

A VERY SELKIE *Christmas*

A MISSING MAREN STORY



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by Melissa McTernan

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Daniel:

Daniel glanced at where his selkie girlfriend was sprawled out on his couch, eating ice cream from the carton and wearing nothing but his favorite sweatshirt. Most days he still couldn't believe it was true. He had known her since he was seven, but twenty-one years later and he still had to remind himself she was real.

Maren grinned at him. "So, you bring trees inside and hang sparkly things from the branches?" She cocked her head, admiring his work on the Christmas tree.

"Pretty much, yeah." He glanced at her dubious expression as he struggled to get the last of the lights wrapped around the upper branches.

Maren's spoon scraped the sides of the carton and she let out a soft groan as she finished off the last of the ice cream. "And then a jolly, fat elf breaks into your house and leaves presents for the children?"

"That's how the story goes." He emerged from behind the tree to find Maren staring at him.

"And everyone is fine with this?"

Daniel laughed, brushing the pine needles from his hair. "Yep." He plopped down beside her, and she immediately snuggled into his side. It was rare for them to be in the same room and not touch. Not since being reunited several months ago.

They had essentially been holed up in his parents' cottage in the dunes on the Cape ever since. Maren had chosen to stay with him for good this time instead of returning to the sea for another seven years, and it still felt like a dream. After all those years of missing her, she was finally beside him. But even still, every day when she donned her seal skin and dove into the bay for a swim, Daniel felt the familiar panic that maybe this time she wouldn't return.

She draped her legs over his lap and leaned her head on his shoulder. He traced the freckles on her perpetually bare feet. They were cool to the touch, and she wiggled them as his fingers ran over each toe.

“If your family is fine with trespassing elves, then I think they’ll be fine with me, right?”

He rested his chin on the top of her head, breathing in her sea-salted scent. “I’m sure they’ll love you.”

Maren let out a soft purring sound and melted deeper into his side. The warm weight of her next to him was almost comforting enough to help him forget that his family would be here in less than two days. Almost, but not quite.

In two short days Daniel’s parents, sister, and brand new brother-in-law would walk through that door and meet his selkie girlfriend. His girlfriend who had lived the majority of her life in the ocean, coming to land only for short visits, the majority of which brought him nothing but pain when they were over. And this girlfriend wanted to simply tell them all this.

“I like the tree,” she murmured. “It’s strange but nice.”

Daniel glanced around the small living room. The tree stood in one corner and he had wrapped garland around the doorway, but that was the extent of the holiday decor. There was no mantle to hang stockings and no big dining room table for any fancy centerpieces. What had he been thinking of, inviting everyone here?

He was in the process of slowly buying this house from his parents and had broken the lease on his Boston apartment. He’d even managed to find a job at the school in town. Maren had sacrificed enough for him, he would never ask her to live away from the water.

She had assured him she could take a trip inland to visit his family, but he had seen the way her eyes had cut toward the sea as she said it. It had only been a few months since she decided to stay. Maybe he didn’t want to push her any farther than necessary. Maybe he was still terrified she would leave. She had done it before.

She reached up and ruffled his hair. “You’re worried.”

“A little. It’s awfully small in here.”

Maren toured the room with her gaze. The small living room with its wall of windows overlooking the bay, the attached kitchen with the tiny worn table in the center, and the hall that led to the only two bedrooms. Thankfully, Molly and Christopher had already decided to stay in a nearby inn. But Christmas dinner was going to be tight.

“I think it’s cozy.”

“Cozy when it’s just us.” Daniel wrapped an arm around her waist and tugged her closer, planting a kiss on top of her head. “Crowded when it’s full of family.”

They were quiet for a few minutes; the crashing waves and the cold December wind were the only sounds in the tiny cottage in the dunes.

“We don’t have to tell them.” Maren’s voice was small when she spoke, a touch of sadness around her words. “If you think that’s best.”

Relief seeped in and covered his worries. Relief quickly followed by guilt. He pulled back, untangling their limbs so he could face her. And that face, God how often had he dreamed of that face, wished for it, longed for it. He ran a hand down her cheek and she leaned into it, but her dark eyes studied him, making him wonder if selkies could read minds. Or maybe just this selkie and maybe just his mind.

“I think it’s a lot to tell them all at once. Why don’t we get the introductions over with first and we can tell them next time.” Even as he said it, he knew he would never tell them. And judging by the way she stared at him, she knew too.

“Cal and Dahlia don’t have a problem with me. With what I am.”

Daniel dropped his hand. His best friends were not exactly a good measure of normalcy. “Cal also believes in UFO sightings and Bigfoot.”

“So?” Maren narrowed her eyes in an expression she must have learned to fend off sharks.

He sighed and scrubbed a hand down his stubbled jaw, reminding him he needed to shave before Christmas. “I just don’t think it’s the right time.”

When was the right time to tell your family you’re in love with a mythical creature? Hard to say. But Daniel was fairly confident it wasn’t Christmas.

“But if I was a fat old man who delivered presents, it would be fine?” Maren pushed up from the couch and stood over him, her hands on her decadently wide hips. Daniel made a valiant effort to ignore the way the sweatshirt rose up over her ample thighs and failed.

“I’m going for a swim.” She marched toward the door and grabbed her seal skin off the hook. That would have to be moved, he thought absentmindedly as she shed the sweatshirt.

“But it’s dark.”

She glared at him.

“And freezing.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Just...”

She waited.

“Just come back. Okay?”

Her shoulders sagged, and she let out a frustrated sigh. “I made you a promise, Daniel. If you’re going to question it every day, how is this going to work?”

He swallowed hard, swallowed all the memories of waiting for her, of missing her every time she left. “I’m sorry,” he managed to choke out past the pain in this throat. “You’re right. Enjoy your swim.”

Maren stared at him a moment longer as though she were waiting for more of a fight, but then nodded and turned toward the door. She wrapped her seal skin around her naked body and stalked out into the night.

He was only half-asleep when she slid under the covers next to him. Her body was chilled so he pulled her closer.

“I don’t want to fight,” she whispered the words against his neck as she curled into him.

Daniel didn’t want to fight either, not tonight. He ran a hand down her back and over the ample curve of her ass, tracing the path of the heat returning to her body. He didn’t want to fight, or talk, or think about anything other than being with her right now. But that was how it had always been between them. Eventually, they would have to learn how to build a life together. Wouldn’t they?

Maren purred against his ear, erasing his worries. She wrapped a leg around his waist and he settled between her thighs, soft and welcoming. He buried his face in her neck and breathed in the scent of the sea from her hair. How easy it was to get pulled down to the depths by her. Maybe he had been a sailor in a past life. A sailor all too ready to go overboard for this woman. And he would have been happy as he slipped through the waves with her for however long he had breath in his lungs.

Her soft moans brought him back from his drowning thoughts. He thrust into her warmth and she linked her ankles around his back, her arms wrapped around his neck, trapping him, anchoring him. And he loved it. He loved her, always had. If she could find a way to live here with him, then he could find a way to trust her again.

Maren's breaths were ragged beneath him. He lifted his head and found her face in the darkness. There was no moon, and winter nights on the Cape were impenetrably black, but he found the glimmer in her eyes and the outline of her face.

He pressed his forehead to hers, pausing his thrusts until she squirmed beneath him.

“Tell me one more time and I'll never ask again.”

Her gaze flicked to his and held.

“I will always come back.” Her voice was nothing more than a rasped whisper in the dark, but finally, Daniel heard it. Finally, his heart understood it for what it was. A promise.

He rocked into her deeper, eliciting a gasp from her perfect lips. She met him thrust for thrust, her mouth capturing his. He swallowed her moans. He held her as she unraveled from pleasure, shaking and crying out beneath him.

But he wasn't done. He didn't want this night to end. Would their promises melt away in the daylight? He wasn't ready to find out.

So, he kissed down her neck and whispered, “Again,” into the soft skin of her throat.

Maren:

She was late for dinner. She must be late. Shit. Shit. Shit.

Maren raced across the beach, kicking up damp sand behind her. How could she have let this happen? It was only meant to be a short swim before Daniel's family arrived. A short swim to calm her nerves. But time worked differently when she was under the waves, when she was no longer truly human. And now she was late.

She glanced up at the house in the dunes, cheerful in the late afternoon sun. Daniel must be angry. Or worried? Or wondering if she was never

coming back. *Shit*. How did you convince the man you repeatedly left behind that you were really staying this time? Certainly not by being very late to meet his parents and on Christmas Eve, no less.

The old wooden stairs creaked beneath her feet as she clambered up the dune. Her breath sawed in and out of her lungs in painful gasps, and her legs refused to move fast enough. Being on land made her heavy and slow, and a sharp craving for the weightlessness of water cut through her. She shook her head. There was something more important waiting for her at the top of the stairs, a feeling greater than weightlessness.

“Maren!” Cal’s voice from the beach below stopped her in her tracks. She turned to find Daniel’s best friend staring up at her from the sand. His blond hair blew wildly around his head as though it was trying to take off from the roots.

“Cal? What’s the matter?”

The man’s usually calm face was scrunched in worry. He ran a frantic hand through his hair. Did something happen to his girls, his sweet, little daughters?

“I need your help.” The winter wind carried his voice away from her, but she didn’t miss the panic in it.

With a glance toward the cottage, she raced back down the stairs to meet Cal in the sand. The relief that washed over his features was enough to convince her she was doing the right thing.

Daniel:

He pushed the food around his plate, unable to fake an appetite despite the worried glances from his family. Where the hell was she?

She *promised*. He stabbed at a piece of orange chicken and shoved it into his mouth.

“Maybe she just got caught in traffic,” his mother said, the forced cheerfulness in her tone was enough to make him grind his teeth. And the idea of someone getting stuck in traffic on the way to the Cape in the middle of December was absurd. Artists, fishermen, and the people at this table were about the only people out here.

“Yeah, maybe.” Daniel reached for the open container of fried rice and dumped more onto his plate, despite the uneaten food still filling it. Chinese takeout had been the only option considering this kitchen was not meant for cooking any type of holiday feast. The stove had only two working burners, and that was on a good day, the oven rejected cooking anything over 250 degrees, and the refrigerator couldn’t hold a turkey even if it tried. God, he had been such an idiot for inviting everyone here. And for what? Maren was a no-show.

“Did you try calling?” Molly asked him for the twelfth time. He shook his head. How could he explain why that was impossible? *Well, Molly, cell phones don’t work underwater.*

“Do you think she got stuck at work? What is it you said she does again?” His father had asked him about Maren’s ‘work’ no less than eighty times since arriving today. Daniel bit down hard on his lip.

“I don’t think so, Dad.”

His father nodded, not taking his eyes from Daniel’s face, clearly waiting for more of an explanation. But Daniel didn’t have one. Not one that would make any kind of sense.

“Well, I’m sure she’ll be here,” his mother said brightly. “Pass the dumplings.”

The conversation drifted to new jobs and imminent vacations and memories of past holidays and Daniel was left to his own circling thoughts. She had promised him she would be here. And she had meant it this time, hadn’t she?

Daniel’s thoughts jumped from anger to fear. What if something had happened to her? Maren was made for the water, but the idea of her out there somewhere in those freezing depths sent ice water through his veins. She was a selkie but she wasn’t invincible. She was out in the Atlantic in the middle of the winter for Christ’s sake. Alone. And for the first time ever, he was worried about her. Not about whether or not she had left him, not about when she would return, but about the very real and terrifying possibility that something horrible had happened to her. Because she hadn’t left him on purpose this time. He was finally sure of it. So whatever was keeping her away was bad. Heart-stoppingly bad.

“Daniel, are you alright?” His mother’s voice broke through his panic. “You’ve gone all pale.”

“I...uh...” He unclamped his fingers from the edge of the table. He had been gripping it so tight he wouldn’t be surprised if his nails had left marks in the wood.

“Here’s the thing.” Daniel looked around at the concerned faces of his family. What was he going to do? Lie to these people for the rest of his life? He couldn’t do it. And if Maren was in danger, he would need their help. He sucked in a shuddering breath.

“Maren’s a selkie.”

Silence.

Shocked laughter.

“It’s true. Human on land, seal in the water. And I’m in love with her. Have been my whole life, but now she’s missing and I’m really worried, and...”

More silence.

Confused stares.

Worried glances.

“Daniel, sweetie.” His mother reached across the table and patted his hand like he was a dementia patient refusing to take his meds. “You don’t have to be embarrassed. So she didn’t show up. Maybe she’s just not the one.”

Everyone was looking at him with big, sad eyes. Even Christopher, his sister’s new husband who must now be realizing the incredibly bizarre family he married into, was nodding his head in sympathetic agreement. Wonderful.

But his family thinking he needed to be committed was not his biggest concern right now. Maren was missing. He pushed back from the table, his chair scraping loudly in the awkward silence he had caused.

“That’s just it. She is the one. The only fucking one, and now she’s gone.” He stood and paced the small room, no longer wanting to see his family’s concerned stares. He was vaguely aware of people shifting in their seats and hushed whispers coming from the table, but the buzzing of panic in his ears was louder.

“Maybe we should call the coast guard?” Molly suggested. The question came with not a trace of mocking, and that’s what stopped Daniel in his tracks.

“We could go scour the beach,” Christopher chimed in, already standing and heading toward his coat.

“One of us should probably stay here. Just in case she returns.” His mother moved to the windows to scan the night outside.

“I’ll grab the flashlights.” His father’s voice came from inside the pantry where he was rifling through old shopping bags and emergency candles.

And just like that, his family was forming a search party. No questions asked.

Daniel ran a shaking hand through his hair. Having a totally bizarre family really worked in your favor sometimes.

But before the party could move out, Cal burst into the room in a flurry of limbs and wild blond hair. “Hey everyone, Merry Christmas. Sorry to interrupt, but—” he paused, taking in the scene in front of him. Daniel’s dad was loading up a pile of flashlights with all the batteries he could find, his mother had a map of the Cape laid out on the table and was circling the nearest lighthouses, Molly and Christopher were bundling up for what appeared to be an arctic expedition, and Daniel was fighting through every emotion from terror to gratitude.

“Okay...what are you guys up to?”

“We’re going to search for Daniel’s selkie girlfriend,” Molly chirped like it was the most natural sentence in the world. Christopher nodded seriously from beneath the dusty Santa hat Molly had placed on his head.

Cal turned to Daniel, eyebrows raised. “Wow, a lot has happened on this little family visit.”

“Yeah well,” Daniel shrugged. “We really have to go, though. Is everything alright? Are the girls okay?” He reached for his coat, but Cal put a hand on his arm to stop him.

“Well, I hate to break up the fun, but I know where Maren is.”

Daniel’s heart stopped and then kicked back up at double the pace.

“You do? Where?”

“I would imagine halfway to Martha’s Vineyard by now.” Cal grinned.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“We had a little issue with the Christmas presents.”

“Presents?”

“Yep. Dahlia’s dad, your old pal, Captain Tom, was supposed to bring the gifts to shore tonight, but he’s stuck.”

“Stuck?” Apparently, the best Daniel’s brain could manage was to echo everything Cal said but in the form of a question.

“Stuck on Martha’s Vineyard. Something about some idiot forgetting to refuel the boat before everything shut down for the holiday. I don’t know, man.” Cal threw up his hands as he spoke. They never did learn much about the fisherman’s life even after their month at sea seven years ago, the last time Maren had left and he had gone after her.

“Anyway, now we have no gifts for the girls. I couldn’t let the magic of Christmas be ruined. Their little spirits would have been broken! So, I recruited Maren.”

“Sorry, why are the gifts on a boat?” Christopher asked, slowly unwinding himself from the three scarves Molly had tied around his neck.

“Every year the girls find their gifts. Every damn year. So this year we hid them on Dahlia’s father’s boat. A boat that was supposed to be back by now.”

Daniel ran a hand down his face. Relief was slowly seeping in, but Maren still wasn’t home, wasn’t in his arms, so he couldn’t relax. Not yet.

“What is she going to do? Tow the damn boat home?”

“Not sure.” Cal shrugged. “But she assured me she’d figure it out and be back by morning.”

“And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?”

“Get a good night’s sleep, I guess. It is Christmas Eve after all.”

Maren:

Maren glanced down. She was covered in sand from her feet to her calves. The rest of her was naked except for her seal skin which was wrapped around her body like a coat. Her wet hair lay in tangles down her back. She had only now begun to shiver. The cold didn’t affect her under the water, but in the December wind, she was freezing.

She stood at the bow of Captain Tom’s boat, watching as the shore came into view. The twelve seals she had recruited for the job pulled the boat through the waves, but nerves bubbled in Maren’s gut. Cal promised to

explain to Daniel what happened, but maybe it wasn't enough. Maybe this time he wouldn't forgive her.

"Nearly there now." Captain Tom's voice filled the early morning silence as he came up beside her. He held out a warm mug of coffee and a dry coat. She took them both, letting her seal skin drop to the deck momentarily before scooping it up under her arm.

She glanced over at Tom and couldn't help a smile at the sight of the gruff man decked out in his Santa hat and coat. For the girls, he had told her.

The grizzled sea captain hadn't batted an eye when she swam up beside his boat in the harbor and announced Cal had sent her. And for a moment it gave her hope that Daniel's family would react in the same way. But the closer she got to shore the crazier that idea seemed. Besides the fact that Daniel may not even want to introduce her to them anyway. Not after she had abandoned him again.

"Why the long face?" The Captain was looking at her again now that she was properly covered by his enormous jacket. "It's Christmas. The happiest day of the year."

Based on his rosy cheeks and jolly smile alone, Maren desperately wanted to agree. But the thought of Daniel waiting all night for her, angry or worse, worried, made it impossible for her to get in the spirit of this strange human holiday.

"I'm afraid he won't want me there. I promised I wouldn't leave."

Tom lifted a bushy gray eyebrow.

"He expects you to be by his side every minute?"

Maren shrugged. "Well, no. But I was supposed to meet his family last night."

"Cal will have explained everything I'm sure."

Another shrug and a sigh had Tom's arm wrapped around her, sharing his warmth and comfort.

"If he's any sort of man, and I believe he is, he'll trust you enough to let you come and go."

"But what if I've broken that trust too many times already?"

"Did you ever promise to stay before?"

Maren paused. She had always been honest with Daniel in the past. "No. He always knew I would leave."

“Okay then.” Seagulls scattered from the rails at the sound of Tom’s proclamation. “No harm, no foul.”

Whatever that meant, Tom seemed to think it settled everything. She hadn’t broken any promises in the past and she hadn’t broken any now either. Daniel would understand. He had to.

As the land came into view, Maren’s heart caught in her chest.

“Well, would you look at that?” Tom’s laugh vibrated through her.

During the night a light snow had fallen and frosted the dunes like Christmas cakes. A small group of people stood huddled together on the shoreline. As the boat neared, they began waving and cheering, and Maren spotted Daniel’s Christmas tree. They must have dragged it out onto the beach. Its decorations sparkled in the early morning sun. The music Daniel had been listening to all week floated merrily on the sea breeze, and a bonfire roared cozily next to the crowd.

Cal’s daughters ran up and down the beach, screeching their delight and shouting for Santa to please stop here. Their mother and Maren’s closest friend, Dahlia, was there, as was Tom’s wife. Cal stood, his arm slung over Dahlia’s shoulder, and a few others Maren could only assume were Daniel’s family cheered louder as the boat neared. And there he was in the middle of them all, waving her to shore. Her heart floated above her on the wind, looped the loop, and landed back inside her chest, beating happily along to the tune of the music.

Tom had returned to the cabin to gather the gifts, but Maren couldn’t wait any longer. She shucked the Captain’s coat, pulled her seal skin around her, and climbed the railing that surrounded the boat.

The crowd on the beach went silent. Even from this distance, she could feel everyone’s eyes on her. There was no going back now. No hiding anymore. She was a selkie. A legendary sea fairy, damn it. And she had saved Christmas.

With a wave to the shore, she dove overboard.

Daniel:

“Holy shit.” Molly’s awed whisper was drowned out by Cal’s girls shrieking their delight.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Daniel’s father scanned the water, waiting for Maren to resurface. He looked ready to grab his notebook and start taking notes on this new marine creature.

Daniel’s mother held tight to his hand. “Will she be alright? It’s awfully cold.”

He smiled. “Yeah, she does this all the time.” Pride swept through him as he watched Tom and Scully load the dingy with presents. Cal’s daughters were bursting with excitement, and it was all thanks to Maren.

She emerged a bit down the shore, her hood already slipping from her head, and Daniel went to meet her, warm blanket and boots in hand. She was grinning as she made her way to the beach, freezing water dripping from her face and hair. Shivers wracked her body by the time she made it to him.

“Merry Christmas,” she managed with chattering teeth.

He wrapped her in the blanket and held her tight. “Merry Christmas.”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“Don’t.” Daniel cut her off before she could finish. He grabbed her chin between his fingers and tilted her face up to his. “You have nothing to apologize for. I knew you’d come back.”

The glow that crossed her features despite the cold was all Daniel wanted for Christmas.

“You did?”

He kissed the saltwater from her cheeks and the tip of her nose.

“I did.”

She planted her chilled lips on his and he happily warmed them for her.

“You are part of the sea. I won’t ever keep you from it,” he whispered against the goosebumps on her neck.

“I’ll always come back to you.” She wrapped her arms around his neck, and he lifted her off the ground.

“Let’s get you warmed up.”

His family stared as he carried a shivering Maren past them. “Be right back. Just need to get her dry.”

Maren waved over his shoulder, giggling at the whistles and shouts of welcome from Daniel’s family and friends. Ignoring them, Daniel carried her up the stairs and into the tiny cottage.

She dropped the soggy seal skin by the door, and he rubbed her chilled body with the blanket until she was dry. He pulled her against him, letting his body rejoice at having her back again.

“I’ll just get dressed and we can go back out and see everyone.” Maren ran her hands lazily through his hair, making going back outside the absolute last thing he wanted to do.

“Or...” He stepped out of his boots and slipped off his coat, pulling Maren toward the bedroom.

Maren’s giggles filled the house. “We shouldn’t. I already missed Christmas Eve. What will your parents think of me?” She tugged her hand away and scurried down the hall to get dressed.

Daniel groaned, following her. “I’m only thinking of your safety.”

She stood in front of the closet, still completely naked, her back to him as she looked for something to wear.

Good lord, that ass. “I don’t want you to catch a chill.”

Her laugh popped and crackled like a warm fire. “I’m fine now.” She pulled a sweater from the closet and tossed it on the bed. “I just need to get dressed.”

But her eyes when she looked at him were dark and a small smile tugged at the side of her mouth. “Unless you’re feeling cold?” She cocked her head to the side.

He was feeling anything but cold at the moment, but he liked very much where this was going. “Well, I was standing on that beach for a while.”

Maren grinned but her stare was hungry as she crawled across the bed toward him. “Take off your clothes,” she demanded. “And I’ll warm you up.”

He peeled off his layers one by one while Maren watched.

“Hurry up!” She tugged him onto the bed, laughing, and pinned him beneath her.

Trapped between the heat of her thighs was the only place he ever wanted to be. She leaned forward and the curtain of her hair fell around their faces. His fingers weaved into her tangled tresses and pulled her mouth down to his.

He was already so hard, it hurt. Hurrying would not be a problem. Maren rocked above him, moaning softly against his mouth, and he raked

his hands up and down her sides, grabbing her ass and thighs and curves along the way. She ground herself against him, purrs and gasps escaping her lips. Her wetness slicked the skin of his abs.

“Fuck, Maren.” He dug his fingers into her hips and lifted her up long enough to thrust into her.

She slid down on a long moan, his name catching in the back of her throat.

“I will never stop wanting you.” He thrust up harder and Maren shuddered above him, a rosy flush blossoming across her skin. “Ever. I will never stop needing this.” Harder and faster he drove into her and she ground down into him, her hips gyrating against his, their rhythm fast and frantic.

“Me too, Daniel. Me too.” Her fingers dug into his shoulders and her eyes squeezed shut. “I can’t stay away from you. I won’t.”

He felt her clench around him, and she flung her head back. The world stilled as a long slow wail escaped her lips. He held her tight, his fingers kneading her flesh as she broke around him, pulsing and steady as his racing heart.

When it was over and her eyes cleared, she looked down at him with a languid smile. He flipped her onto her back and she squealed, wrapping her legs around his middle. It didn’t take long for him to finally let go.

This was how they would make a life together. One beautiful reunion at a time.

If you’re curious how it all started or if you just want more Daniel and Maren, check out *Missing Maren!* Thanks for reading and stay tuned for more new releases coming soon.