

# CPR

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Jaiden Dembo | Short Story

The sun baked my skin like a dry riverbed and all I could think about was the day I drowned. My knuckles were white on the one hand gripping the steering wheel while the other rested on the stick shift. Rock snarled from the stereo to match the growling of the engine as the '65 Mustang devoured the highway. The wind knotted its fingers through my hair and pulled it back from my face but all I could feel were the waves pulling me under.

There were still nights when I would wake in a cold sweat as I was brought gasping for air to the surface of my nightmares. I would repeat to myself over and over again that it wasn't real, that it was only a dream. Except it wasn't a dream when my ex-lover pushed me off the edge of his yacht into the churning waters of the Pacific. His green eyes flashing with rage, his hand at my throat as he backed me into the railing. How he released his grip just to push me over the edge. There was no road in front of me, only the hate writhing in his face and knuckles white on the railing, knuckles white on the steering wheel. I clenched my jaw and tried to forget the feeling of falling into oblivion and slamming into the waves.

I had made it my life's pursuit to forget. It was my job to forget the warmth of his caress that turned to a heat that blistered my skin. It was my job to forget the way he'd cupped my cheek after he'd bruised it. There had been a time in my life when I'd loved that lawbreaking fool but I'd stopped the moment he caged me like an animal. Love disappeared when he whispered death threats like sweet nothings. I had not wanted to be the doomed queen of his drug kingdom and so he shackled me to his throne. The romanticized vision of danger shattered and I was left with cold fear nestling into my gut for warmth.

When he pushed me over the railing I hadn't even been able to take a breath. As I drove down the highway I breathed deeply and tasted the desert on my tongue. I was planning on spending the rest of my life as far away from water as I could. Mountains on the horizon and cedar trees ready to catch fire waited after the dull gold scrub brush that stretched for miles. No oceans, no lakes, no large bodies of water in sight.

That night when water filled my lungs I choked as I fought the waves pulling me under. Being tossed around in black waters I could catch glimpses of the stars but even then the North Star couldn't help me find direction. It was my extremities that went numb first and the sensation crept its way up my arms and legs and it was when it reached my chest that I stopped fighting. This was probably around the same time I stopped trying to cough the water from my lungs. I fought until the ocean beat me into submission and once I was disarmed a calm came over me, a moment of peace before I blacked out and accepted my less than ideal death.

Except death hadn't come for me yet because the next thing I knew I was puking up the brine and my throat was raw from the effort as I dragged oxygen into my deprived body. I was laying in a pool of my own blood, no, check that, it was just the ocean I'd brought with me. Solid ground was the second thing I registered, except I could still hear the waves crashing. I hadn't opened my eyes but the moment I did I was staring into a set of brown eyes warmer than the sun. He was leaning over me, his arms braced on either side and his face uncomfortably close to mine for a stranger. He closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief.

"I didn't know if you were going to come back," he said.

After coughing for few more minutes I managed in my ragged voice, "I told Satan not today." I should've told Satan never but he was back on that yacht and I'd already made the mistake. All I could do was say never again.

"Nearly dead and you still have a sense of humor," he said with a laugh.

"Nearly," I agreed and as reality set in, as the memories came back, hot tears started to pour and I wondered if my eyes would ever stop stinging.

My saviour sat back and pulled me up with him, cradling me in his arms. "It's okay. It's over. You're safe now," he murmured.

It was over and I was never going back.

"Who are you?" I asked as my sobs faded.

"Roshan," he replied.

I rolled my eyes and leaned back in his arms, "I meant are you the Coast Guard or what?"

"Not quite, I'm just a recreational sailor," he said and this was when I realized I was on another boat.

"Okay." At this point that was a good enough answer.

"Come on, let's get you inside, you're shivering," he said and pulled me up.

A change of clothes, a warm blanket, and a hot cup of tea later we were sitting in the cabin and I was finally regaining the feeling in my toes. Roshan was bringing me to the nearest port on the Sunshine Coast. I'd left solid ground with my ex two days ago so a day with a stranger wasn't a problem.

"Were you just going for a casual swim earlier?" Roshan asked as he came and sat next to me. There was the warmth of humor in his voice but it still struck a chord.

I looked down into my tea and let the warmth seep into my hands as I held the mug tight. "Yeah, something like that."

“You don’t have to tell me what happened if you don’t want to,” he said with a shrug, “but I could help you if you want.”

“Thanks for the offer but I’d rather not talk about it,” I replied. I would rather just forget everything and move on. If my ex believed I was dead then he at least wouldn’t hunt after me. Nothing like dying in order to live again.

We sailed through the night and I stayed with him as he steered the boat. He sat me down in a chair with a few more blankets but I still felt like I would never be warm again. I asked him why he was sailing alone and he told me that he liked to get away to think about things and that the ocean helped calm his mind.

“And what inspired this walkabout?” I asked.

His gaze was focused on the horizon but I saw him wince.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” I said, offering the same out he had given me.

“No, it’s okay,” he said after a pause. “My girlfriend and I broke up recently.”

“Was it serious?”

“I thought we were going to get married,” he said with a shrug.

“I’m sorry,” I said and let the quiet hang in the air for a beat. “But I’m still not going to tell you why I was swimming,” I teased.

He laughed and shook his head, that warmth returning to his face. “That’s perfectly fine,” he said with a grin. Roshan looked over to me and there was something in his gaze that made my heart catch. “You don’t owe me anything,” he said and I knew there was more weight to that anything than the initial assumption.

“Thank you,” I said.

I stood up from my chair, walked over to him and began to ask him how to sail the boat, what all the different dials meant. We talked about all the places he’d sailed and all the places he wanted to sail to. We talked until the sun rose and painted the sky pink and gold.

“I never thought I’d catch myself a mermaid,” he said with a laugh as he looked down at me. We had moved closer to each other, shoulders brushing, and despite the sunrise all I wanted to do was look into his face.

“I’m a pretty shitty mermaid if you had to give me CPR,” I said.

“You were just having an off day,” he said and brushed a strand of hair behind my ear.

His face was comfortably close for someone who I no longer considered a stranger and I wanted him

closer. In the quiet I could hear the boat cutting through the waves.

Tearing through the desert I took my hand off the stick shift and brushed my fingers across my lips. I’d replayed the memory of him a thousand times since that sunrise. I put that scene on repeat after drowning in my nightmares to remember what warmth felt like.

Roshan inhabited my thoughts more than I wanted and maybe he wouldn’t just be a memory if I’d given him my name, or a number, or a way to find me. I’d decided it was better to disappear when he dropped me off at port. It was better if I was alone. At least that what’s I had convinced myself. There was no reason to drag him into the tangle of my life and subject him to the potential danger of a homicidal ex-lover.

My chest was hollow with an ache that stretched through my body and I slammed my foot on the accelerator. It was futile to run from the feeling but I was going to try my best.

Sirens started to howl and I groaned as a motorcycle tore out from behind a billboard. I lifted my hand to look at the speedometer even though I already knew I had been driving too fast. Slowing my car at the persistence of the wailing motorcycle I pulled over, the tires crunching against the dirt as they stirred up dust.

One hand draped over the car door, the other resting on my knee as I waited for the officer to walk up. I could hear his boots against the gravel and then there he was in his mirrored aviators and leather jacket decorated with police badges.

I ran a hand through my hair, “My apologies officer, I know I was driving too fast but you see-” the words stuck in my throat as I looked up at this man who removed his aviators to reveal brown eyes warmer than the sun.

He leaned against my car and grinned, “Now, what’s a mermaid doing out in the desert?”

Stars were colliding and for the first time I felt the sun, “I told you Roshan, I’m a pretty shitty mermaid.”