

## CHAPTER 1

The instant I tell you I am a mermaid, you will jump to many conclusions and all of them will be wrong. I prefer facts to fantasy, so I'm going to set you straight right away. You may be disappointed but I don't care. You can imagine whatever you like, but that doesn't make it true. And going by my own experience, relying on your imagination to get you through the day is like bringing a wet noodle to a bloody battlefield: it can't protect you and you just end up looking silly.

So first things first. A mermaid's DNA—my DNA—is 98.65 percent identical to that of *homo sapiens* and chimpanzees. The remaining 1.35 percent requires further genetic research, but we believe it is a combination of dolphin, octopus, and orca whale. Yes, these three sea-beings are very different from me and from one another. No, that doesn't make me a freak. And by the way, they are the most intelligent sea-beings on Earth, apart from mermaids. So draw your own conclusion.

Second, I do not have a fish tail or a fin, nor was I born with either. That probably shocks you. You already have a picture of me in your head: a sexy siren with a shimmery green fin that resembles a woman's undulating hips at the top and a forked fish tail at the bottom. Why people find this sexy, I'll never know. But I don't have one, and even if you plunge me into a bathtub filled to the brim, I won't grow one. Not happening. And anybody who still believes that deserves to be...no, never mind that now. This will cheer you up: I do have vestigial gill slits integrated with the mastoid bones right behind each ear. This means I can remain under water far longer than you can, but not indefinitely. It's not a superpower, it's just a genetic fact.

And oh, mermaids are hairless. That's right: no long, sexy, golden tresses cascading down our backs unless we're faking it with wigs. We have no body hair. Instead, the outermost layer of our derma is protected by a micro-thin coating called *shlemma*. You can't see it, but if you were to touch me—and that's purely rhetorical—you'd describe my skin as just slightly slippery, almost greasy. I am *not* actually greasy, but that's probably how it would feel to you.

I should make something very clear. If you were to meet me at the gym, a bar, or your favorite bookstore, you would never know I am a mermaid and not a *homo sapien*.

You wouldn't see my gills. And you would not be invited to touch my skin. I would be wearing a wig (not long and blonde, or red, as I'm not going to cater to your stereotype), or perhaps a head wrap, or a hat, or some combination that will not raise questions. And another thing: You're undoubtedly picturing me, and all mermaids, as milky white. But you should know that mermaids' complexions vary widely, from bright white to deep brown, depending on which sea kingdom their ancestors lived in, millennia ago. You would probably think I'm Mediterranean, as my skin is a shade people call deep olive. And that would be the first correct conclusion you'd draw about me, since in fact my ancestors did occupy a large kingdom many leagues beneath the Mediterranean Sea. My ancestors, I've been told, traded with the Phoenicians and had extensive business interests from Gibraltar to the Levant. The history is complicated, and I'm not going into it now. There's no point.

And now I'll tell you something that might make you begin to hate me, just a little. But as I said before, I really don't care. I'm not looking for your admiration or approval, and I'm certainly not aiming to feed your fantasies about mermaids or give you any reason whatsoever to shared fevered illustrations with your best friend. Selkies: they are not real. They were never real. There is no such thing as a seal that transforms into a human, or vice versa, for that matter. If you believe selkies are real, that says more about you than it does about me, and it's not flattering. I only bring this up because so many of you seem to conflate species or make ridiculous assumptions about one thing being related to another, as if a house fly were close kin with an elephant.

If I were prone to getting sidetracked, which I am not—and anyway, this is not the time or the place—I could rant at length about the embarrassingly far-fetched origin stories feeding your belief in mythical creatures. And I would press you as to why, especially, creatures that are part-human, part sea-being, hold such fascination for you. I would ask why this titillates you. I would ask why there is such a powerful, persistent desire to *fetishize* mermaids—to invent histories and personalities and belief systems for them that have no connection to reality. I would ask, above all, why you so desperately wish for non-existent creatures to be real, when real creatures are in dire straits and in need of help right now.

Because the other fact you need to know, which is about as far from shimmery green scales and songstresses of the sea as you can get, is that my species, mermaids, has been hunted in one form or another to the brink of extinction. I've been referring to "our" history and "our" bodies, but that's just force of habit. The plural helps me feel I am not alone. But the truth—the fact I really want to impress upon you—is that *I* am the last mermaid.

And believe me when I tell you, learning the truth of *that*, really taking it in and coming to grips with it, has not been easy.