

Cry of the Sea by D. G . Driver (Excerpt – Chapter Three)

They must be surfers, was all I could think as I ran toward the three squirming bodies. Who else would be in the water this early in the morning? But even for surfers, this was pretty early. They'd have to have been surfing in the dark. That didn't make any sense. Were they crazy? I knew some surfers at school, and they were definitely nuts sometimes, but surfing before the sun rose seemed extreme even for them.

Well, crazy or not, they didn't deserve to be caught in an oil slick. I crashed down to my knees beside the bodies and dropped my gear. I started to reach out my hand to tap them and see if they were all right without even stopping to get a good look at them. But before I touched any of them, my arm recoiled back to my side.

"Dad!" I screamed. "Oh my God! Dad!"

My dad rushed up behind me. "Are they alive?" he asked, trying to catch his breath.

"I... I..."

Words didn't come. I couldn't formulate a thought. I was too startled. These three figures lying in the sand in front of me weren't surfers at all.

They weren't even people.

From their facial features and upper torsos, they looked kind of like women, but all three of them had silver-colored skin. They were bald, with strange ridges marking their skulls. None of them seemed to have ears, only holes in the sides of their heads. No nose was visible, not even a bone or nostrils filled that space between their eyes and mouths. Although their mouths seemed to be moving, they were actually breathing through what looked like gills in their necks.

And if that wasn't weird enough, instead of legs, their upper torsos stretched out into long, scale-covered, silver fishtails. If I had to say what these things stranded in front of me, splattered with oil, appeared to be, I'd say mermaids. And no, they didn't look like they'd start singing songs or granting me wishes. They looked a little bit scary—but fragile too. Most of all, they looked like they were going to die, and no handsome prince was there to kiss them and keep them from turning into sea foam.

"June," my dad whispered. "Do you think they're real?"

"Yes," I whispered back. "Strange but very real."

"You don't think they're costumes?" he suggested. "Maybe some costume party on a yacht last night—they fell off."

Sometimes my dad's brain worked even more off-kilter than mine. I shook my head. "Those are not costumes, Dad."

Those beings lying there in the sand were not wearing anything that was cut or stitched together. What I saw wasn't material. It wasn't a lycra suit like on *Catwoman*, nor was it some kind of make-up like that chick from *X-Men*. Make-up would've been washed away.

What I saw was real skin. Or some kind of skin, if skin could be silver. And those were real scales, not some kind of pointy sequins. I'd been around enough fish to know the difference. Besides, if these were a couple drunk, rich women in costumes, they'd be dead already. I knew these creatures weren't dead, because the one closest to me suddenly opened its eyes and focused them right at me. They were huge and midnight blue, almost like eyes from a Japanese Anime character but more oval in shape. The color was so deep, lacking any light, probably like the world the creature knew. In those eyes I saw such intense pain and desperation. The creature implored me with those eyes to do something to help. The mermaid raised its webbed hands to its throat. The other mermaids started doing the same action.

"I don't think they can breathe," I said. "They're suffocating."

My dad and I had been kneeling there in the sand, mesmerized by the creatures for far too long. I forced myself to my feet and sprang into action. Reaching into my pack, I pulled out a box of alcohol wipes. I used them to wipe the oil away from the mermaids' gills and faces. The mermaids

cringed at the sting of the alcohol. While I attended to the mermaids, my dad got on the cell phone.

"Yeah," he said to someone on the other end. "It's Peter Sawfeather. We've got an emergency... Oil spill... How fast can you get the center ready? We've got a number of animals here, but we need to bring in three, um, fish, right away... We can't wait... Dolphin size... Saltwater... Give us twenty minutes. Maybe less." He closed his phone and came back to me. By now the sun was fully above the horizon. The Coast Guard and Affron specialists should be arriving any moment to take over.

"We've got to get them out of here before Affron gets here," Dad told me as if I didn't know that already. "They won't be safe."

I chose not to take a moment to say, "Duh," even though I was thinking it. Instead, I slipped my arms under the cold, slimy body of the first mermaid. He didn't lean over and grab the tail. Instead, he was rummaging through his pack. "Dad," I said impatiently, "help me carry them."

"Wait," my dad said. "One second." He pulled out the video camera he'd stashed in there when he ran over to join me and aimed the lens at the three mermaids. "Hold that one up a little bit more, June," he ordered. "Let me get a good shot of her."

"Dad, we don't have time for this," I said. He didn't listen. He gestured for me to hold the mermaid up even a little straighter. "This might be hurting her." He put a 'stop' hand up. I guess I had her where he wanted. "Dad, am I in this shot?" I asked. "Please say no."

With the mermaid dying in my arms, I knew it was awful to think about how ugly I was at the moment. I mean, my hair wasn't brushed, and I didn't have a stitch of make-up on. A part of me realized that I shouldn't care about such things. I should only care about doing what was right—saving the mermaids and recording their plight for the world to discover. This was an unbelievable find that I could barely wrap my head around, and yet I knew it was more important than my stupid vanity. That was the thinking of the responsible person my parents raised, who understood the enormity of what was happening, what I was holding in my arms. The rest of me, however, was still a teenage girl with a few basic needs. One necessity was being given some kind of warning that

I was going to be filmed, so I would not be completely hideous looking. Who knew where my dad might choose to send this footage? I didn't even have a free hand at the moment to tuck my stray hairs back up under my cap.

Dad put up a 'shush' finger in front of his mouth and then started narrating into the microphone: "We've found an amazing discovery at Grayland Beach in Washington today. What you are seeing are three sea creatures that appear to have human features such as arms, a torso, and a head. Based on these features being matched with fish tails, one might stipulate that these are the mermaids of legend. They have found their way to this beach because of leaking oil from an Affron Oil vessel. The mermaids have mere moments to live unless we can get them to a tank of water and get the oil cleared away from their gills." He leaned close to me to get a good shot of the gills on the mermaids' necks.

"Dad," I said urgently. "Stop taping. We don't have time. They're dying." As he focused tightly on the face and neck of the mermaid in my arms, guess who else got a close-up on camera?

"Dad!" I shouted for two reasons. Do-gooder and teenage girl unite in protest!

My dad snapped up. "You're right," he said, backing up and turning off the camera. "I got carried away." He tucked the camera inside the bag on his shoulder and helped me lift the first mermaid.

Her skin had a spongy quality similar to the skin of a dolphin or seal, and yet it wasn't as thick as a sea mammal and not nearly as heavy. Some of the scales bent backwards and cut at my hands. I guessed the scales protected her like armor. As we carried her to the truck, I saw the mermaid's skin color darken. Her eyes fluttered, and her gills worked frantically. She had to get back into water—fast.

We put her down softly in the bed of the truck and covered her with some blankets. As quickly as I could, I ran back to the other two mermaids. What I saw when I got to them caused me to crumble to my knees and start to cry. I know I'm not supposed to cry; it makes my dad crazy when I do it. I just couldn't help it right then. When I looked at the mermaids in that early morning sun, the sadness took over so fast that the tears and sobs came out before I could control myself. Their gills had closed to slits and their strange fingers no longer clawed at their necks. The bodies lay completely still.

My dad caught up with me. "What's the matter?" he asked. I opened my arms and gestured to them. "Can't you see?" I said. "They're dead. We weren't fast enough. Look at them."

"Come on, girl," Dad said. He wrapped his arms around me and helped me stand up. "I know it's terrible. It is, really. Just hold it together a little while longer. We still need to get them off this beach."

My first impulse was to wriggle away from him, shocked by his words. I could feel my forehead creasing with the distrust filling my brain. Did my dad, always the warrior of creatures that had no voice, just tell me that these mermaid bodies needed to be taken somewhere?

"Why?" I seethed at him. "What are you going to do with them?"

"Calm down, June," he said. "Don't you know me better than that? I don't mean the bodies any harm. But I *do* need to keep them away from Affron. What do you think they would they do if they knew there were creatures like this in our waters?"

I felt stupid. Of course my dad wasn't thinking of diabolical plots to chop up the mermaids and study them for science. He'd never do that. He wouldn't even chop up already dead meat from the grocery store to eat for dinner. On the other hand, Affron scientists would have no qualms about exploiting the poor creatures if they knew about them. They'd hunt them down. Find their homes. Capture every last one of them. Not to mention just the testing and prodding they might do on these two cadavers.

"Sorry, Dad. I'm just feeling overwhelmed, you know."

"I understand," my dad said. "Now hurry. We still have a chance of saving the one in the truck. So, come on and help. Fast." He hefted a mermaid out of the sand and practically ran with it back to the truck.

I tried to be helpful by using all my strength and picking up the remaining mermaid by myself, only I quickly found out that was impossible. Although the mermaid appeared as thin and as slight as a supermodel, she must have weighed close to one hundred fifty pounds. With that being at least thirty pounds more than my own weight, all I could do was lift her up behind me and drag her over my shoulders by her arms. Dad came back after unloading the other body onto the truck

and met me only a few yards from where I'd started. He took her upper body off my shoulders and helped me carry the mermaid the rest of the way. We put the two dead mermaids in the truck bed next to the barely surviving one.

"I hope she doesn't get creeped out by this," I said.

"Like she isn't creeped out already?" my dad pointed out. "C'mon."

We got into the truck and sped off. As we drove away from the beach, we passed four white SUVs with the Affron Oil logo painted on the sides heading the opposite direction. I don't know why I ever doubt my dad. When it comes to this business, he knows his stuff. We couldn't have stayed a breath longer without our mermaids being discovered.

No more than five minutes later Dad veered off the highway and pulled the truck into the nearly empty parking lot of the Aberdeen Sea Mammal Rescue Center, a large warehouse-looking place tucked between a pine forest and shore cliff. Dad had driven like the truck was on fire, and the center was only a few miles down the road from Grayland Beach. I jumped out of the truck before it had completely stopped and ran up to the door. At the same moment, a young man stepped out of a beat-up, used Civic and approached the door.

"You Sawfeather?" he asked me.

"Yes," I said. "I'm June. And that's Peter, my dad." I pointed back at the truck where my dad was still turning off the ignition.

The guy stood there, fumbling with the keys to the front door for an interminable amount of time. Did he even know which key opened the door? He didn't look much older than me, and the sight of this blond, shaggy-headed kid in his sweatshirt and jeans didn't impress me. Where were the marine biologists who were supposed to meet us? What good was this guy going to do me? He had to be too young to be of any real use.

"Excuse me," I said. "Do you actually work here?"

"Yeah," he said, not a drop of self-consciousness in his voice. "I'm an intern here. Name's Carter Crowe. I just got a call to come in for an emergency. You it?"

He finally got the door open.

“Well, not me personally,” I said. “But we do have an *extreme* emergency in the truck and we need to get it into water fast. Is anyone else coming? Like someone who can actually help?”

Carter smiled at me. Straight, clean teeth. His eyes were bright. He’d had his caffeine on the way over, and it was working. I have to admit, his was the most dazzling smile I’ve ever seen. It made me slightly dizzy.

“No worries,” he assured me. “I can help.”

I can’t say why, but all of a sudden I was absolutely sure that he could.

He flipped on the lights to the center, revealing a neat little room with a sign attached to the front of the information desk that denoted the space Visitor’s Center.

I’d been to the Sea Mammal Rescue Center before, on a field trip in grade school and for a rescue I’d done with my dad after a construction crew left so much litter when building a new beachfront condo that it was killing the animals that relied on the water there. This place was a non-profit organization with some small aquariums and a tide pool in the front lobby. Tourists paid admission to see the tiny reef sharks and hold sea slugs in their hands. Little kids tortured sea stars, and everyone marveled at the jellyfish tank.

What the average person and school group didn’t realize was that behind the double doors on the far side of the room was a warehouse facility. I could remember from the time I came a few years back being amazed at how much stuff was on the other side of those doors. And I felt so special being let in on the big secret of it all. The room itself was massive, and at the far end of it were two tanks large enough for dolphins to swim in tight circles, and they were set up side-by-side, filling the entire length of the wall, precisely for emergencies like oil spills or fishing disasters. Porpoises getting caught in tuna nets, otters stuck in plastic 6-pack soda rings, orcas maimed but not killed by harpoons. Along the right wall were sturdy shelves lined with more aquariums of varying sizes and some cages for rescued sea birds. Usually the pelicans and seagulls were sick from eating poisoned fish, and sometimes they had hooks stuck in their beaks. In the center of the room were some long, metal examination tables. Many cabinets, a sink, and all the tools of the trade cluttered the left side of the room, along with a door leading to a private office, and a hallway that led to an examination room and a locker room for cleaning up.

Carter flung open those double doors at that moment, giving me just a glimpse of the vast room of water and glass. I moved to follow him, eager to see if my memory of the room and reality were the same, but he stopped in the doorway and told me, "I'll set up a tank while you bring in the fish."

Stretching my neck to see past his shoulders, I asked, "Do you know how to do that?" "Do you know how to bring the fish in?" he questioned in return, slipping through the doors and allowing them to shut with a bang behind him.

The challenge spoken, I retreated to the parking lot to hold the door open for my dad who had already unloaded the surviving mermaid. He carried her gently toward the center and had just passed through the door when another car skidded into a parking spot. The noise caught my attention, and I hesitated before shutting the door behind me to get a better glimpse of who had just arrived. It was just an ordinary, unmarked compact car.

"Dad, someone's here," I said to my father, who was already halfway across the room.

"I need your help, June," he said. "Come on."

"But what if it's Affron? What if one of them followed us?"

"Then close the door and help me move this body out of sight."

I shut the door tight and ran across the room to open the double doors to the warehouse for my dad. He was panting under the weight of the mermaid.

"What about the other mermaids?" I said, suddenly realizing they were still out there in the truck bed. My heart started beating really hard. "They'll see them."

"They're under a blanket," Dad said.

We kept moving inside, heading for the large tank at the end where Carter was adjusting temperatures.

"Over here, you two," Carter called over his shoulder. "Is that it? I thought there were going to be three of them."

"Two of them died," I said.

"That's too bad," he said sincerely. He faced my dad to help lift the creature up into the tank. When he saw the mermaid, he jumped back.

“What the hell is that?”

Dad didn't answer. Instead, he asked, “Where's Dr. Schneider?” By his tone, it sounded like he wasn't thrilled with the presence of this teenage intern either.

“Right here.”

The new voice behind us startled me. I hadn't heard the door open over our talking. Dad and I both snapped our heads to see Dr. Schneider closing the double doors behind him. The thin, balding man grabbed a lab coat from a hook by the cluttered desk beside the doors and slipped it on over his wrinkled clothes. “I live a little farther away from here than your emergency allowed.”

“You should move,” I quipped.

I guess he didn't think that was funny, because Dr. Schneider ignored me as he headed across the floor toward my dad.

“So what have you brought for us, Peter?”

“I'm not sure,” Dad said. “But I think it's something no one has seen before.”

“It's a mermaid,” I said. Carter and Dr. Schneider looked at me like I had three heads. “Well, that's what she looks like. You got a better idea what she might be?”

Carter shook his head. “Well, whatever it is, we'll have to get the oil cleaned off of it before we can put it in the aquarium, or it won't do any good at all.” He directed my dad to place the mermaid on a large metal dissection table in the middle of the room.

“Okay. Do that,” I said. “But hurry. She's at the end as it is.”

The gasping mermaid was now almost a navy blue color, all the luster of her silver gone. Carter let out a long whistle at the sight of her once she was lying flat on the table and dad had backed away.

Dr. Schneider, who had been standing there sputtering as if the shock of seeing the mermaid had stolen his ability to speak, finally formulated some words. “Dear God! What have you found?”

I ignored all of their reactions. “I don't think we have time to clean her, Carter,” I said. “She's dying. Let's get her in the tank now.”

Dr. Schneider walked around the table slowly, giving the creature a long visual once-over. “No doubt about it,” he said. I wasn’t sure if he meant that there was no doubt that it was a mermaid or no doubt that it was dying.

“Sir?” Carter asked. “What do you suggest?”

“Yes, yes!” the scientist declared. “Into the tank. And fast!”

Carter moved fast to help my dad lift the mermaid and carry her to the aquarium. All the cockiness he displayed when we first got there evaporated with the task of handling this unusual creature. Now he was all business. He climbed the stepladder and pushed back the screen lid to the aquarium. Then he helped my dad and me guide the body up and over the edge. Gently, he let the mermaid topple from his hands and drift into the cold, salty water of the tank. He closed the top and joined us back on the cement floor of the warehouse.

All of us watched the mermaid as she sank lifelessly to the bottom of the aquarium. No one spoke. No one breathed. We waited patiently, each of us hoping the mermaid’s color would return and that she would open her eyes.