks will buy me much," I say, indicating the plain, blocky outfit I'm wearing. He winks at her, "You'd be surprised," he replies with a smirk.

Mmm, not sure what is in this sauce, but this fish taco is amazing. "So, you up for another challenge?" Crunch, mmm, and the cole slaw inside of the...wait, did he say something? "Sorry, I was focused on my taco." He chuckles, "I see that. I'm needing to step-up my business, and I got an idea that could land us both more money without any more time." Hmm, this sounds too good to be true.

"We need an attraction to get more passengers, and I know just the thing."

"We? Uh, as long as you have one passenger, I'm good," I chuckle with a mouthful.

"Sure, for you, but I gotta think of my family and future, so how good are your swimming skills?" What could he want me to swim for? As she contemplates that, he goes on, "So, there's an island legend that mermaids used to live in the water around the island. Some of the coral reefs have shapes that make it seem like someone lived under the water there."

Mermaid? What kind of crazy idea is this? "So, I thought you could put on a flipper and swim around under my boat's bottom. You know it has a glass bottomed section, and if they saw you swimming down there, it would be huge for business." You mean like Ariel? Under the Sea? You must be chewing on some of that local seaweed people keep complaining about.

"You could get scuba certified, since I'm an instructor, and use the double rebreather for the shallower areas, so you would not have to surface while I drive near you. It would look like you are a real mermaid." He is really waving his arms now, like he might fly away. How could he think anyone would fall for this? Mermaids? Me? Have you looked at my figure lately?

"I can tell you are not convinced, but just think about it, okay?" He looks so expectantly at me. Fine...I'll say I'm thinking about it, but I'm not going to do it. "Sure, Harry, if it will help you so that I can eat my taco in peace, I'll think about it."

"Aaah," that's the third night in a row I've dreamed of mermaids, and why am I all sweaty? Ugh, gotta sit up and readjust my sheets on the bed...again. Looking around the one room apartment, everything looks where it should be, other than my excessive sweating, "Well, I sometimes wake up in a sweat in the heat, but this is ridiculous." Let's get ourselves a quick shower to rinse off before sweating again on my way into the wharf.

"Okay," don't commit here, but let's just see where this goes, okay...be very noncommittal and wait for that last customer to walk away for the day, "Let's just say I'm curious...not interested, though...about this whole mermaid thing. How would it work, I mean, how could it work?" Sheesh, that didn't sound as convincing in my head that I haven't been thinking about this all week.

Wrapping up a rope and stowing it in the bin to port, "Yeah, so that's the part I think is the best part. So, imagine I'm taking the boat out on the tour like usual. As I pass the outer cove, I say something like, 'boy, this is a perfect day for a mermaid sighting' and then I steer closer to the shore and point at the window to the ocean floor."

He picks up a life preserver and stows it in the bin to starboard, "You would be swimming along the bottom moving shells from one colorful reef to another, or maybe you are simply swimming the other way, ignoring us humans." He air quotes the 'humans' part and continues, "We just keep going and I pretend I didn't see you, right? Makes it all the more magical...or would that be mystical?"

Uh, neither...this is crazy. "So, how would, I mean, could I stay under that long?" This is crazy. "I can hold my breath, but I don't think I could do anything like that at that depth." This is crazy.

He steps past me and opens another bin in the small captain's cabin. "This," he says while holding up a double, cylindrical tank, "Is a scuba tank for cave diving. You inhale from one tank and exhale to the other. It is designed to keep air bubbles or pockets forming in natural caves. Some ocean preservation thing...I had to qualify in cave scuba for my last certification."

This is still crazy. "And I would be wearing that?" This is still crazy. "Mermaids don't wear tanks." This is still crazy.

"Oh no," he exclaims loudly, "You would have this tucked in amongst the coral, then return to it every couple of minutes. I figure you are moving shells around anyway, so you can be moving them nearby and keep your back to the surface as you take a hit." He laughs at his joke.

Not funny, Harry. "I'm starved. Where's my lunch money, huh?" I'll wait for the cash, and then say "nope" there is no way I'm doing this.

"Shouldn't the wetsuit cover my whole body?" This black color would be extra hot, especially with me standing on the dock near the boat. The tank top connected to the shorts that squeezes me tightly is oddly comfortable. He shakes his head, "Not around here, too hot. Besides, you'll be wearing less than that as a mermaid. Okay, like we have practiced, goggles first, rebreather next, and hold both to your face when you hit the water."

I can't believe I'm about to "graduate" from his...splash...diving school. At least the water feels good today, like it does every day. Let's turn myself around and swim to the...wait, check the gauges on my wrist first. Okay, pressure good...mixture good...okay, now we swim to the bottom. Sure it's pretty down here...I can see why people like to scuba dive. I may not have wanted to do anything this year, but I'm proud of this accomplishment. Who would have thought a girl from Michigan would be scuba diving off the coast of Aruba?

Hey there, sea turtle. You are looking all cute swimming over there. Hey there, small red fish...no clue what you are. Lemon shark keeping your distance? That's okay with me, even if I'm twice your size. You guys just stay away from me while I stand on the bottom of the ocean at 30 feet deep. Okay, change my ballast and...bump...stand on the bottom of the ocean without floating up. And there's Harry up there looking at me. So cool that the water is that clear here. Looks like he is giving me a thumbs up, so I passed! I can't wait to post this when I get "home" this afternoon.

All I have are bikinis which I guess works here, "So how does this fin thing work?" But, how am I gonna move around in that?

"Simply," Harry states as he holds a bucket of sea water to his waist, "This special wetsuit constricts in salt water. I got you the gold one so that it will show up all flashy with sparkles. Just make sure your legs are together and bent in the same way, because you really can't get out of it until you get out of the ocean."

Can't get out of it? Not sure I like that idea, and what is all this oily stuff I'm having to put on my skin? "And this oily sunscreen stuff?" It smells like a coconut that has gone bad.

"Oh, that's to keep your skin from wrinkling from being under the water for so long. You will have that perfect skin tone and look with that goop. Can't do much about the smell though," he says with a shrug.

"Okay, I guess, but you better...woah that's cold!" He just dumped that big bucket of water on me. What a big...wait, what's that sound? It is like shrink wrap or crumpling aluminum foil. Oh wow, the fin is tightening around my legs, it is like they are being squeezed into one leg or fin. He's right...good thing I had my legs bent in the same way and right next to each other.

Can I wiggle my toes? Not really, but it appears every part of my two legs is now squeezed tightly into one single fin. Cool! "Well, what do you know, it worked?!" I can't believe it, and if I flex my toes, the tail flicks in rhythm.

"Don't sound so surprised, you think I'm an idiot and wasting our time and my money?" His face definitely showed more disgust than usual, but surely he was skeptical, too, right?

Actually, I was thinking just that. This whole scheme seemed impossible, and for me, I'm just here for the fun and maybe some extra spending cash. Rubbing my hands on the smooth "mermaid skin", thinking, and if I make enough side money, I could extend my gap year a little longer. It feels so strange on my legs...it is like I don't have two legs anymore.

"See? Works as advertised." He says while waving his hands, "And now let's get you in the water before it dries out. I got a diver's chute back by the motor." He jerks his thumb

behind him as he moves to open what looks like a trap door in front of the engines in the back.

Well, here goes nothing. Take a deep breath. I'll just scoot along the fake carpet along the floor of the boat. Push down with my arms and slide along my butt, ha ha, this is definitely not very graceful, must be why mermaids are designed for water only.

Where did that hatch come from? And look, there's the clear ocean water beneath it, "Oh, that is handy. Why couldn't I use that when I was certifying in scuba diving?"

He shrugs his shoulders, "The class is designed for over-the-side of a boat, so you had to go over the side. Here," he says pointing to the double tank by the trap door, "Once you get in the water, take this with you, so you can try it out. I stopped us nearby to your 'mermaid hangout', so it's not that deep and there is plenty of coral to swim around."

Mermaid hangout, huh? Aaah, that water feels so good, yet strange on this fin thing. We need a new name for "my home". Maybe grotto? That sounds familiar from a movie I've seen. Oh my...my fin feels so good now that it is in the water. The water pressure seems to form it perfectly to my legs and body. Hold that smile in, girl, I'm not gonna let him know how good this feels.

"Alright, I'm not going far, just a little bit along the shore to see how far I can see you," he takes a look around to make sure no one is very close to them. "Goggles and nose clip on tight?"

"Okay, but stay close." I don't want him leaving me to swim all the way back into the wharf. I got the tank through the small hatch and under the water, but I'll keep my head above water until it's time, "There is nobody nearby last I looked and I don't want to swim all the way back like this. And yeah, the nose clip feels like it's about to cut my nose off, and these teeny-tiny goggles better work." There is no way this all works as advertised, but I've stalled long enough, moment of truth here. Attach rebreather to my face while holding the tank in front of me, and down I go with a splash. I'll push off the boat bottom with one hand while holding the tank, then kick my legs...ugh, gotta kick them both together. Remember, you only got one now, girl.

Okay, kick together, down and down, yes, that's it. Wow, I'm moving so much faster than I thought I would. With just a few kicks, I'm almost at the bottom. The tiny goggles are holding to my face perfectly, so I think they will work okay. The nose pinching thing is still not comfortable, but I need something to keep water from flowing in when I do flips or barrel rolls or whatever a mermaid does.

Great, I'm at the bottom already, so let's try this out. I'll set the tank on the ocean floor, wedged in this coral reef so I can get to it easily. Take a deep breath, remove it from my mouth, and swim away. Oh my goodness, I'm a mermaid swimming underwater! Let's try this out, girl. I'll swim over to that group of fish near that seaweed and then come back. Don't want to go too far yet.

On the surface, Harry looks over the side of the boat, "I can see her golden fin moving around, but it is really hard to tell she's a mermaid from here. I better get a bit closer." He moves the boat a bit then looks down through the glass bottomed part, "Ah, there she is and you can definitely tell she is not a fish. Look at her move, almost like a natural. This is going much better than I thought. I think I can move my plans up a bit."

Hey there fishies, just a friendly mermaid here. I'm giggling like some airhead, but I better turn around and head back to the tank. The fish still scurried away from me, but they might not if I come up slower next time. Okay, here's the moment of truth. Gotta get my hair away from my face. Hold the rebreather over my mouth tightly, then breathe out to empty my mouth of water and my lungs of the bad air, and then...ah, cool fresh air in my lungs now. It worked!

Okay, don't smile or my face will break the seal on the rebreather like it did the first time I tried it. Let's take another couple of breaths and go check out this other group of fish and seaweed. When I'm not moving, my hair is all over the place. Just let go of the rebreather and away we go, swimming like a mermaid. I'll try and come up slower this time, like I'm being nonchalant. Are fish nonchalant? Hmmm, I wonder, maybe that's not the right word. Anyway, I'm slow and smooth and graceful just like a fish.

It worked! I'm slowly moving with them as they are ignoring me, basically. I can now swim slowly with the fish along the sandy, rocky bottom as we all search for food. I'm hungry, but not sure I'll be eating anything down here, but I can pretend like I am. Swim, swim, swim, I'm a fish, fish, fish.

Well, gotta go guys, need a refill. Turning around here and heading back to my tank. I can try and go faster now, and oh yeah, I'm fast, too. This is way more fun than I thought it would be. I'm already back at the tank. Seal it tight to my mouth, exhale out, and breathe in deep. I really can't believe this works like Harry planned, and I'm even more surprised I actually like it.

Uh oh, the tank shows I'm down to 1/4. I wonder if he filled it up all the way, or maybe I'm breathing in too much. Either way, let's try one more excursion, then I'll head up.

Let's see, where is Harry? Ah, I see his boat floating nearby, and it looks like he is looking at me through the window in the bottom of his boat. I'll wave at him, then hold up one finger with a swimming motion to follow. Hopefully, he will get what I mean.

Let's head closer to shore this time. Nice and slow, just like any other fish, except I got hair flowing behind me. Here's a pretty shell...and some seaweed or kelp...and another shell. Nice and slow, just like any other fish. Oh, hello there, lemon shark! You're just gonna swim right by me, huh? Don't even care, huh? I'm just another big fish to you, I guess. I thought I would be scared, but I can sense he is not into me. He wants something small and crunchy, and I'm neither of those.

I'll give you a wave, sharky, and then I gotta go. Back to the tank, here we go! Fast and furious...well, actually fast and graceful...hmmm, might need a new phrase for what I'm doing. Seal my mouth, in and out, and let's go up. Ugh, come on, tank...got it wedged in there pretty tight...there we go. Ugh, my hair is all over my face. Up and away hair!

I can see the boat coming closer, and the trap door looks open behind the window. Gotta watch out for the propellers though, so let's not get too close until he stops the noise. I thought it was loud in the boat, but it seems even louder down here. No wonder the fish are upset with us coming and going all the time along the surface. Ah, engine is off, so here we go. Aim for the opening...easy...ow, hit my head on the boat. Try again...ow...come on, girl...get your round head in the square hole.

"Well, how did it go?" Harry says while hoisting the tank into the boat.

Can't help but smiling now, "It was great...no lie. Everything worked perfectly, and I'll admit it was not as hard as I thought it would be." I don't want him to get a big head, but at the same time, I know he can see my facial expression. "But, I might need a hand up into the boat."

His hands grab my extended ones and he pulls me up in one quick motion into the boat. "Look at the size of the fish I caught," he says jokingly, "What a whopper!" He laughs as I reply in a teasing way, "Easy there, fisher man, ladies don't like their size being mentioned." We can't help but laugh as he closes the trap door.

"I'm not even gonna ask, because I can see it on your face," he says while heading to the cabin to start the motor again.

Yeah, I guess it is hard not to smile after that. "It was awkward at first, but once I got in the water, this," pointing down at my golden tail and fins, "Actually works like it should. It

felt...natural." I'm not sure that is the right word, but then what word would I use to describe me wearing a mermaid tail underwater?

"Ha, somehow I knew you would like it, despite your whining." He throws me a towel from one of the local hotels that went out of business years ago, "Start drying it off and it should let you out of it."

Catching the towel on a rocking boat isn't easy, Harry. "And that was not whining...constructive complaining, maybe...but to be fair, this has not been done before." No reply? I'll keep going, "And how could we have known it would literally be that easy to 'create' a 'mermaid'? I just cannot believe how smoothly this has gone for our first time trying it."

After another moment of silence, he states, "Well, the big moment will be tomorrow, when we try to fool the tourists."

Tomorrow? Yeah, that will be big. Oh, I can feel the tail loosening its grip on my legs, that will be the real test. I fooled some fish, maybe. Or more likely, they were just ignoring me as I was no threat. But, I did feel something in the water between us. Kinda like that feeling you get from a dog when you try and pet it, you know? You can just 'feel' if it accepts you or not.

Clank! Clank! There, that should do it. I'll set the hammer down by the tank and connect the outer ring to the chain that I just hammered into the reef, and presto! The tank is now attached to the bottom so it cannot float away, out of sight from the coming tourists' eyes, and I can quickly disconnect it at the end of the day.

Okay, let's check the levels, and I'm good. Full pressure and full tank, so Harry got that right. Now, I can move some weighted shells over to where I'm going to 'find them' later and move them to my 'hiding spot' with the tank. Wow, these are so much lighter to carry as I swim along the bottom of the ocean. I can just drop them here, and with a few flicks of my tail, I'm back where I started. Maybe I need to put them further apart?

Well, I'm looking up to the surface and I don't see the boat yet, so maybe I'll practice a bit more. I gotta look the part, and besides, it's fun to swim like a mermaid. I just arch my back and tighten my core and whoosh...away I go. Pump my tail, and I'm free to go, go go. This is incredible, just simply incredible. I'm like a...whoops, sounds like a boat coming.

Ah, there it is...show time! Let's go get some more air, and then I'll go 'hunt my shells'. I'll take my time heading back now, just at a slow, easy pace. I'm just a mermaid now, like any fish I see around me. I belong under the water. Slow and graceful, I move my tail up and down. I wish I could have pulled my hair back, as everytime I stop or turn, my hair seems to have a life of its own. Okay, I got me a full breath of air, and now let's get some shells.

"I'm telling you I saw something flashy over there," the heavy set woman in the big hat points to the water off to the left of the boat.

"Honey, there are lots of fish in the ocean," the older man says in a patronizing way.

She shakes her head, "No, no, no, you aren't listening to me. It had hair, like a...a...," but she cannot bring herself to finish the sentence.

"Mermaid?" her husband says with a snort.

Harry steps in now, "Oh, you never know around this part of the island," he says pointing towards the outcropping of the reef along the shore. "This is known as mermaid grotto, and it is said that mermaids used to come here searching for prized shells. I haven't seen any in...wait, did you see that golden glitter along the bottom?"

Now the rest of the passengers are interested to see what the captain might find noteworthy. "Is that a...I mean, it looks like a...," the woman stutters as a small girl says, "Ariel!" And at that point, everyone grabs their phones and starts recording. Some almost drop them in the water, while others try and look through the window in the floor of the boat without falling over themselves.

"Unbelievable," Harry says with excitement and unbelief, "Let me see if I can get us closer without scaring her off." With faces pressed against the window or bodies hanging half out of the boat, the tourists gasp and point and click as they get closer. "Are you sure it is a she?" the one boy says, "I don't see any...," but his mom clamps her hand over his mouth. "What is he...she...it doing?" she adds quickly.

Harry says softly as he idles the boat, "Legend has it that a large sea monster died nearby and turned into the most beautiful shells in the ocean. Mermaids would come here searching for those shells as the current brings them in and around the island." No one is even looking at him, but he can tell each is hanging on every word he says. He hits the throttle twice in succession, and adds, "And we want to be sure not to make too much noise...uh oh, she must have heard us."

Finally, the signal, I was wondering when I could hide. I was out of shells and just passing time. I'll swim quickly over to the tank and duck down behind this reef and lay along the bottom. I can keep the mouth piece in awhile as I lay here very still. Just lay here and be part of the ocean. Don't move and let the people in the boat slowly pull away. Yes, you cannot see me. I'm just part of the reef and ocean floor here. My golden fin blending in perfectly, and...and...there they go. One boat down and one more to go, I hope it is working as well as Harry wanted it.

"That one lady freaked," Harry says while piloting the boat on a slower route than usual, "She was waving her arms, and I thought she might jump in the water." He laughs while removing his cap and then putting it right back on, "They might not believe it was a mermaid they saw, but they were convinced that it was something epic."

There we go, I can feel the fin loosening some now with the extra towel. "That's awesome! I'm so glad they believed me...you. I mean, no one believes in mermaids, but then you see something that might be, and then you wonder, could it be?" I'm part of it, and I can't believe it. Maybe Disney's idea of magic isn't too far-fetched after all?!

"And, we are booked solid for tomorrow," he says with a big smile from ear to ear, "First time all season...all three tours, max capacity." He takes a quick look back at her, and sees her nodding her head and trying to peel herself out of the golden fin, so he continues, "Of course, the final tour won't see you, but that is part of the mystery of the mermaid grotto. We can't be too predictable, or they will figure we got something deceitful going on."

Well, we do have something deceitful going on, but we aren't doing anything bad. This is a show, and we are the entertainers. Oh wow, what a show we are putting on! I can't believe this is working, and how much fun I'm...wait, what did he say? "Excuse me, what was that?"

"Yeah, well," he says without making eye contact, "We'll need to do something about that. Some of them weren't sure you were female, so you need to wear something that makes your...uh, clam shells...more noticable."

I know what he means, but, "Clam shells? My clam shells aren't big enough for you?" I know my chest is small, but who says that in front of the woman who is sitting right here. Sure, I buy my swimsuit in the kids section, but that doesn't mean they are too small. Don't listen to him, ladies.

He can hear the loud slurping sound of her exiting the fin, "Nothing crazy big, just more noticable. You can think of them as ballast to help you stay neutrally buoyant. They could actually make it easier on you."

Oh, he is selling it now. No way I'm giving into this "sex selling" scheme. I'm me and I'm proud of me, whether I'm human or mermaid. I'll not change for anyone.

Ugh, did he put lead weights in these clam shells glued to my chest? I mean, they are lighter underwater, so they do add some ballast to keep me from floating up, but it is hard to stand up when I'm on the boat. Seriously, I laid on the floor of the boat face down after I got the fin and the clam shells on me. I could barely move out of the water without him picking me up like a piece of luggage, but under the water? Mmm, this really does feel great.

Swim left and then right...now a quick flip...well, I'll never admit it to him, but the clam shell knockers are helpful, even if they seem a little too big for my liking. And, the boat riders should not mistake me for a boy now. I got two big green clam halves stuck to my chest now, I think it is clear I'm a mermaid, not a mer-mister...a mer-butler...well, whatever a boy mermaid would be. Oh, I can hear the boat returning, time to put on a show.

"Mommy, it's a mermaid," the little girl says with a squeal.

"Sure, honey," she says while winking at her husband, "I can see her, too."

Under his breath, the husband says, "With knockers like that, it sure isn't a dolphin."

Harry grips the wheel with a smirk, "Hang on, everyone. I'll try to turn us back a bit closer. She might get spooked and go into hiding. She has a cave nearby that she will retreat into if we spook her."

As the boat turns slowly, another man says, "I don't see any bubbles coming up from the scuba gear..."

The woman with him adds, "Maybe she holds her breath for a really long time?"

The teenage boy notes, "I don't see any scuba gear at all."

The man shakes his head, "Nobody could hold their breath that long, right?"

Harry smiles bigger now with his back to them, enjoying the "magic" of his mermaid. He slows the boat and then revs the engine twice in rapid succession. As if on cue, the little girl squeals, "Look, she just disappeared...maybe she went back to her home."

The parents look sideways at each other, unsure of how to explain what is happening, "That's right, dear. Even mermaids need a nap, just like you." The little girl replies with a yawn and a mumbles, "I don't need no nap."

Deep under the water, the mermaid takes a break, humming a tune to herself. This may be the worst paying job I've ever had, but it has to be the most unique and fun. Who knew that swimming like a mermaid could be so fun? I'll admit though: I'm tired. I'm glad this was the last tour for me today. I'm ready to get all this off me so I can really relax. I never paid much attention to the days of the week, until I became a mermaid. My two days off a week are nice, oh, here comes the boat.

Alright, let's unhook the tank and push my colorful shells out of sight, and then I'll head up. Bye, Tuttle, my favorite sea turtle friend, swimming nearby. And there's Nomel the Lemon shark looking for lunch. This job even has great co-workers. Giggle.

Back at the boat, Harry picks Abby up and lays her facedown on the floor of the boat, "Nice job today. The waving at the sea turtle got some real laughs."

Unable to roll over, I'll just keep staring at the blue artificial carpet, "That's Tuttle, my turtle co-worker. He seems to be coming closer each time I see him. I figure he's like that guy who wanders into your cube at work to make small talk." Oops, maybe I shouldn't have mentioned my underwater office fantasy.

Harry laughs at that while closing up the hatch, "Co-worker? All this ocean water must be soaking into your...hey, what's he doing so close?"

"Who?" I can't see anything but the carpet a few inches from my face, but that does sound like another boat nearby.

"Pakel," he says with distaste, "He's coming this way. I think he wants to talk. Just don't move and don't react. I'll get rid of him."

Good thing you don't want me to sing and dance. I'm frowning but you can't see it. I can barely move until you help me get this stuff off me.

"Ahoy there, Captain D," Abby recognizes the European accent of the other tour boat company, "Catch you a big one, there?"

"Shove it up your propeller, Pickle," Harry fires back, "What do you want?"

"In a hurry," Pakel questions, ignoring the vulgar nickname, "You seem to have caught...what is that? A mermaid?" He says the last with fake surprise and real sarcasm.

"Ha, like there is such a thing," Harry responds as he puts one foot up on the edge of the boat, "This is just a sinker I use for the tourists."

I can feel eyes on me now. I guess Harry doesn't want anyone to know I'm a real person doing this. Which is okay with me, as I don't think I want anyone to know either. How could I explain this to anyone, you know? Ow, did Harry just kick me?

"See? Just a skin colored scuba suit over a mannequin that I filled with lead weights," Harry says after kicking Abby softly, then patting his hand on her butt sticking up in the air. "Pretty convincing, huh?"

Pakel responds while looking from his boat, "Da, she looks real from distance, must be why you got so many customers these past few weeks, huh?"

Harry shrugs his shoulders as he pulls Abby's hair pack into a straight line down her back, "Well, you know like I say, the good float, the best swim." Harry steps to his cabin, "Speaking of swim, I gotta go, Pickle, so unless you got something worth saying, I'll catch you in my wake."

Harry speeds away as Pakel says only loud enough for his two-man crew to hear, "I got nothing to say, but I sure got something to do."

"Where are we?" Abby asks still facing the floor of the boat.

"We can't go back to the dock yet, as I'll bet old Pickle will follow. I'm taking my 'mermaid sinker' home for the day." Not sure I want him taking me home, but I sure don't want to be caught either, and what was that wink for? "Looks like she needs to be shined up before her next swim."

Ha ha, "Well, I could use more than a shine, and I'm ready for my day off tomorrow." I feel even more tired now than I did before. Probably the way it ended with Pakel and his intrusion on our operation.

Back at his house which sits among others that are almost in the water around toward the other side of the island, he says, "Alright, everybody is out to lunch, so let's get you inside." Using his boat sling, he gets Abby into and then swings her up and off the boat and onto a wagon he has on the small dock. "Just in case, don't move yet."

"Again, where would I go?" I can barely move with the fins and clams out of the water.

"Ah, ah, no talking, dead weight," he says with a chuckle.

Great, my boss is pushing me on a cart that smells of dead fish towards his house, which is quite nicer than I expected. It is two stories, with an open area straight through the first floor from the back to the front. I'll just bounce along with the old cart, until he pushes me through the door into his kitchen. Air condition? Wow, I can't believe he has it on while he is gone. Brrr, I'm cold now.

"Whew, nobody around, so let's get you undressed," he says loudly.

Ew, gross, "How many ladies have you said that to?!" I'll laugh that off as a joke, as I can notice the fin starting to loosen from being out of the salt water.

I must have dozed off on Harry's couch. This surf shop towel is actually quite comfortable as a blanket, and I think I'm finally dry from the day. I don't see Harry, so he must be off doing other things, which is okay by me. I just didn't realize, yawn, how sleepy I was.

I'm glad I brought my bag of clothes on the boat, so that I had something to wear once I got the fins and clams off me. Wow, look at that giant painting of a mermaid above his mantle. I wonder if someone local did that? The blonde hair floating free in the water, the deep green fin color, the modest but noticeable cleavage around the clamshells on her chest...that's a gorgeous mermaid painting. Well, I better see about getting home.

Let's stand up slowly, nice and easy. Huh, mermaid coasters on his coffee table...this guy is into mermaids more than I thought. Here's my flip flops, and I think I hear voices outside by the boats. The one might be Harry...I'll walk out and find out. Yawn. I might

need another nap on the beach before dinner tonight. Hmmm, not sure who he is talking to, but he is walking away now.

"Hey, Harry, can you give me a lift back home?"

Harry turns abruptly, but then realizes who is speaking. "Sure thing, just making sure Pickle isn't following us. Besides, it looked like you needed a nap, huh/"

"You aren't lying," try not to yawn again, "But I'm ready to get on with my weekend," hold the yawn in until he turns away.

"Let me grab a couple things from inside," he says while walking past her briskly, "See you on board."

yawn fine with me, she thinks sleepily, I need a weekend break more than I realized.

Huh, Harry is not on the boat this morning like usual. I'm looking around but don't see him with the other locals milling about. I'll just keep walking and get on the boat to wait. Ah, the weekend relaxing really helped me start fresh this Monday morning. As much as I enjoy this job, I do need a break.

The sound of my flip flops and the boats against the dock are a familiar sound now. And, I'll step onto the boat without falling over. "Harry?" Huh, not ducked down in the boathouse either. Well, I'll drop my gear and...oops, looks like I knocked off his clipboard.

That's interesting...he's got a invoice from Pickle here and a check for \$15,000?! I thought Harry hated that guy, and he is paying him for "harpooning services"? None of this makes any sense...ow, who shantched the clipboard...

"Oh, Harry, didn't see you there." Sheesh, what a sour look on his face. He must have woken up on the wrong side of the boat this morning.

"Yeah, had important stuff to do," he says while shaking the clipboard, "Personal not public stuff." I hold up my hands in mock surrender, "Sorry, just knocked it off when I dropped my..." He shoulders past me and mumbles, "Yeah, yeah, fine."

Getting dressed is not an issue, as it has become fairly easy now. In fact, I just lay here like a limp fish and let him put me in the water when I'm done. It is just easier than trying

to drag myself over to the chute. So far, he has not tried to feel me up, so I can't complain to human resources. Of course, I don't look much like a human at the moment, and we are a two-person business. Giggle.

Ah, back in my habitat, swimming free under the water. Tank secured. Shells laid out. I don't see Tuttle yet, but that is no surprise. It is early for him. Swim, swim, swim. And if I turn my head slightly as I stop, my hair stays out of my face. This is the life!

Vroom...vroom. That's the signal. Time to disappear for the day, as the last boat pulls away. Seems strange, but today, he wanted to do a show for all three tours. We've not done that before, and he didn't explain why. Oh well, he's the boss. I'll just lay here and wait for him to return.

Huh, I think I see something under the water, but it is not like a regular fish. It is black, with bubbles coming up from it. Oh wow, someone is scuba diving out here. I better keep laying low until they swim away. Just keep still and blend in with the floor of the ocean.

Yikes, he is going to swim almost right above me. Black wetsuit with his arms and legs exposed. His skin tone is one of the locals, and he is obviously in pretty good shape. He's got the professional mask and gear, so this is someone who knows his...wait, is that a harpoon gun in his hands? And that tattoo, only one person I know has that on their forearm: Pakel.

The invoice...on the boat...what did Harry do? Frantic, I let out a squeak, which I quickly stifle as I accidentally knock some shells over. Pickle has not swam too far past when he turns around from my clumsiness. Uh oh, he is looking at me and raising his gun.

Fast! Gotta swim fast! I'll swim erratic and weave in and out, surely he can't hit me if I'm moving. My heart is pounding so fast. I see Harry's boat coming back, but I can't trust him, can I? My heart is about to beat out of my chest. Why would he do this to me? What did I do? I've done nothing to be hunted by the humans.

Checking my shoulder, he has anticipated my move and trying to cut me off. I can't go up to the surface, but I'm gonna need more air soon. How far could I swim? Think, think. Alright, let's double back, get a breath of air from the tank and head to the shore. I can leave the tank after a full breath, and I should hopefully be able to make it into shallow waters. The harpoon gun hopefully won't work out of water. I just gotta drag myself up on the shore and get out of this fin, which should be easy on the dry beach with the Sun

high overhead. That's right where I used to lay out, so I know there is a beach walk and people just up the path.

Hurry, hurry, just a quick breath. He's coming back this way. Push the bad out and take in the good. Yikes, he's getting close, time to turn on the speed. Fin don't fail me. Swim, swim, like my life...my life...what is that pain in my back? And, why is there an arrow sticking out of my...my chest. Hard to swim anymore, can't feel my fin...arms won't move. And what's that covering around me...a net? That human caught me...I don't want...to be...captured. Darkness.

Epilogue

Harry walks up the stairs of his villa to the sound of drilling. As he steps into his bedroom, he can see his latest catch laying on the bed. Abby the Mermaid lays on her back on the king size bed. Her stiff hair plays out onto the bed, as her arms are out to her side like she is swimming. Her golden tail glistens in the late afternoon light as direct sunlight hits her from the open balcony doors.

He throws his hat on the chair, as he glances at the two guys on ladders installing two rods from his ceiling that replace the ceiling fan that used to be above his bed. Harry walks over and lays his hand on the mermaid's fin, running his fingers along the shiny scales to rest on the tight stomach muscles showing. The glossy resin feels slightly warm, as if she is still alive, but he knows it is just the sun hitting her skin. He continues his fingers up to the extra-large, light green clamshells on her chest. He taps his finger nail against them, as the clicking sound is lost to the men working above him. He then rubs his fingers along the ridges of the clamshells, taking in each bump.

Her face is like that of an angel, as she looks so serene, so peaceful. She has a timeless expression, that cannot help but make any man fall in love with her. Harry would be the first to admit that it is not love, but lust. He shrugs his shoulders, not really caring which it is. He smiles as he caresses her cheek gently, feeling her firm skin that will remain that way forever.

"Uh, sir," a male voice says softly, "We are ready to mount her." Harry chuckles to himself. "Nobody is mounting her again, but you can hang her now." The men grin at each other as they pick her up with a grunt. Their rough hands handle her delicately, but if she were alive, she would be appalled at the number of times they had to touch her body parts. On her back are two metal attachments, which hook onto the rods coming from the ceiling. They connect her upper back then swing her up to attach her lower back. Just as planned, Abby seems to swim along the ceiling in perfect form.

Harry grins broadly. "Nice job, guys. I already sent money to your boss, so you can clear out." The workers take another look at the mermaid statue, then they grab their ladders and tools and leave without saying much. Harry waits until they are gone to lay on his back on his bed.

He takes a moment to make sure she is centered perfectly over him. He sits up and removes his shoes. He walks into the bathroom and pulls a spray bottle and rag from under the sink cabinet. He comes back into his bedroom and stands up on the bed. His face is right next to hers as he sprays and wipes her waist with a slight squeak. He tenderly kisses her cheek as he sprays her upper arm and wipes it with another squeak. He switches to the other side and gently kisses her belly button while he wipes down her mermaid hip. He takes his time, enjoying the touch of his lips to her body, as well as the sound and feeling of wiping her down. He hops down from the bed to return the cleaning supplies to the bathroom.

Back on the bed, he stares up at his new ceiling decoration. He takes in her perfect curves, her graceful pose, her shiny skin and tail. He stares into the eyes that seem to unlock the soul, and he sees exactly what he saw those many weeks ago when he first met her. She has a mermaid soul within her human body, and he has sealed it within her perfect, natural form forever. Everytime he looks up, he will feel a sense of power and peace, knowing a mermaid is constantly looking over him.