

# Excerpt -- Jessaloup's Song

## SIX

ALMOST fifteen minutes later, my lungs bursting and my legs burning, I pulled up to the beach parking lot. I flung my bike on the ground, kicked off my shoes and sprinted barefoot along the path through the dunes. I saw people standing in a group down by the water line, scratching their heads, pointing. They were peering at a large dark object partially sticking up out of the water.

A very large object.

A large, immobile, torpedo-shaped object with scalloped, white-tipped flippers that, rocked by the waves, bobbed around a little on the surface...

I'd have recognized those flippers anywhere. My legs buckled under me. I landed on the sand with a hard plop.

For a moment I didn't know where I was.

I blinked. I was sitting on the sand, my legs sprawled out in front of me. Down the beach, the crowd of gaping bystanders hadn't noticed me. I didn't know if it was from the wind or the shock, but I felt tears drying on either side of my cheeks, tickling my earlobes. I scrambled to my feet. The old scar on my right leg pulling and throbbing, I started loping awkwardly down the beach, down to the water.

As I drew closer, I knew there was no mistake. It was Jessaloup, my best buddy. The awesomest, most athletic whale in our pod of humpbacks, or, as they prefer to call themselves, Sirens: The Singing Ones. Jessaloup, the whale I had never stopped thinking about, not a single day since I found myself back on dry land, three terribly long years ago. It was Jessaloup, and he was hurt, he was in trouble, he was dying...

"Hey, watch out there Miss — Where you goin'? Don't you go no closer!" A man in a baseball cap held out his arms to stop me from wading into the water. "It's dangerous!"

My anxiety turned to rage — fury at this man who knew nothing, nothing, nothing at all. I was so angry that I couldn't get any words out. I just elbowed him out of my way and splashed past him as if I hadn't heard him.

There he was — Jessaloup, lying flat in the surf. Waves crashed over his back, and with every surge, his flippers rocked up and down like two great inflatable pool toys. At least he was alive — a weak puff of spray came bubbling out of his blowholes every thirty seconds or so. The rest of him wasn't moving at all — his jaw, his pleated belly, were stuck in the sand; I saw that he was pinned to the bottom by the undertow. I waded over to his right side, reached out my hand, and touched him. His great eye, just below the water line, was closed.

"Jessaloup," I whispered.

The eye opened, and gazed at me.

"It's me, Isabel. I'm here."

The eye blinked. Then again.

"It's me, Jessaloup. Say something!"

I heard a faint click-rumble, somewhere deep inside.

He knew.

"Oh, Jessaloup, what are you doing here!" I groaned. "What were you thinking?"

## SEVEN

THERE must be a reason, I thought to myself wildly. Jessaloup would never accidentally beach himself. Jessaloup would never get himself into a fix like this... Was it because of me?

Had he missed me as much as I'd missed him?

I touched him — gently, I didn't want to put any more pressure on him. I stretched my arm up to stroke his head. The part I could reach felt dry. Too dry. I cupped my hands and started splashing seawater over him, taking care to avoid his blowholes.

I sensed a commotion behind me. I turned to look at the beach. The crowd was gesturing at me wildly. Then I saw that one of the desperately waving people was Jacob, and he was splashing through the surf toward me. In less than ten seconds he was at my elbow. Before I could explain, he tackled me, and, grabbing my arm in a viselike grip, hauled me back onto the beach. I fought back, but he was too strong for me.

"Stop!" I yelled, trying to kick at his legs. "Stop it, Jacob! Let me go!"

"What are you doing?" Jacob hissed. "Didn't you hear what Mom said? It's dangerous to get so close! That thing could roll over on top of you, it could kill you with a flip of its tail!"

"No! Get off me, you jerk! Let me go!"

Next thing I knew I was on my back on the sand looking up at him, gasping for breath. He had my wrists pinned above my head and was holding down my legs with his knee. We'd been rolling around in the sand, fighting like little kids.

Jacob backed off, sat back on his haunches and then got to his feet. "Cut it out, stupid. You're making a complete ass of yourself!"

"Who, me? I was just..." I sobbed. "You don't understand..." I gave up, helpless. I didn't even know where to begin explaining to him what he didn't understand.

The crowd had turned its back on the sea in order to stare at the two of us. Scrubbing at my tears, I struggled to my feet, suddenly horribly self-conscious. Stephanie and Jenny had their hands over their mouths, stifling giggles. I smiled sheepishly at them, slapping the sand off my shorts.

Just then a huge wave crashed way up onto the beach where we were standing; I tottered, nearly losing my footing again. The tide was coming in.

There was a shout.

"Hey — Look! What the...? Where'd he go?" someone was yelling. All heads swiveled back to the water. Out there, where a minute ago everyone had clearly seen the broad back of a massive whale, there was nothing but... sea. Waves. Horizon.

"Where did it go? It's gone!" people were yelling. "The whale's swum off!"

"Must have been that big wave just now," said the man who had tried to stop me from getting close. He lifted his baseball cap to scratch the bald spot on the top of his head. "That's what did it. Tide coming in.

Must have given it just enough of a cushion to let it swim away.”

“Where is it? Can you still see it anywhere?” squealed Stephanie, hanging on to Jacob’s shoulder.

Everyone was staring at the water, hoping to see a tail, a spout, somewhere out there.

Finally Jacob shrugged. “It’s gone. Too bad. Well, good for the whale, I say. Let’s hope it’s learned its lesson, not to come in so close again.”

My heart was beating so wildly in my chest that I was sure everyone could tell. I was about to explode. Except that no one was looking my way. No one was looking in the direction I was looking in. No one saw what I saw.

Out there, just beyond the crashing surf, there was something in the waves. Or, rather, someone. A boy. Just some kid out for a swim; nothing out of the ordinary. None of the people on the beach paid any attention.

Except for me. Because there was something very familiar about that dark head bobbing in the waves.

The crowd started to disperse. “Come on, Steph, Jenny,” said Jacob. “Let’s go. Nothing to see here anymore. You coming, Izza?” I shook my head.

“I’m sorry I was a little rough with you, just now,” my brother said. “I was only trying to protect you...”

“I know. It’s OK, don’t worry. You guys go on ahead. I think I’ll stay for a while. I feel like going for a swim,” I said as nonchalantly as I could.

“What, are you crazy? It’s not even July yet! The water’s too cold!” Jenny squealed.

“She doesn’t mind, do you, Izz?” Jacob said, kind of proudly. “My sister’s like those polar-bear club nut jobs. She’ll swim in any kind of weather. Although she’s not supposed to.”

“What do you mean, she’s not supposed to?” asked Jenny.

“My parents have this thing about Isabel going near the water,” Jacob explained. “They’re kind of paranoid about it.”

“But why?” said Jenny. “I mean, if she’s such a good swimmer?” Jacob shrugged. “Just some weird notion my parents have.”

“Isabel almost drowned once, when she went on a whale watch with her class,” Stephanie informed Jenny. “Before you moved here, Jen.”

“That explains it,” said Jen.

“Yeah,” said Jacob.

I had already wriggled out of my clothes, leaving them in a pile on the sand. “Don’t tell on me, all right?” I begged.

“Do I ever? See you at home then. Don’t be late, you’ll get me in trouble. You know Mom will kill me if she finds out.”

“I won’t say anything if you don’t,” I said.

“Deal.” My brother, Stephanie and Jenny started trudging back to the parking lot with the rest of the crowd.

I ran into the surf. The cold water snapped at my skin like a stack of rubber bands. In less than a minute I was within a few feet of the boy – the human boy — bobbing up and down in the waves.

“Jessaloup?” I whispered. “Is that you?”

