

Chapter 8

The markets were crowded. But for once Sylas didn't mind. He couldn't seem to shake his good mood, no matter how hard he tried. And with his smile firmly planted on his face he'd managed to almost completely sell out of his fish, which was unusual... but understandable. Pushing people away and creating a reputation for himself was bad for business. He'd always known it. Even so, he'd made the decision to sacrifice business for peace.

Though he had never intended for that peace to turn into loneliness.

You looked lonely.

He still couldn't shake Morel's words.

Or the silly argument she'd had with her sister.

He felt himself chuckle as he recalled the look Kas had given him before falling off the side of his boat.

'Someone's chipper, today!' called a voice from the stall next to him, and Sylas turned to see the fruit vender's wife had come to help her husband close shop. 'You feeling in a pretty mood, Sylas?'

'Aw, Pippa, 'e's been grinning like a fantasist all day!' replied the vendor, reaching up to tug down his stall's cover. 'Staring off into space an' sighin' an' all! Reckon the lad's had something *real* good happen to 'im to put 'im in such a good mood!'

'Evening, Mrs Earnshaw,' Sylas gave a wave. 'Nice day, isn't it?'

'*Nice day?*' Mrs Earnshaw echoed, her voice rising in disbelief. 'Sylas what *has* happened to you? You don't seem yourself at all— Not that I'm complaining none. Smiling suits you, you know.'

'So I've heard a lot, today,' Sylas replied, making his way to the front of his own stall. He figured he should close up, too. He was running out of fish to sell, and he still needed to go see his sister before sundown, so he quickly pulled down his stall's cover and swept the last of his fish into a tray before heading over to the Earnshaws. 'You two want some fish? It's too much for me to eat in a day, and they won't keep too long.'

'Generosity as well?' Mrs Earnshaw gave a laugh, and accepted the tray. 'Now I *must* know what you've done!'

'I've met a girl,' Sylas admitted, blushing when Mr Earnshaw snickered at him. 'She's a wonder of a woman. Comes from out of town, and acts like it too. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen and, for some reason, she likes the look of me.'

'Well, she'd *have* to be from elsewhere, wouldn't she? To even *think* of approachin' you!' Mr Earnshaw teased. 'I'm guessin' she don't know of your reputation?'

'Nup,' Sylas replied. 'You know, the first thing she did when she met me was ask for a free fish.'

'She *didn't!*' Mrs Earnshaw gave a playful gasp. 'Oh, my lord. I remember the last fool who asked your family for a handout like that! Your daddy nearly snapped his hackles.'

'Heh, I remember that,' Sylas gave a click of his tongue and shook his head. 'Father never was one for charity.... I hate to say it, but I think he rubbed off on me a little

there.'

'Oh, come now, lad!' Mr Earnshaw put an arm around Sylas and gave him a squeeze. 'Just cos you ain't able to *afford* charity don't mean we ain't seen you turnin' out your pockets for poor ol' Jensen.'

'Excuse me, I've done no such thing,' Sylas lied, giving a sniff as he straightened up. 'You must have been mistaken. You know as well as I do the Hills family don't talk to the Jensens, let alone give them money.'

'Yeah, yeah!' Mr Earnshaw slapped Sylas on the back and picked up a nearby bag of apples. 'You liar! You know as well as I do if you had the money you wouldn't be spendin' it on yourself. No matter what you say.'

'Hey! No,' Sylas raised his hands defensively— And then fumbled to catch the bag of fruit as it was thrown at him. 'I'm not a good person. I'm a nasty piece of work!'

'Oh, Sylas,' Mrs Earnshaw shook her head and lifted up the tray of fish as if to make her point. 'You've been lying to people for so long, you've managed to trick yourself into thinking you're not as sweet as a pie. Don't forget we've known you as long you've been born! And we know it's all just a *front* you put on.'

Sylas shrugged at that. A week ago he would have argued —maybe even cussed them out and called them old fools— but with the mood he was in today, all he could bring himself to do was roll his eyes at the couple and smirk.

And when he did, Mr Earnshaw let out another laugh. 'Love feels good, don't it lad?'

'Love?' Sylas hesitated, his smile falling from his face. 'I don't fall in love. Besides, I barely know her.'

'*Aw, Bobbie, you've scared the boy,*' Mrs Earnshaw muttered to her husband. Then she turned to Sylas and put a hand on his shoulder. 'Listen to me, hon. Love doesn't always make sense, you hear? I only knew my Bob for a day before I knew it was meant to be. Now I look at you, happier than you've ever been, and I know you must be feeling something good. You're feeling something *real* good.'

'I... guess,' Sylas looked to the ground and scuffed his foot along the cobbled road. 'I don't know if I'd call it *love*, though.'

'Well, whatever it is, you hold onto it, you hear me?' said Mrs Earnshaw. 'Now, we have to get home, and I'm sure you've got your own business to attend to.... Stay safe, Sylas.'

Reluctantly, Sylas let the old woman plant a kiss on his temple, and gave a short nod. 'You too, Mrs Earnshaw. Mr Earnshaw.'

'Right, lad. You get on, now,' Mr Earnshaw gave a wave and a smile, and then linked arms with his wife and turned in the direction of the inner-city.

As soon as the couple disappeared from view, Sylas lifted his vest and wiped his face where he'd been kissed.

The Earnshaws were strange. And a bit annoying. But they were long-standing friends of the Hills family and he didn't have the heart to hate them. Especially when they'd stuck by his father for so long after his mother left.

And they'd stuck by him, too. Even when he thought they'd have been better off not....

A sigh followed by a smile, and Sylas readjusted the bag of fruit in his arms and

Heartbound

started towards his sister's house.