

# *LOVERS UNDERWATER*



*by Chrys Romeo*

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*BY*

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## *A Dream of Water*

The phone rang.

But when I answered, there was just an odd silence on the line. At first, I thought it was her. I thought she hadn't made up her mind yet and was hesitating, unsure what to say.

I was far from the truth: it wasn't her. The phone went off.

And then it rang again.

“Hello there!” I said.

“You leave Seloren alone!”

It was a man's voice, heavy and coarse, hidden in something that sounded like traffic noise.

“What?”

“You do as I said!”

“Who the hell are you?”

“You stay away from her!”

The phone went off again. I just stared at the screen, clueless. The number had been hidden as an anonymous call.

I had been waiting for her the entire day to tell me if she wanted to get away on a vacation and possibly retrieve some of her lost memories of us two, before the radiation had scattered them into foggy oblivion. I had hoped she would decide to say yes and come with me on a trip. I would have thought her lost memory was the only obstacle standing between us.

I had no idea there were people on a mission to keep us apart.

Who could have been? I paced back and forth across the room. An ex-boyfriend maybe? The voice had sounded too demanding, professional, official, cold and precise,

delivering an order from a hidden authority. It didn't bear any passionate inflections. It had been calculated and almost obliterating any imaginary protest from the start, as if there was no option whatsoever.

There was only one question on my mind: **Why?**

I dialed her number, but there was no answer, so I grabbed my jacket and rushed out the door.

I knew I had to get to her, just to make sure she was okay. Somehow, that warning phone call had made me worry for her. Something wasn't right. I had promised myself I wouldn't reach out to her until she was ready to give me an answer, but I couldn't keep my distance when things were turning shady and unsettling.

I jumped on the motorbike and started the engine. It was already evening and the light was fading out into dark blue across the sky. The streetlights spread along the roads, shiny little stars lighting the way as I increased my speed, swinging past cars from left to right. At some point, I noticed in the rear view mirror the blinding headlights of a Jeep, keeping track of my bike as I was changing lanes. I left the downtown avenues, turning on smaller darker streets to get to Seloren's place. The Jeep paused around a corner, turning off its headlights. I was sure someone would still watch me in the dark. I didn't care if it was the man on the phone. I was more concerned about her.

I stopped in front of her building. The lights were off. Her windows were closed and dark. Nothing moved.

And then, suddenly, my phone rang. I took it out of my pocket: it was her. Seeing her name on the screen was an unexpected relief.

“Hi! Are you okay?” I said in one breath.

“Yeah.”

Her voice was hesitant and I could hardly distinguish the words. There was intense noise around her. It was an engine. A big one.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“I'm sorry, Ky... I can't go with you on that trip.”

“Why not? Are you saying you don't want to – or can't?”

“I want to. But I can't... not right now, anyway.”

I listened to the noise that almost covered her words and I suddenly understood she was leaving.

“Is that a plane? Are you at the airport?”

“Yes. I must go now.”

I didn't even blink.

“Wait for me! I'm coming with you!”

“You can't do that again, Ky. We're not teenagers anymore. You can't just drop everything and jump on a plane with me.”

“Watch me.”

She started to say something, but I didn't have time. I jumped on the bike and flashed by the Jeep, so it couldn't keep up with me anymore.

I arrived at the airport so enthusiastic for the sudden idea of accompanying her, even if I knew it meant I would have to adjust to many unpredictable situations ahead. It felt right, nevertheless. I knew I had to do it: I had to make sure she was going to be safe.

Seloren was standing by the check-in desk when I got there. She had a small travel bag and was glancing around absently, through her sunglasses. When her eyes met mine she smiled, slightly resigned to witness the irrevocable truth of my presence. She seemed lost and fragile in that crowded noisy place.

“I'm just in time to buy a last minute ticket”, I said and she shook her head.

“You're nuts...”

“Do you remember when I jumped into the truck for you?”

“I'll never forget it... among other things. ”

Her smile seemed to intensify, but the next second her eyes turned away, towards

the big hall full of people. I wondered if she remembered how she had felt about me, long ago... how we had defied war and danger, finding miraculous love undercover. However, I knew both of us had become different from our encounter years ago. And yet... was there anything left from what we had shared together? I looked at her, as if trying to guess what she was thinking... as if trying to see if time had irreversibly distanced us from each other. I could only see her eyelashes behind the sunglasses.

“What's with the shades?”

She shrugged, a bit tired.

“The light hurts my eyes, ever since that radiation. The neon in this room is too bright.”

“Maybe you'll feel better in time.”

“I don't know... I don't feel very well. I feel as if nothing is the same about me anymore... “

“So what are you doing, getting on a plane?”

“I have to go, I was asked to be somewhere. It's work related. I've got to find the source of that radiation leak, so I'm meeting some people in a lab. It's an international science meeting.”

I wondered if I could tell her about the phone call and the Jeep, but then I decided against it.

She already had enough on her mind.

We boarded the plane. As I had bought my ticket without a reservation, my seat was a few numbers away from hers. It was different from the past, when we were going up the mountains in a truck, in the middle of nowhere, but something reminded me of the absolute certainty we had felt. We had been more certain of our love than anything in the world... and yet, we had drifted far away from that moment... away from each other, somehow. She didn't even remember how she had fallen in love with me. And maybe she didn't even attempt to. It seemed to me she had already given up on us somehow.

But there I was, on the same plane with her. It had to be a good start.

I watched the fluffy clouds: we were flying above a sea of white cotton candy. It looked like an empire of snow, a castle in the sky. It seemed promising and I felt optimistic. I also felt sleepy. Seloren was reading some files, probably scientific data. I watched her fingers turn the pages and somehow I dozed off.

Suddenly, I was in a swimming pool area and the lights were out. There was someone in the water. The silhouette moved, and the water moved with her. The lights at the bottom of the swimming pool made her body glow. It was her. I was standing by in a bathrobe, just watching. She climbed the marble steps slowly and her body emerged from the water, her skin wet and her hair damp, dripping warmth. I noticed she wasn't wearing a bathing suit. She was actually stark naked. I couldn't take my eyes off her, as she advanced towards me. I was stunned, as I'd never seen her like that before: completely exposed and unflinching, totally aware of it, intentionally, irresistibly right in front of me. She didn't hesitate; she kept advancing until she stood so close that I could feel her breathing in my ear. I knew what she intended when her hands took the bathrobe off my shoulders, in a swift move. *Let's get back into the water*, she whispered. Her body kept glowing in the neon lights, beautifully hypnotizing through the vapors that enveloped the pool area like a mist. She looked vulnerable and determined at the same time as her arms went around my neck, and we were taking the steps together, sliding in the warm liquid. I felt a wave of heating emotion rise in my chest, as the water touched my skin.

“We have to get off”, I heard her voice loud and clear so I opened my eyes, startled.

I looked around perplexed: I was on the plane and Seloren was staring at me from behind her sunglasses, with the briefcase under her arm, leaning on the edge of my seat.

“You look confused... The plane has landed. We must get off.”

“Oh, right... Damn, it happened at the wrong moment.”

I yawned, still feeling the warm touch of her arms on my skin and the water surrounding me, as if the dream had been real. She watched me attentively and curiously.

“Why? What were you dreaming?”

I grinned.

“Something... nothing...”

“Yeah, something interesting for sure. Come on, tell me.”

I looked at her, evaluating if she could handle it.

“Umm... I don't think we have time now.”

“Well, if you want to be mysterious, I won't insist. You can tell me when we get to the hotel.”

“Great. I'm looking forward to it.”

I smiled. She pointed to my jacket.

“Don't forget your luggage. By the way, I wonder... won't you need pajamas tonight?”

I shrugged.

“Sometimes, I don't need any.”

She smiled.

“You never cease to surprise me.”

“You don't know half of it yet.”

It had been a long time since we had shared more intimate moments and I didn't see it happening anytime soon, so when we arrived at the hotel I let her choose a room for herself and I chose another single room for myself. I didn't even mention we could have stayed together. I didn't know if she could be comfortable taking that step and I wanted to give her space to understand how she felt about me - if she could ever discover that feeling again... or even a more liberating one... an unforgettable, undeniable one, forever.



“So, what's the schedule?” I asked her.

“For you, not much of a schedule, I'm afraid. You'll have to stay out of that lab where I'm going tomorrow morning. And I don't know how long I'll be there.”

“Okay, don't worry about me. I'll walk around the city. I'll tell you later if I discover anything interesting.”

She stopped in front of her room and turned to look at me. I could almost see her smile.

“Don't forget about that dream you promised to tell me.”

Then she added:

“I'm tired now. See you tomorrow. Good night.”

And she went inside.

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I woke up in the darkness as the phone rang again.

For a moment, I thought I was back home, but then I saw the shadows of the hotel room furniture. The screen kept illuminating the night table. I looked at it: anonymous call, hidden number. I wanted to go back to sleep, but I also wondered if it was the same person. I answered:

“What do you want?”

“I told you to stay away from her!”

It was the same voice.

“Who gave you my number?”

“ You didn't listen. I'm warning you, for the last time!”

“Is this a joke?”

The man coughed roughly.

“Does it look like that to you? We know you're in the hotel with her. We know you were on the plane with her. We're watching your every move. And you're not doing what we told you to do.”

I looked around.

“So, you've got surveillance cameras in here?”

“We've got them everywhere.”

“Who the hell are you anyway?”

“We know you were in the army. We know everything about you. Just stay away from her, or you'll regret it! Tomorrow morning you'll get back on the plane and go home.”

“You wish!”

I hung up and switched off the phone. I didn't care if they had cameras. I didn't care if they were listening to my phone. I cared about Seloren and nobody could intimidate me to remove myself from her life, just because “they” were watching us.

However, the threats seemed real. I didn't know what “they” were planning, but I was sure they wanted to separate me from Seloren, in order to isolate her, for some reason. It had to do with the radiation and the scientific investigation. I knew I had to stick around to find out what it was.

The first thing I did the next morning was go to Seloren's room.

When she answered the door she was already prepared to go out. She was wearing an office suit, high collar shirt and her hair was up in a ponytail. The metal frame narrow glasses and the briefcase gave her a professional, very scientific appearance. I took a step back, to let her pass by.

“I see you're ready to go to the meeting. You look sharp, teeth and nails...”

“Oh, it's just an impression. I'm trying to keep my cool because I'm nervous about the meeting and I'm terrified of making mistakes with that investigation.”

“I'm sure you'll do just fine. Let me come along. Have you had breakfast yet?”

She glanced at me. I could see the uncertainty in her eyes.

“I'm not sure I can eat anything before the meeting. I'm really nervous. There'll be scientists from all over the world and I'm supposed to tell them what I discovered, and convince them of it too.”

“You can tell me about it first, just to practice. Here, let's have some coffee.”

She sighed, letting some tension dissolve away from her back as she stretched out her arms and relaxed.

“Alright. One coffee.”

I went ahead and she came along with me to the hotel dining room. It seemed so easy sometimes to just be with her, as she didn't protest too much to my ideas. Instead, she welcomed whatever I said as a possibility. She agreed instinctively and she made it seem like the best thing she wanted at the moment. I almost remembered how right it felt long ago, when we were in tune with each other, in harmony each second, as if our energies naturally matched and uplifted each other along the way. I hoped she could feel it too. Yet I knew she would be too worried about the present to remember the past.

I took the coffee cups to the outside terrace. The air was cold, but the pale sunlight made it better. Looking out from the terrace, the new morning light seemed invigorating.

“So, what have you discovered?” I smiled, initiating conversation.

“It's about the radioactive rain. I don't know if I should tell you.”

“Why not? After the conference, people are going to find out sooner or later anyway.”

She looked down into the black coffee. She seemed absent and distant. Her silence was a sign of hesitation. I already knew that.

I offered to help:

“You'll have to begin your speech somehow. You can start by addressing the issue. Where does radiation come from?”

“There are some theories saying it comes from the sun. A few scientists believe it's

from solar explosions infiltrating the atmosphere, breaching through the layers and accumulating in the raindrops.”

“And you don't think it's plausible?”

She sipped some coffee, looking over the cup, into a distant dimension.

“I think it might be true, at some point in the planet's history, but not in this case. I see it differently and I've got proof of it. The radiation comes from inside, not from outside the atmosphere. There's a source on the ground level. It was toxic and it was there in the soil before it got into the rain.”

“How do you know?”

She looked at me, still calm and detached.

“I analyzed the data from two months prior to the rain. It had been there, but nobody saw it before the storm started. I've got it all written here, in my files.”

I looked at the briefcase she had been carrying around.

“Is this information available somewhere else too?”

“Yes. It was on my laptop, which I left at home because the system crashed. It must have been a computer virus or something. It happened right before I left.”

“And now it's only in your printed files.”

“I managed to save the information on a USB flash drive that I prepared for the conference.”

I suddenly saw the reason for the phone calls.

“Do you think someone would be interested to hide this information?”

“I don't know. Why would they do that?”

I thought about it.

“What if they're responsible for it? They wouldn't want it to be known.”

“How could someone be responsible for so much radiation? It would have to be an entire atomic factory.”

“Yes, exactly: what if it's a top secret building somewhere in the desert, making

experiments or preparing weapons? What if it malfunctioned? Or even worse, what if it was on purpose?"

She glanced at me in disbelief.

"Your imagination is wild. I find it hard to believe there could be some illegal experimental activity going on, with so much impact and no one to be accountable for it."

"But what if there is?"

She shrugged, somehow disinterested.

"I don't think I can find out who's doing it or where it comes from. I only need to discover how to reverse radiation effects. That's my task, actually. And until I do that, I'm not sure I can feel better."

She finished the coffee and stood up.

"I'm going to the conference."

Suddenly, she stopped, opened the briefcase, searched her suit pockets and started to look around, worried.

"What?" I asked, noticing she was distracted and anxious.

"My phone. I can't find it. Have you seen my phone, Ky?"

"I haven't, not this morning anyway. Maybe you left it in the room?"

We went together. After a few minutes, there was still no result and she was still worried.

"It's not there. It's not anywhere. I had it with me yesterday. I must have lost it somewhere... on the plane, in the airport... I don't know. My whole contact list is on it."

I found it suspicious that her phone had disappeared. I looked at my watch.

"What time is the conference starting?"

"Ten. But I should be there by nine thirty, to get the files in their computer for the video projector. I asked the hotel staff to call a taxi for me."

I followed her outside. There was a taxi waiting by the sidewalk.

She turned to me and said simply:

“I'll see you later.”

“I want to come with you.”

“You can't be there. Only diplomatic delegates and certified scientists can participate.”

“Tell them I'm your assistant.”

“My assistant is a girl.”

“They don't know that. Tell them a male assistant was sent with you this time: me.”

She shook her head, accepting somehow reluctantly.

“Fine. But it won't be enough just to tell them. You need some documents to prove it.”

While we were talking, we got inside the taxi. The driver started the car.

From the first moment it seemed unusual to me that he didn't even ask for a destination. I wondered if the car had been sent to pick Seloren up and take her directly to the conference.

I didn't have time to think about it. The taxi stopped on a small street and two masked, armed men got in. What followed was someone placed a bag on my head.

“Not one word, or you'll get a bullet as a reply.”

We weren't given any explanation and we didn't have any choice.

When I could finally look around I was in the backseat of the Taxi, inside a garage, hands tied up behind my back. Seloren was tied up too, in the front seat. The engine was running and there was a slight smell of gasoline. I felt a little dizziness and nausea building up, so I suspected carbon monoxide poisoning was about to happen. She stood still and silent, so I had to check her situation.

“Seloren, are you awake?”

“I am... for now.”

She seemed too shocked to say more.

I had to think quickly, before the fog that blurred my vision would increase the confusion in my head.

“Listen, they left us here to asphyxiate. We have to get out. Can you climb over the seat? Get over here. I have an army knife in my jacket.”

She moved and rolled over the seat. We were crammed together in the back of the taxi, trying to adjust to a position where her hands would get my pocket knife.

“Do you even think this is possible?” she asked, while twisting her tied wrists to get to my jacket, struggling with the zipper.

“I'm sure it is. You can do it.”

“I told you I'm just average. I'm not a hero. I can't save anyone, not even myself... I feel I'm getting sick and dizzy.”

“Just focus, Seloren. You're not average. Maybe you'd like to believe that, just so you can have an excuse to give up. But average people don't reach high levels of performance in anything because they don't search for it. You do. You are great at what you do and I'm sure you'll also find the cure for the radiation effects. You always get to the depth of things. You don't give up. You found the will to keep me in your life, which is more than average... you know what average people do? They don't know what they want, they don't go for it and they settle for whatever happens to them, without asking questions, without taking initiative to improve it, without even trying to understand their own life, without any hope of a dream coming true. You're not like that. You'll get that knife from my pocket.”

“Nice speech, but you've hidden the damn knife in the inside pocket and I'm getting dizzy in the process, hanging upside down in here.”

“You're special. You're actually brilliant, and that's why those people are after you.”

“Here come the compliments... Making me feel better about myself won't help me

reach your knife, you know.”

“I mean it. I'm not saying it just to make you believe. If anyone can get to the bottom of this global problem, it's you. And if anyone can get that knife, it's you. I wish I could help you see that. I know it's a little late to tell you, but I've been getting threatening phone calls recently. And yet it didn't matter, I still wanted to be with you because I believe in us.”

She didn't seem surprised.

“They told you to leave me alone, right?”

“You know about that?”

“I've been getting some unsettling phone calls too. The bastards said I shouldn't mess with you cause you'll bring me much trouble. They also asked me to forget about the conference. They demanded to deliver my USB flash drive to them.”

“And did you?”

“Of course not. It's in my shoe.”

I smiled, amused by the place she had chosen to hide the flash drive.

“Why didn't you say anything about it to me?”

“I wanted to keep you out of it.”

I was silent for a moment. I suddenly understood she had been under extreme pressure and yet had chosen to protect me somehow. That meant she still loved me, even if she wasn't aware of it.

“Have you reached the knife?”

“No. And I'm feeling weak.”

I was getting the same nauseating sensation from the subtle poisoning. I understood we could lose consciousness soon. I raised my feet and hit the car window with my boots. Once, twice, until the glass smashed to pieces. Air was starting to come inside.

“Got it!” I heard Seloren say and she handed me the knife.



I cut the cords around my wrists, then untied her hands too.

We got out of the car through the smashed window. Then we lifted the sliding door of the garage, enough to crawl outside. The street was empty. It was a residential area with high fences and silent houses.

I noticed Seloren had lost her glasses in the garage.

“Can you manage without glasses? Should we look for them?”

“I don't care. Let's just get out of here.”

“We can't go back to the hotel. They'll be waiting for us there.”

“So what do we do now? Go to the police?”

“And tell them what? That a taxi driver locked us in a garage? I've got a better idea: let's go to the mountain cabin that I booked for us before this trip. You'll have time to figure out how to make the information available to those scientists. And we'll breathe fresh air... I'm sure the radiation levels are low up there.”

I was convinced it would be the best thing for us, to get away together.

She didn't think about it too much. Any trace of resistance she had felt before had remained behind us, in the garage we escaped from. She shrugged, looking in the distance.

“Okay... nothing left to lose, I guess... we could go there instead.”

I smiled.

“This time, we'll get closer seats on the plane.”

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