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The Ocean's Shadow

Jennah Sharpe

Dedication

For all the artists who portray mermen so beautifully, inspiring me to write about them.

Chapter One

A dark shadow moved through the shallows, powerfully and expertly winding its way between the coral reefs. If anyone was out in the twilight of the evening in the gusty wind and light rain, they would have thought it a lost seal or an unbelievably large fish thrown over the reef by the swells, now big enough to crash into the sand and jagged rocks of the shoreline. They would be wrong.

The shadow boiled the dark waters, sending spray into the cool air as ominous clouds, full of pending rain, gathered closer to shore. Children were called inside from their play. The perpetually squawking seagulls became quiet, forced into shelter by the gusts. Shutters were closed and latches secured.

The shadow grinned maniacally as it heaved its long, lithe body onto a rock to watch its creation batter the land. Storms were its specialty, and ones that brought ships crashing against the rocks provided entertainment and a certain sense of satisfaction.

The locals had a name for the shadow. He'd been in the area since the beginning of the summer, bringing destruction and loss to the inhabitants of the island. They called him Ailfinn, or white stone, for he seemingly turned the rocks white, as they were beaten with ocean foam during his rampages. He adopted the name, enjoying the fact that it seemed to exude reverence.

Only a few unlucky fishermen who'd mistakenly snagged him in nets had seen him up close. Upon breaking the surface, he'd slashed at them with his tail and knocked them flat as he ripped at the nets with his strong, upper body. The fishermen survived only by dropping their lines and submitting their precious nets to the sea. Ailfinn went with them and his legend grew. The merman, Ailfinn, reportedly as long as two tall men, haunted the warm, transparent waters along the southern shore. His tail was like the skin of a porpoise, dark amber in color, so that on bright, sunny days the flash of his tail could easily be seen from shore as he jumped through the waves or sunned himself on a rock. His hair was waist length and although still amber in tone, much darker than his fins. The women added that his eyes were the color of copper, smoldering in a mix of anger and sadness. It wasn't long after his arrival before young girls were kept from the waters in the evenings. Spinsters, as well as widows, were seen indulging the odd evening dip to cool off, perhaps taking the chance that Ailfinn would choose them for his sexual escapades.

The population knew of the merfolk, however Ailfinn was different from the rest of their stories. The males of the species rarely made contact with humans, and although they were known for causing storms and havoc upon the sea, none was as consistent as Ailfinn.

Ships avoided the coves near the rural village of Copperberry, choosing to unload their trade goods farther up the coast. Fishermen were careful to set their nets where Ailfinn was unlikely to venture. He preferred the deep hollows and caves at the base of the cliffs as opposed to the shallow areas off the reefs that were loaded with fish.

The light rain abated and a sound caught the attention of the shadow, Ailfinn. He swam easily to a rock closer to shore and peered over the top, looking for the source. The storm he'd been busy conjuring was forgotten as his curiosity piqued. A young woman was wading in the sand below the cliffs. She would have taken the path through the coarse bushes down to the beach, avoiding the slippery rocks flanking the cliffs. Recognizing her as a new widow from the village, he watched her. Her expression was blank, her hands clasped behind her back as she kicked at the waves breaking around her small feet.

Ailfinn knew most of the people who lived above the cliff. They were entranced by the sea and relied on it for their sustenance. He knew many of them by name. This woman was Julie. She had a young son who loved searching for seashells. Her husband had been lost in a hunting accident far inland. Ailfinn knew this from the gossip he absorbed by hiding behind rocks and swimming just offshore.

Humans meant nothing to him. They were pure entertainment. He communicated with neither merfolk nor humans. A loner who needed no one, he was fine on his own. He used the human women as they used him and felt nothing when one of his storms brought down a ship or tore apart a harbor. The more widows, the wider the selection, he told himself.

As he appeared from behind the rock, somewhat obscured by a rising fog and growing darkness, the woman called Julie startled, bringing a hand to her throat. Ailfinn swam slowly. This one was timid. He'd have to be careful if he wanted to have his way with her. Julie took a step back and Ailfinn stopped. Still in his merman form, he could not call out words of encouragement to her. Was she worth the effort? He attempted to gauge her response but was distracted by another sound. His ears were deeply in tune to the natural movements of the sea and were able to hear noises in the water many miles away. This one was not a feeding fish, the glide of a ship or the song of a whale. The sound of vicious panic and thrashing accompanied by an intermittent stillness had him turning his head under the water to listen.

His gaze returned to the waiting woman on shore. She would have run anyway if she'd seen him shift into his human form. Besides, she'd be back, once she'd thought things through. He knew he was intimidating, much larger and more real than any of them ever thought. Very often it was three or more trips to the shore before a human female was willing to mate with him in the cloaking darkness of night.

Ailfinn threw himself into the waves. His tail pumped hard, propelling him through the water faster than most ships could travel. He followed the fading sound until he was deep in the ocean but only yards from the surface. He stopped when he saw the woman.

She drifted under the surface, still and quiet, the gently rumble of a ship moving through the waters was miles away. Her blond plaits floated in the currents, framing her face and tightening his loins. She was beautiful, with porcelain skin that glowed with the changing light under

the surface. Skirts billowed up around her arms but her fingers were relaxed and slightly curved. She was moments away from inhaling water. Ailfinn did what he considered unthinkable and completely uncharacteristic. He pulsed his body cleanly through the water and grasped her around her chest with one arm. With two powerful strokes of his tail, he broke the surface, holding the woman's face above the water.

Rain was falling hard now and thunder split the stillness of the humid, summer night. Ailfinn stroked the woman's mouth and it opened. She was breathing. She hadn't quite given up when he'd reached her but she was thoroughly exhausted, unable to remain afloat.

Her eyes drifted open for a brief moment, showering him with gratitude and warmth before closing again. He stared at her, wondering what the next step would be. He couldn't set her adrift after that look. It wasn't in him. He'd have to take her to shore. Perhaps Julie would still be close by and could take charge of the girl's safety.

Ailfinn wrapped one muscular arm over the woman's shoulder and under her opposite arm, securing her to his side as he swam for shore, taking care she didn't inhale water and cursing himself for brewing this storm. It wasn't easy to swim in swells like this on the surface, let alone with an incapacitated girl strapped to his side. By the gods, he should have left her. Surely the boat would have come back for her, he thought, even as he knew it wouldn't have.

Bogged down by the woman's layered skirts, Ailfinn stopped long enough to rid her of her clothing, right down to the cotton shift that clung to her body. He ripped and shredded until the deadly material came free and sank into the darkness, a mass of cotton and lace.

He gasped at her beauty, feeling a distinct and sudden urge to mate with her. He trailed his hand up her arms, delighting in the softness of her skin. But her skin was cold, a bluish tinge around her lips. He knew what that meant to a human. He'd had enough experience with dying humans to know if he didn't get her warm, she would be among those he'd killed. Why did he care about this one when he'd let so many others die? The question flitted through his mind, but he didn't have much of an answer. It was a split decision to take hold of her and pull her to the surface. It had been an instinct, and once he'd made that decision, he had to see it through.

Lights from the village above the cliff lit the sky with a dull yellow sheen. The beach was deserted. Ailfinn cursed the forces that fated him to rescue this girl. There was no choice but to shift to his human form.

Swimming as far inland as he could, he sent the girl on a wave that deposited her on her stomach in the sand. Ailfinn floated on his back in the water, closed his eyes and willed the transformation to begin, as many of the males of his species had done since the creation of the seas. Females were unable to transform, giving the males an advantage when it came to human matters.

The water soothed his skin and relaxed him during the shift. He cringed with the brief pain accompanying the process, as the cells composing his mer tail shifted, forming the two legs of a human male.

Finding his balance amid the suctioning currents, he sprinted to the woman lying prone on the beach, her body covered only by a thin white shift made see-through by the water. Had she been conscious, she would have been thankful for the cover of night. Carefully turning her over, he pulled strands of blond hair from her face. Lovely was the word that came to mind. Lovely? That wasn't an adjective normally used in his vocabulary. He shook his head as if he could shake the thought.

Ailfinn slid his arms beneath her, easily lifting her body. He dared not venture into the village. Too many people would recognize him. He thought he knew the perfect place. Of course, *he'd* have to take care of her until she recovered from her ordeal. What had he gotten himself into?

He carried the small woman in his arms, walking slowly over rocks and shards of shells around the base of the cliffs. When he emerged from the waters of the cove, he saw what he was looking for. An abandoned fishing cottage was not far from the water, the perfect place for his catch of the day. There were no lights in the windows, indicating the cottage was still vacant. With only starlight to guide him, he walked up the sandy path, past bushes of pink roses a tender gardener had planted years past. The plank door came open easily with a shove of his shoulder. He stopped, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness of the cottage and testing the musty, stale scent for traces of sickness or death. He'd been here before, with other women, and so he walked to the left. He knew there was a large bed against the far wall.

His knee hit the bed before he realized how close he was. He cursed loudly and the form in his arms stirred. He held still and looked down at her face. Her eyes were still closed.

Ailfinn eased her onto the bed where he made quick work of taking off her shift. He threw the wet clothing on the floor and tucked the woman under the quilts. He sat on the edge of the bed and wondered what would happen next. Surely she would wake soon, tell him her name and where to return her. He decided to wait. He needed to make sure she wouldn't die in the night.

Unclothed himself, he began to feel the chill of the evening air. Quilts were stacked neatly on the end of the bed. He swung one around his shoulders and leaned back on the footboard. The woman's breathing was even and steady. He was sure she was sleeping now, not unconscious.

Chapter Two

Ailfinn must have slept as well for when he again opened his eyes, the pale light of dawn had broken through the dirty glass of the windowpane. His gaze swept the room as he noted what he would have to find for the woman. A kettle, some food and new clothes were all that came to mind.

When his gaze came to rest on the woman in the bed, he almost gasped in shock. She was sitting up, arms wrapped around her knees, watching him. Her cheeks had regained their natural pink color and her lips were curved into a smile. Small breasts rested against her thighs where he could make out the smooth, round edges of them. She smiled at him, a confident, strong smile that told him she was much recovered.

"Are you my rescuer, sir?" came her soft voice.

"I am. That is, unless you didn't want rescuing. In that case, I'll leave you to it." He pushed off the bed and turned to leave. Better to be rid of this human girl before he regretted dragging her from the sea.

She reached out a hand to stop him. "No, no. I'm so grateful to you. What is your name?"

He hesitated before answering. If she noticed, she didn't give any indication. How much information did he want to give her?

Relenting, he faced her again and offered up his name. "Ailfinn," he said softly.

"That's a different name. Are you from around here?" Her perfectly shaped eyebrows rose in earnest curiosity.

"I am now."

"I'm Claire McIvor. I was a maid for a couple who are bound for America. The storm came up so quickly that I was caught outside and washed overboard."

Ailfinn chewed the inside of his lip. Guilt was an emotion he hadn't experienced in years. It weighted heavily in his chest.

"I should have jumped earlier or stolen away before they noticed I wasn't on board. I didn't want to be taken from my homeland but I couldn't risk showing any insolence. I'm just as happy to be ashore. Thank you."

This one was a talker. Ailfinn, still wrapped in his quilt, was unsure what to make of her.

"Well, Claire. I see you are much better and so I shall leave. If there is anything you are wanting, best let me know now. Are you feeling well?"

"I am. I do feel exhausted and will sleep again, however, um...do you know where my dress is?"

The girl didn't even so much as blush. Many women would have been disconcerted, at the very least, to find themselves naked before a man. This Claire was bold. What if she asked as to the whereabouts of *his* clothing?

"I had to take it off you. The dress was too heavy and I swam easier without you in it." He took a step closer.

She smiled, gazing at him coyly. "That was very wise. I owe you my life, sir. I will have need of some clothing if I'm to venture anywhere. Is there a town nearby?"

"The village of Copperberry is over the hill." Feeling the need to leave as soon as possible, Ailfinn strode to the door. Instinctively, he knew there was more to this woman than a bout of human sex.

"I'll find you some clothing," he finished.

When he turned to make sure she'd heard him, he saw nothing but desire in her green eyes. He watched with enjoyment as her gaze raked across his body. He could have sworn the heat of it seared his skin. So unused to breathing air, he fought to keep from gasping. The emotions stirring within had him fighting to maintain composure. The air left his body in a rush and he struggled to inhale. She was lovely. There was that word again. Beautiful. More lovely than any of his own kind and yet...she was human. Why wasn't he diving into that bed and taking her right then?

Ailfinn left the cottage. His gut churned and his brain felt muddled. He needed to get back in the ocean. As he walked in broad lengths, he glanced around, ensuring no others had seen him. Reaching the cool waters, he dove into the surf. It was calm now but the currents were strong enough for him to fight. He welcomed the exertion.

His tail emerged as he flung himself into deeper waters, turning to look back at the cottage on a whim. In the front window he caught a vision of Claire. He could see her from the waist up and knew she was kneeling on the bed. He cursed that he was too far away to make out the details. Had she seen his tail? She must have. It was too late to worry about it now. He'd stay away until she'd forgotten his name. The villagers would tell her she'd met Ailfinn, and was lucky to come away with her virtue intact. That would be the end of it.

Villagers heard the noise that morning. The rumble of thunder that seemed to shake the cloudless sky brought the name Ailfinn to their lips. He slapped his tail on the surface, calling attention to the pent-up, conflicting feelings that coursed under his bronzed skin. To be anything to this woman could mean her death. He couldn't live with that, but he could think of nothing else. As he skirted the bony shipwrecks of his adopted domain, he knew he would go back to the fisherman's cottage.

* * *

Claire drifted in and out of sleep. It was such a relief to be off that ship. Although she hadn't a clue where she was, she would no longer feel the sting of her employer's strap nor would she feel the uncertainty of starting over in a new land.

Simply for not feeling the effects of seasickness as the wife of her employer did, she'd been subjected to the strap against her bare

backside as if she were a disobedient child. She could feel the humiliation yet. Despite being treated as a brat, she needed the money. She needed the security of a shelter and food. There was no family to take her back, no other skill she could depend upon. But when they said they were taking her away from her homeland, away from all she'd ever known, the fury and anxiety settled inside her.

Taken above deck, in the sleet and rain, she was bent over a barrel, her skirts hiked up around her waist and a strong leather belt whipped against her. Humiliated, Claire had sunk to the deck, gathering her dress around her feet in an attempt to hide herself as well as stay warm. She hadn't felt like going back to the dark cabin she shared with her mistress. She didn't want to hear the retching, to smell the putrid buckets placed beside the mattress.

Within moments, she was soaked through. Knowing she'd never be warm in wet clothing, she'd watched the lightning arc across the endless night sky. It was fascinating. With a chill of wonder, she'd stayed that way for quite some time, watching the power, feeling the rumble of it. The waves rocked the boat in a manner that others may have described as violent. Claire had felt safe. It was as if the storm and the ocean had no wish to harm her. It was others they were after.

Crawling to the railing, she'd hauled herself to standing. The sea, though dark, was silver, reflecting the sky as it was shot through by bolts of searing light. It was beautiful. Why she'd felt no fear, she couldn't say.

She hadn't thought about jumping over the side. When she hit the water and the ocean closed over her head, it came as a surprise. One that she was grateful for. Death did not seem imminent, not until her lungs began to burn for air. Sinking lower and lower under the weight of her dress, she'd thought only of escape.

Now, lying safe in a small seaside cottage, surrounded by the scent of wood smoke and sea salt, she knew she'd jumped for a reason. Still chilled from her dip in the ocean, she left the bed to explore the cottage. When the sun heated the sand, she'd lie on the hot beach. The very thought warmed her. It was summer, she reminded herself. A fireplace big enough to roast a pig graced the far corner. Keeping the quilt wrapped tight around her, she opened a closet to find a pair of men's trousers and a worn flannel shirt. Perfect. She could use those clothes when she left. Surely, the village would have a dressmaker. Sitting back on the bed, she combed her stringy hair with her fingers, hoping to bring back some of its softness. She wasn't sure it worked but it was better than nothing. Her looks would be forgiven. She'd gone overboard. Glancing toward the sea, she marveled at how calm it was compared to the night before when all had seemed as dark as a bottomless pit. She could feel the ache return to her bones as she recalled her exhaustion and inability to stay afloat. Thank God for Ailfinn. How he'd come to be in the middle of the trade route, she felt sure she'd never understand. Watching him dive back into the ocean from her window, she'd been sure she was hallucinating in her incapacitated state. A tail emerged behind Ailfinn to smack the water. She'd imagined him a merman. How silly.

Picturing his physique, as he'd stood naked before her, her stomach clenched. She never seen a man so well made, so strong and yet so tender. She could remember a brief vision of his face over hers soon after her rescue. She'd seen him and hoped he knew how grateful she was. That body covered with a sheen of water was a sight she hoped to see again—and to touch...oh to touch. The image made certain she had the ridges of his muscles etched in her mind so she could recall them at any time.

She'd admired the tangled fall of his hair and the way his hand trailed over the bedclothes as if aching to touch her. His eyes were entrancing but, most of all, Claire remembered the soft touch of sadness in the corner of his eyes. Along with the sun lines and the indescribable color, was a noticeable lack of light. Eyes that failed to shine with happiness or contentment were strangely endearing. It only made her want him more.

When morning broke, Claire walked to the door on wobbly legs. She stepped out into the sunlight and almost tripped over a worn kettle, a pair of sturdy shoes and a light cotton dress hung over the rose bushes as if to dry. It was plain but more than suitable. Her gaze skirted the surface of the sea, but Ailfinn was nowhere to be seen. The day was quiet

with only the complaints of the seagulls to interrupt her thoughts. Sitting down on a smooth rock not far from the luscious, fresh scent of pink roses and hydrangeas, she bared her body to the heat of the sun. Her skin tingled as it absorbed the warmth. No place in the known world suited her state of mind more.

After hours spent alternately dipping into the ocean and sunning her body on the beach, Claire stood, gathered her gifts and returned inside to prepare for a trip to the village.

She walked slowly, following the cow path toward the thatched roofs she could discern in the distance. As she came nearer, she realized the group of houses could barely be called a village. *Where am I*? she wondered, stepping carefully over the rocks, as the path became a road.

The sun was low now, but she still had a few hours before dark. Her stomach growled noisily. *There must be a place to eat here*.

Claire walked into the backyard of a small cottage. A woman bending in her garden of beans and potatoes drew Claire's attention. A white kerchief covered her hair and two small children, a boy and a younger girl, bustled around her skirts. Every so often, she swatted at them like flies, without saying a word. She seemed friendly enough.

"Excuse me? Could I ask some help of you?"

The woman stood, dusting her hands on her skirts. Soil marked her cheek and her kerchief where she adjusted it. She shielded her eyes from the sun while her children clung to her skirts. Sweat beaded on her forehead.

"How can I help you?"

Claire walked closer. "I was thrown overboard last night by the storm and was rescued by a mysterious man. He left me in an abandoned cottage in the cove." The woman followed Claire's finger as she pointed in the direction from which she'd come.

"Truly? It was a nasty storm. Are you all right?"

"I am. My rescuer made sure I was safe but I'm without food and I'm terribly hungry. Could you point me in the direction of somewhere I could eat?" The woman placed a hand on Claire's shoulder. "You'll eat with us, my dear. I would love to hear your story. Do you know the name of your rescuer?"

The children ran off to play and the woman led Claire into her cottage.

"He said his name was Ailfinn, but would tell me no more about himself."

The woman stopped and stared, seeming to be at a loss for words.

"You've heard of him?" Claire asked.

"Uh, yes. He's well known in these parts." She sighed. "Have a seat dear, supper is almost ready."

The cottage smelled of raw fish and wet, stale clothing drying above a fire. Claire walked farther inside and spotted an iron pot of what smelled like stew simmering over the fire. The woman's cottage was not much different from the one she called her own.

"I've forgotten to introduce myself. My name is Claire McIvor."

"Julie McClellan." She began to stir the stew. "I'm here alone with the children, Ewan and Elizabeth. My husband is no longer with us, so I'm happy for the company."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thank you. You must be missing home. Should you contact the authorities who can alert your family that you're still alive?"

Claire sat at the bare table. "No, no. The ship was headed for America and I've no wish to follow. I'm better on my own."

"Oh. Well, suit yourself. It's no business of mine." There was silence for a moment. "So, you saw Ailfinn? Was he in merman form or human?"

Claire felt her mouth fall open and quickly closed it. She had no idea how to answer that question.

"Merman?" she stammered.

"Yes. Ailfinn is a rather dangerous merman who seems to have adopted this part of the ocean as his own. He's a bit of a rogue, prone to

tantrums and blatant displays of his sexuality. Many of the women around this area are quite familiar with him."

"And he can turn human?" Claire's voice wasn't quite as stable in pitch as she would have liked. She was certain of what she'd seen, but at the time, just as certain it was all a hallucination. This woman was telling her otherwise.

"Yes, he can but he doesn't like to. Only seems to be when he's looking for a female." She gave Claire a quick glance as if accusing her of something. She felt a flush rising in her skin for, although she'd not so much as touched Ailfinn, she'd fantasized about him relentlessly all day.

"He's dangerous, Claire. Stay away from him." Julie stopped stirring the stew to look at her. "If you cannot, for I've seen him myself, then be careful. Do not upset him. That storm last night that stole you from your ship was evidence of his temper. I don't know what happened to him but he's arrogant and moody. We don't need him thrashing about our boats this time of year. The catch is badly needed."

Claire nodded in understanding as her fingers trailed over the roughhewn surface of the family table. Her fingernail caught a splinter. She ripped it from the table and let it fall to the floor.

Julie served the stew in small pottery bowls before calling out the window to the children who had a stray cat trapped in a crate.

"Let that thing go and get in here for supper." She was answered by squeals. Claire had a tiny view of them through the low window, over Julie's left shoulder. The children freed the cat and watched it scamper down the road, its tail high in the air.

Claire ate her stew in silence. She couldn't remember ever being this hungry. The tastes of the potatoes, meat and carrots were so much more intense than she'd experienced. Julie was quiet as well and Claire didn't miss the tremble in her hand as she lifted the spoon to her mouth. It seemed something else was in the room interrupting them. Claire wondered if the discussion of Ailfinn caused the atmosphere to change or merely the fact they were strangers. Only the children muttered and giggled throughout the dinner. Claire washed down her stew with a cup of water. "I must be on my way. Thank you for your tremendous hospitality. I think I'll be at the fisherman's cottage for a little while longer if it's not needed by anyone else. Until I decide what's to become of me, that is."

Julie smiled at her. "You're welcome. I hope you'll come by and visit us sometime." She stood and walked Claire to the door. "Goodbye, Claire, and remember what I said."

"I will. I've taken your warning seriously." She nodded to the children and headed toward the road. The sun was splashing the sky in pinks and oranges. She had a very pleasant walk the short two miles back to the cottage. It was quiet, the birds having retired for the night. The sea was calm and still. She wondered if Ailfinn had left or if he was simply not up to a storm tonight. As she walked the path to her newly adopted home, dragging her fingertips overtop of the rose bushes, she searched the surface of the sea for any ripples that could mean Ailfinn was close by. Disappointed, Claire entered the cottage.

Chapter Three

He was right. He couldn't stay away. Not after he'd seen her lying in bed, peaceful and vulnerable. He'd kept himself too long from touching her as they'd lain together the night before. When she entered the cottage and looked at him, without startling, he felt weak. It was as if she expected him to be there. Her acceptance swept him off guard, but her sultry smile had him leaping across the room to hold her in his arms. That's exactly what he did and she let him. She was doing something to him on the inside for which there was no defense. It didn't matter she was a human. He wanted her. His body ached with need.

She melted against his skin, showing no sign of hesitation, holding tight to his shoulders. Her lips were sweet and so willing. The soft little moan that escaped on a breath gave him the courage he needed. Her lips parted just a little, enough to let his tongue inside. He luxuriated in the feel of her tongue sliding against his. Unbelievable that she wanted him as much as he needed her. It had him rock hard and throbbing.

He swept her up off the floor and carried her to the bed. As he set her down, she clung to his neck, forcing him down on top of her in an awkward fall. Quickly, he shifted his weight to his elbows, all too aware of how small and petite she was in comparison to his formidable form. She kicked her skirts away and wrapped her legs around his lean hips; all the while he took from her mouth the taste that had been calling to him throughout the day.

She was sweeter than the sea plums he adored. Sweeter than the wines brought to him by hopeful women. Sweeter than any of those widows he'd tasted. And those legs...they were stronger than they looked. She'd hooked her ankles and squeezed him closer. He released her

mouth and gasped as he felt warm heat emanating from between her legs. Hot moisture slicked against his abdomen. *Of course*. He hadn't provided her with any undergarments. She was bare beneath the light dress he'd found for her. *By the gods*, he was done for.

When he looked into her beautiful green eyes, he realized she knew exactly what he was thinking. Mischief glowed like a little spark in her irises, swirls of desire flared out around them. She was all but daring him to take her. It was a surprise to him to have a woman not fearful, not full of guilt in some way.

"Tell me what you want, bright eyes. What do you dream of?" he whispered against her smooth, white throat.

"I want what you give the others. I want to know why the women treasure you so."

His quiet laughter filled the cottage. "They treasure me because I can give them what no *man* can. They would not come to me if their needs were met elsewhere."

"So, they use you?" Her breath was coming in short pants now as his hand gently caressed her side, her arm and the round outer curve of her petite breasts.

"No, I use them."

She grinned, "Well, as long as both sides are happy...are you using me, Ailfinn?"

"Would it bother you if I were?" He did nothing to disguise the need in his voice.

Claire didn't answer. Ailfinn took advantage of the silence and delved into her mouth yet again. Then, raising himself on one elbow, he slipped the dress down over her shoulders, kissing every inch of skin, as it was uncovered. She kicked at the skirt with her legs until it fell gracelessly to the floorboards.

Ailfinn licked a hot path down her neck, her shoulder and her breast. He stopped for only a moment to flick her ripe nipple with the tip of his tongue. She arched her back in response before taking hold of her own breast and pushing it up to him. He moaned and sucked gently, still

teasing her nipple with his tongue. She writhed like a slow, sensuous ribbon. He wanted to give this woman more than he gave the others. She deserved her climax and he intended to give her many. So many that she'd cry out for him to finish. The thought excited him even more and he held still for a sheer moment, regaining his control, before nipping at her sleek belly with his teeth.

She wound her fingers through his long, loose hair, taking hold. She gave him rein but was every bit in control of where she wanted him. He admired that, raised his face to grin at her and, seeing the flush of arousal radiating through her skin, he sank deeper into the moment.

Her legs parted for him. He found himself breathing her wild, heady scent and was thrown into a fit of passion. His cock ached but he didn't dare touch it, lest he spill his seed. Already it leaked. The pressure was close to unbearable. Ailfinn touched her moist folds with the very tip of his tongue. Slowly, teasingly slow, he made his way to the small nub that was now so easy to find. At the lightest touch, she bucked beneath him, pulling at his hair.

With a low growl, he plunged his tongue deeperinto her core, tasting the exotic scents of her inner being. Her hips rocked against him, as he held tight to her bottom, squeezing her cheeks in rhythm with her convulsions. She came then, with a moan and a rush of warm fluid. He licked and lapped as she sighed, sinking into the mattress.

"Not yet, bright eyes. We're not done yet," he growled.

She looked at him in confusion then suddenly realized what he meant.

"Your turn," she breathed.

"Are you ready?" He loomed over her like a hunter out for prey but she was an easy catch. He knew that when she grabbed his cock and stroked it. Sucking in his breath sharply and closing his eyes, he let her touch him for only a moment. Then, guiding his length with his hand, he plunged inside her. She was tight and hot. Ailfinn fought to bring her to another release but feared he would come too soon. No female, human or mer, had reacted to him this way. He'd never allowed it. In his mind, the mating was for his pleasure, not theirs. It made him ache with pressure like never before. He held on until Claire's neck arched back and she made a choked sound as if holding back a scream. She tightened around him, holding him within her.

That was all it took. He pushed hard into her, reaching down to tilt her hips so he could enter more deeply. Her erect nipples brushed against his chest, her fingers clawing at his back. Starlight filtered through the windows and the waves lapped gently on the shore. It was perfect. Ailfinn strained as his muscles convulsed. He gave in to his release, a shower of stars bursting before his eyes. Lowering himself over Claire, he was unable to comprehend why she was different. The sensation felt both unnerving and delicious. A feeling he'd never experienced.

As he lay, breathing into her hair, he wondered if this beauty would stay with him. How could he convince a human female to become his, to be his lover? It would be so much easier to have one woman to deal with, someone he knew was waiting for him.

"That was nice," she whispered. "But I need to breathe."

Immediately, he propped himself up on his elbows and she took a deep breath before letting out a little giggle. He brushed his hand across her cheek and into her hair. Her skin was so soft and the light pink color had returned to her cheekbones. She was warm now, heavenly warm. Other females were often too tentative, too unsure to offer him the warmth of what came afterwards. Too often he rose and left when he hadn't realized what he was missing.

When he slipped down to his side, Claire turned to cuddle against his chest. She lay with her eyes closed, her breath soft and quiet against his skin. He held her securely against him, wanting to never let her go.

"Why are you here, Ailfinn?" She tilted her chin to look up at him.

He'd expected questions but took a moment before answering. "Where would you expect me to be?"

It wasn't what he meant to say. He hadn't intended to be flippant in response to a serious question but he needed a minute to figure out what words to use. At her glare, he apologized.

"I'm sorry, Claire." He raked a hand through his hair, letting it rest on the nape of his neck. "I owe you an answer. The truth is, I don't belong anywhere else. I've been exiled by my kind."

"Exiled?"

He knew he had to tell her. He'd told no one. He'd never been asked. It secretly thrilled him that she wanted to know.

"There was a battle," he began. "Many years ago but it remains vivid in my memory. We were fighting the humans."

He watched her wince at the bitter way he said the word *human* and held her closer to him.

"They'd discovered us and were intent on hunting our colony to extinction. I finally tracked down the ship with the help of my brothers but the spears thrown by the humans were too powerful. Many of us died. My brothers and sisters. The waters turned pink and then red but not from the setting sun. The scent of blood burned my nostrils and so I fled. I couldn't have faced the rest, the survivors, and the families. There was no mercy that night, for either side. I led the attack. My kin followed me to their deaths in the lagoon where the boat anchored and for that, I'm not sure I'll ever forgive myself."

He talked as if he were alone. Shivers crept across his scalp as he listened to his own monotonous tone. Claire stroked his chest but his muscles were too tense to relax under her touch. He cleared his throat, afraid of any tremors in his voice.

"I left and found this place. My brothers can't find me here and the humans are somewhat hospitable."

He felt her head tilt up to look at him.

"Wouldn't that be because you wreak havoc when they are anything *but* hospitable?" It wasn't a question.

"That's none of your concern," he answered, bitterness wrapping his tone. Instantly, he felt regret.

Claire pulled away from him. No, she needs to understand!

He touched her arm. "Wait. I'm sorry, Claire. I'm not used to talking about this. I've done wrong in my life, no doubt, but I'm paying."

"How are you paying?" she asked without looking at him.

"Humans have always been of no consequence to me. That's the way of it. You're different, Claire, and I have no idea why you've allowed me to be here with you."

"The women in the village have all been here with you," she accused, looking him in the eye.

So that was it? Claire felt jealous? What was he doing? She was just another human female who felt nothing for him, who used him to her satisfaction.

"I kill," he mumbled. "I've no remorse for killing what humans I have, but I do wish circumstances were different. I bring death. You risk your life being with me."

Ailfinn climbed from the bed, wrapping a quilt low on his waist. He felt her looking down, but kept his eyes on her face, rather than following her gaze to the arousal between his legs. He apparently had no control over that. Her own quilt covered only her most private area. Her perfectly smooth breasts rose from the covers in what seemed a teasingly sensuous manner. Suddenly, he craved the numbing silence of his sea more than anything.

"Thank you, Claire." He bowed his head to her and walked to the door. She said nothing as he walked outside and down the path. He discarded the cumbersome quilt and strode into the quiet waters. It would be so easy to call a storm right now. It was what he would do were it any other night, but no. It didn't seem right to disrupt what he and Claire had just shared. This night should remain sacred, despite the fact he'd left her alone in a strange bed.

In his merman form, he slashed through the water, scaring creatures from his path, pulling the weeds from their anchors in the forceful current he created with one silky movement of his powerful tail. Once again, he became merely a shadow under the sea, restless in his

uncertainty. These were feelings he had no experience with. He felt a great urge to flee, to find another part of the ocean to call his own, far away from this woman who'd dropped into his world. Yet, he was tired of leaving. The humans respected him. It may have been out of fear but he was fine with that. He had all he needed.

Thoughts tumbled through his mind as he slowed and floated on his back just below the surface, staring up at the tiny hints of stars, blurred by the movement of the water above him. Momentarily, he thought of finding a woman to release his tension with. But that only brought him back to Claire. Perhaps he shouldn't have left her as he did.

* * *

Ailfinn sat on a distant shallow reef, his chin in his hands, his eyelids heavy, when he noticed a flickering of light near the fisherman's cabin. He'd been watching for quite some time, wondering whether to return or not, knowing she was by now fast asleep. It was a hot night. No doubt she'd be sleeping under a thin cover, her upper body bare. *Why am I not there*?

When he'd left, her face held no anger, no shame, only confusion. Confusion was an emotion that would let her rest. Of that he was certain. Shame and anger kept a being up at night. He was well acquainted with all three emotions.

The flickering lights came into view as they rounded the side of the cabin. Torches? Ailfinn dove off his perch, swimming for shore to get a better view. His strokes were strong yet noiseless. No one could see his approach.

All at once he heard Claire's cry of alarm as the door to her cabin flew open. The torches remained alight outside. Panic flew through his veins as he pressed himself to swim faster.

Claire was pulled from the cabin door, a white bedsheet billowing in the breeze around her body. Ailfinn cried out to her but his voice was lost in the air. He wasn't close enough to get to her in time. As his tail shifted to the legs of a human male and those feet felt solid sand, he counted three men as they threw Claire overtop of a nervously prancing horse and flew up the path, toward Copperberry.

Ailfinn felt the storm growing despite himself. The air charged with electrical energy, zapping through the sky above the cliffs. The pressure changed instantly, bringing with it the promise of hard rains. It was beyond his control. At least no fishermen would be foolish enough to be out this time of night. For once, they were safe from the temper of Ailfinn. He had to find out what happened to Claire.

The light pink of dawn spread out over the hills as Ailfinn walked into town via the cow path. He'd rummaged the closets of the cabin, coming up with a red flannel shirt he didn't bother to button and a pair of trousers too short to reach past his knees. He remained barefoot but the gravel scraped at his tender feet, so unused to walking far, let alone on rough surfaces.

The sun cast a pale glow over the fields. He could hear the low moan of waking cattle and the soft bleat of the sheep in the hills. The land was full of morning sounds. As if nothing wrong had occurred in the predawn darkness.

He followed the hoof prints of the horses, counting three sets in the soft road. They led out of town. He did not know the land. Needing more information, he stopped at the window of a nearby home. Not quite gently, he rapped at the glass three times before the curtains parted. Instantly, he recognized the face. It was Julie, the woman who'd sought him out only two nights past. Her face registered shock before quickly becoming unreadable.

Motioning him to the entrance, she chastised a crying child within. He obeyed, meeting her at the heavy, wooden door. She opened it tentatively but he pushed it farther with his forearm. Julie stepped back.

"What do you want?" she asked abruptly.

"You know who I am."

He was angry and she needed to choose her words carefully. He was sure the glare in his gaze told her all she needed to know.

She took a deep breath. "I do. You are Ailfinn." She whispered the name with a hint of reverence. "What do you want?"

"Three horses rode through here not long ago. Did you see them? Do you know of them?"

She seemed more at ease now, but spoke to him with disregard in her voice. "Three men. They had the woman Claire with them. The woman you took from the sea."

Ailfinn felt at a loss. "What would they want with a woman not from here?"

"That's exactly why they want her. A man came to my door yesterday, not long after Claire left here. He was searching for her. Said she was a runaway, he did. A servant owing a debt who's left her masters without fulfilling her payments. She didn't wash overboard as she told me. She jumped and they've come to take her home."

Ailfinn felt extreme distaste for the short woman in front of him. To think he'd almost taken her to bed. The idea disgusted him. She had no care for what was his.

"And you told them where she was, didn't you?"

A flash of fear prickled across the woman's face but she reined it in. Showing fear in the shadow of Ailfinn was akin to suicide as far as she knew. Ailfinn knew the stories that ran rampant on shore. The scent of fear riled his senses. It delighted him. In reality, he saw it as permission to play with the humans, to scare them a little more just to watch them squirm. He didn't have time for that now.

"Didn't you?" he yelled when she didn't answer him.

"I told them she was at the abandoned cottage and how to get there. They paid me in shillings. Why? Does she mean something to you, Ailfinn?" Her sarcasm cut at his chest.

Ailfinn's mouth curled into a snarl at the sound of his name on her traitorous lips. Julie hastily pushed the door closed, leaving Ailfinn staring at a knothole.

They were taking her home, back to her employ, he guessed. Whether or not she took the opportunity to throw herself overboard or was thrown by the storm, Claire wanted to be free. Ailfinn intended to ensure she remained that way.

Chapter Four

He left Julie's home, feeling a fire burn up through his neck. The passion and intense anger that drove him to find Claire filled his veins with electricity. Thunder echoed through the hills, but she was out in this weather. He had to remain calm if only for Claire. She was on horseback, not fully dressed and vulnerable to the three men who'd captured her. A storm of the magnitude he felt he could call up would only add to her misery.

Ailfinn took a breath as he looked down the road connecting the village of Copperberry to the rest of the world. Finding Claire would not be easy. He had no idea where she was originally from, nor where her employers lived before leaving for America. No doubt that was where she was headed. But to find her seemed impossible.

Ailfinn sat on the edge of the road in a clump of grass still damp from the morning dew. He took one foot in his hand and rubbed it. Already his tender soles were scraped raw. Walking on human feet would get him nowhere. He decided to take to the waters. He could find Claire from his own domain.

If anyone had seen him on that night as he raced for the sea, muscles straining in rhythm with his pace, they would have stared in awe at the beautiful form he presented. Swimming through the swells he'd created in his fury, he shifted and once again became the powerful merman of legend.

Ailfinn followed the shore, knowing the road would meander in that direction. The next town was also on the coast. He swam hard, testing his endurance and finding himself still worthy of the power so many had attributed to him. The more power he put behind his strokes, the more the skies cleared, revealing the pinpoint stars and a sharp sliver of a late summer moon. He didn't need the light to see. He knew the waters better than the fishermen. He lived in them, they were his home or as much of a home as any place of exile could be.

Claire's face came to his mind then. He was unable to stop it and for a moment his stroke faltered. Her sweetness and acceptance touched him deep in his chest. She was his. No other man could have her, whether it be a heavy-handed employer, bounty hunter or potential lover. He'd make certain of that if it cost all he had.

He realized then, how little he had that held any meaning for him.

* * *

The minute that rough, smelly hand covered her face, Claire knew who'd sent for her. As they ripped her from her bed, she cursed the name Silvain, praying he would die some horrible death before she was returned to him and his despicable wife. Could she even call that horrible woman a wife? Silvain did not share a room with her in their manor. It wasn't her he slept with. He'd tried more than once to get Claire into his bed but she found him repulsive, his breath always smelling of whiskey, his underarms always damp with the exertion of simply being. He wanted her to want him. Ever since she'd first rejected him, she'd become the focus of his frustrations and anger. He never failed to find a reason to whip her backside or slap her face so that some part of it bled. The storm that hit their crossing was a godsend. Claire was more than happy to go overboard, knowing she risked death. When the merman found her, an incredible weight had been lifted from her mind.

Merman. As she lay bruised across the rump of a sleek black horse, wrists tied in front of her, she played with the word on her lips. She thought it had been a dream until he touched her. That strong hand with a salty scent reminded her of summers spent by the sea when she was younger, when life had been right.

She'd fought them when they dragged her from her bed and for her efforts she'd been rewarded with a cuff across her jaw. She could feel the swelling. She pushed gingerly at the inside of her cheek with her tongue, stopping when a stab of pain pierced through her face. Praying her jaw wasn't broken, she counted her teeth with the tip of her tongue. All there.

She slipped from the horse only once, headfirst, unable to cushion herself with her bound wrists. The damage to her shoulder would surely be showing by the morn. She'd been cursed at and hauled back up by the man on the front of the horse, who was comfortably cushioned in the saddle. If she could get her hands on a knife she'd be gone.

Ailfinn.

Would he even remember her? Would he care? Their lovemaking was unlike any she'd experienced. That said something, didn't it? Claire was not inexperienced, nor was she an expert. A couple of nights in the barn with a young stable boy were nothing to scoff at, but Ailfinn had made her feel like a woman, rather than a clumsy girl.

As they entered a town, it was still dark. Despite the early hour, Claire heard the grumbles and chatter of men working on the docks. The salt in the air told her she was still near the water, however, it was masked by the bitter rankness of the sweat of men and horse. If she could get word to Ailfinn back in Copperberry, he would come for her. The longer she spent on the back end of the horse, the more certain she became. But how could he possibly know where she was? If he came to the cottage and found her gone, he would assume she'd merely left, returned home.

For the first time in days, her eyes filled with moisture. She closed her eyelids, forbidding herself to let a single tear fall.

"Where are we supposed to meet?" grumbled a tired voice.

The man in front of her answered, "The third dock from the road. It will be a small rowboat we're to look for, ready to take her back to the ship. They intend to be in America by the twenty-first." They were talking of Silvain. She shivered. She had to think of a plan. The shock of being taken was wearing off. Now, she needed to do something about it.

"There he is there," the man in front called to his companions.

"He'd better have the coin with him is all I can say," said the man on the grey, mottled horse close to her head.

The docks were crowded and smelled of fish and horse dung. Claire tried to fling her hair out of her face to see what choices she had to make an escape. The leaves stuck in her hair scraped her eyes. She peered through the tatters of hair. It wouldn't be difficult to disappear here. The sheer number of people ensured that. She wondered if Silvain had seen her atop the horse. If he hadn't, she had an even better chance. The bounty hunters who'd taken her were weary and bitter. They were apt to just let her escape. She could hear it in their tones.

With a sudden burst of speed and energy, Claire heaved herself from the horse's backside. She fell in a heap on the ground landing squarely on her tailbone. Stunned by the pain, it was a moment before she could move. When she scrambled to her feet, it was already too late.

"Where ya think yer going?" drawled her captor. Dismounting, he grabbed her by the shoulder and maneuvered her through the grubby consortium of dockworkers, toward a small rowboat tied precariously to the end of a dock. No one so much as glanced in her direction. To see a woman bruised and bound at the wrists was a common sight at the docks, where people of respectability never ventured. Disobedient wives, fallen women who'd turned to gambling to stay alive, escaped slaves and of course employees who hadn't been given their leave. Silvain stood tall and pompous beside the boat.

"We've got her, Mr. Silvain," called one of the men. "We found your little maid." As they moved closer, Claire watched the sparkle of greed flicker in Silvain's gaze. The oil lanterns lighting the docks would have been pretty on any other night. On this night, they merely reflected men's thoughts. "The wench? Ah." His lips drew into what Claire would describe as a snarl, although she knew from experience others saw it as a cocky smile. He was planning all the wicked chores he could think of for her, imagining the games he'd make her play, the debts he'd claim for "saving her life". She was so certain of his thoughts that a cold sweat broke out on her palms. Her stomach heaved. Fighting to hold her composure, she straightened her head and looked directly at him.

As the men stood before him, he slowly reached into his jacket pocket and, without saying a word, produced a small leather bag. The man with the tight grip on her shoulder pushed her toward her master at the same moment he lunged for the bag. She stumbled but Silvain caught her waist, steadying her. She grimaced at the stench of scotch emanating from his mouth.

The men crowded together in a tight, conspiratorial circle without further thought for Claire. They fingered the currency inside and took off. Claire had a feeling the money would be spent on booze and women before dawn.

She didn't want to look her master in the face. The fear was quickly becoming uncontrollable. She hadn't ever wanted to see him again. He shoved her hard into the rowboat. The rough-hewn seat she fell on cut into her cheek. A small trickle of warm blood dripped down her already bruised face. *This can't possibly get any worse*. She was alive and was grateful the bounty hunters hadn't thought to rape her. *Just take a breath. You can handle this, Claire.*

Claire remained in the hull of the boat, listening calmly to the reprimands Silvain tossed at her. Two of his men rowed the boat out to sea.

On the horizon, she could see the tall masts of the ship that would carry her to America. Could she risk another escape into the water? Where was Ailfinn? If he wasn't there to save her, she'd certainly drown. Although she'd been willing to risk that only days ago, life had changed drastically. Now, she had Ailfinn. Life away from Silvain and his barbaric family was imaginable. For a moment in time, it had been attainable. It wasn't blood now that dripped quietly down Claire's cheek. She turned her head and looked over the edge. The sea was calm. There was no anger in the night sky. Perhaps he didn't know she was gone. Or maybe he didn't care.

At last she felt able to voice the question that had haunted her. "How did you know to look for me? You knew I was alive? How did you find me?" The questions sputtered out with a tremble, belying her anxiety.

Silvain grinned in the dim night. The flash of his big teeth caught the moonlight. "A gut feeling, lass. I had a feeling you went voluntarily. The storm was a nice cover for you. How you made it to shore, I've no idea, but it's of no matter to me now. It only took the task of asking a few questions in the villages along the cliffs. They were all too happy to give you up." He sneered. "I wonder why that is?"

Claire lowered her gaze. She was a stranger. Why wouldn't they give her back to her employer? They owed her nothing. Unable to conjure anger, Claire curled into a ball on the hard wooden planks of the hull.

Very slowly, her eyelids drooped as the beginnings of exhaustion overtook her. She felt weak, her arms and legs heavy and aching.

The gentle lap of the water on the hull and the rhythmic rowing had her lulled into a fitful sleep when a sudden, loud splash and rocking of the boat brought her fully awake. She propped herself up, her bound hands grabbing at the edges of the boat. She looked around, blinking as her eyes adjusted to wakefulness. It was dark but not too dark to notice Silvain was gone. Circular ripples in the early morning sea were all that remained. The two men in charge of rowing cowered in the stern, eyes not on Claire, but on the water where Silvain had disappeared. It was then that a fish tail broke the surface of the water, twisted once and came crashing down with a sound that echoed through the dark night.

When she caught a glimpse of that awe-inspiring tail fin, she jumped to her feet, rocking the boat dangerously. But falling into the water was not her fear. Being hauled aboard that ship frightened her much more. The little rowboat was much too close for comfort now, despite the fact Silvain had disappeared. His staff and his wife were still aboard that ship. She would not be taken to America. She would stay on the shores of the North Sea or die trying.

"Ailfinn!" she called out. "Ailfinn, I'm here."

Shouts arose from the deck of the ship as sailors ran for spears and ammunition for their guns. So, it wasn't her imagination. They'd seen him, too. She could make out from their crazed shouts that they hadn't missed what had happened to Silvain and were intent on revenge. She turned her head, searching the water for a sign that he was coming to her rescue.

She couldn't let them kill Ailfinn. "Stop," she yelled. Claire pulled the sheet that she'd wrapped around her body higher, stepped up on the seat and yelled. "Stop!"

The sailors paid her no mind. Drifting closer to the ship, her rowers finally weighed the risks of entering the water with confronting the dreaded merman. They conferred for a moment before diving simultaneously into the frigid waters and ploughing through the night in the direction of the ship. Shouts of encouragement had them swimming as fast as they could. Fear had them sputtering and calling for help as they did so. They wanted out of the water before the merman got to them.

In a whispering volley, spears pierced the surface at the bow of Claire's boat. She ducked only to realize it wasn't her they were aiming at. A massive, dark fin emerged from the surface in front of her only to smack down again in a storm of water. That was all the proof she needed. In desperation, she pinched her nose and jumped into the water.

It wasn't as difficult to stay under as she'd imagined. It had only been days but she'd forgotten the pull of the ocean. The sheet covering her body tangled around her legs weighing her down. Frantically, Claire pushed her hair from her face with her hands, trying to peer through the ocean depths. Her lungs began to burn, but the thought of surfacing was too much to bear. She would not be dragged aboard that ship. Just as she felt the sensation of an overwhelming calm and desire to just let go, a strong hand grasped her wrists. She relaxed then, floating into oblivion.

Chapter Five

When her eyes fluttered open, she was momentarily disoriented. It was dark. A dim light danced across the ceiling. Water was reflecting from somewhere. At first she thought she must be in her little fisherman's cottage, then, remembering her capture, she imagined it was a cabin on Silvain's ship.

"Isn't it beautiful? The moonlight seeps in through cracks in the rock." When his smooth voice broke through her thoughts, she relaxed.

His rugged face was tilted up toward the dancing shadows on the rock that formed a ceiling above their heads. In this light, it became all too obvious he wasn't human. He was too beautiful, too ethereal and too unreal. A tinge of panic nauseated her. What would she do when the time came for him to leave? Surely, he couldn't stay in human form with her for the rest of their days. But that was exactly what she wanted.

She lifted her arms and glanced at her wrists. The binds were gone. Only a thin red line remained. Gingerly, she reached a hand to him and traced his jaw, feeling the pain of her injured shoulder pierce through her arm. His profile dusted with moonlight gave him a diaphanous quality. She needed to touch him to make sure he was real. She would not let her sore body keep her from him.

He seemed to understand. Taking her hand in his, he leaned over and brushed his lips against hers. "I'm glad you're awake, bright eyes. Are you warm?"

Claire looked around. A thick, woolen blanket was wrapped tightly around her. She felt safe and dry.

"I'm perfectly warm," she answered.

As clear thoughts returned to her, she noticed Ailfinn was in his human form, supporting himself with small kicks of his feet as he rested his arms on the side of the rocky ledge she lay on. Droplets of water glistened on his shoulders and chest. She'd never seen him so beautiful. She stroked his chest, following the rivulets.

"You won't let them take me, will you?" she whispered.

"Of course not. But love, you would have escaped. They were nothing compared to your fortitude."

"Sure," she scoffed.

"We're going home, Claire. As soon as you're ready, we're going home."

Claire sat up slowly, ignoring the blanket that fell down to her waist exposing her bare chest. Ailfinn was not able to ignore it. He gently caressed and kneaded her breast with his closest hand.

"Come closer." His voice was tinged with urgent, growing need.

Claire shifted on the ledge until she was on her back, inches from Ailfinn's chin. His hand touched her skin, warming her to the core. He traced a curved path from her collarbone to her breast. Leaning in, he took a taut nipple in his mouth. Claire gasped at the intense sensation shooting through her veins.

Caressing with his tongue, he was unable to speak, but despite her arousal, her curiosity was also piqued. She ran a hand through his long, dark hair. "Where is home, Ailfinn?" she whispered, aware of the echoes in the rocky cavern he'd brought her to.

"It's where I haven't been in too long. It's where we'll both be safe. That is, if they'll have me." He turned his attentions to her nipple once again but she needed to know more.

"Why now? Why not Copperberry?"

Ailfinn groaned as she pulled his head to her chest, forcing him to take her breast deeper into his mouth.

After a moment, he released her and stroked her cheek with one hand. "They know us there and they're not at all opposed to exacting revenge on me by having you killed." He paused, scanning the cavern as if unsure what to say.

"I've killed for the last time. I know that now. I want my life back."

Claire felt panic explode in the pit of her belly. "And me?" she asked on an intake of air.

"Did I not say we, my sweet Claire? Of course you're coming with me. I won't be without you."

"But, there are others." She marveled at the thought as she spoke the words. "How will I fit in? If the others hold the same hatred for humanity that you do—"

"No, not hatred. Not of humanity. I thought that's what it was, but it was misplaced. How can I redeem myself in your eyes, Claire?"

She took a small breath. "You've been through too much. Your anger and your hatred were not misplaced. They've simply run their course."

He hesitated, seemingly unsure of how to go on, how to handle the emotions he was feeling.

"And you will fit in just as all the other humans have. You're not an anomaly, Claire."

At that he gathered her in his arms, dragging her into the water. He held her tight against him. His true form was still an unimaginable concept despite that she'd seen him both as a merman and a man.

He ran his strong hands up and down the length of her back, breathing warmly into her hair. The sensation of their slick bodies sliding against each other filled her veins with lightening.

"I wasn't sure I'd see you again," he said, his voice husky with need. For the first time I had something I couldn't risk losing. The seas will be calm tonight, love."

* * *

They reached Copperberry late that afternoon. Ailfinn was tired, his feet worn and sore, but the air was fresh and crisp. It gave him the strength he needed to ignore his feet.

As they walked down the main road, past the small crofters cottages, he walked tall and proud with Claire wrapped in a blanket, taken from a clothesline, beside him. With a tinge of anger, he glanced at Julie who quickly rounded up her rambunctious children at first sight of Ailfinn. Desperate not to encounter him again, she hurried indoors with her brood, slamming the door tight behind her.

Ailfinn turned his head to hide the curl of a smile from Claire. They would be left alone for the time being. If the people of Copperberry knew he was back, as Julie was sure to inform them, they would behave until a leader was chosen and the hunt began. He intended to help Claire gather the few small items she'd scavenged from the cottage before they left. The thought of returning home still sent shivers through his scalp.

Home. It had been five long years since he'd left his brothers to roam the shores alone. When it scared him, he thought of Claire, who was journeying to a world completely unknown to her. His own fears of rejection, dismissal and anger from those he loved seemed miniscule in comparison.

Chapter Six

Tucked in against his warmth, with a small satchel slung around her body, Claire was warm in the waters of the North Sea. He held her tightly but still she clung to his torso as they sped through the waves toward his home. She kept her mouth closed but found it surprisingly easy to breathe without getting nostrils full of salt water.

After what seemed like hours, Claire began to relax and let her thoughts drift. The caress of the water as it flowed soothed her battered body. Her fingers stroked his velvety skin. He pulled her against him in response. The sun colored the water like gilded fire as morning dawned on the eastern horizon, warm and misty. Claire could make out the everchanging shoreline.

"Are we close?" she asked when he began to slow. With powerful thrusts of his tail, he did not need the use of his arms. He wrapped Claire in his warmth.

She forgot he would not be able to communicate verbally with her in his mer form as he'd warned before they left. As a merman, his language skills reverted to those of his race. He would be more fish than human. A squeeze of his arms to let her know he understood was all the reassurance she needed.

His swimming was tentative now, as if he wasn't sure where he was headed. Claire tried to look around but was rewarded with seawater up her nose. She sputtered and coughed.

A quick glance from Ailfinn reprimanded her. *Keep still*, it seemed to say. *I'll let you know when we're going to stop*. The tone in his gaze was more serious than she'd ever heard, not that he spoke much. When he did, Claire had always thought him serious, until now.

Finally, as the warm sun rose high above the horizon, drying the hair on the top of her head, Ailfinn deposited her in shallow water. The bottom was sandy and soft on her bare feet. She dug them in for only a moment before heading for shore. Around her, the presence of beings could be felt. She knew they were there, could feel the water moving around them, curious and anxious all at once. She searched the waters but they kept out of sight.

Walking onto the soft, hot sand, her legs felt wobbly, her body sore. Still, she pulled herself out of the water to stand in the welcoming sun. He would follow soon. She knew in her heart his family would accept him. How could they not? He was an awesome creature, an amazing man. Claire stood naked, hugging herself under the palms of this warmer land, sheltering herself from the chill she now felt out of his arms, away from his body.

A rustling in the small hills behind her had her taking a defensive pose, feet spread, arms at the ready. When a slight woman, dressed in a long skirt and a bright material wrapped around her breasts, stepped into the sun, Claire relaxed. The woman drew closer, put a soft arm around her and smiled. A fresh citrus scent wafted on the air and Claire inhaled deeply to breathe it all in.

"What's his name?" she asked, a calm smile telling Claire she already knew the answer.

"Ailfinn."

"Ah. A name I know well but only from the stories. On the mainland they speak of him. Those who knew him when he left have long felt that Ailfinn was the one they were searching for. He doesn't know how the battle ended, does he?"

"I cannot say for certain."

"They'll tell him. He's a hero, you know. Set high on a well-deserved pedestal for his bravery in battle, in protecting the colony."

Claire smiled. "No, I don't suppose he knows that."

"And your name, dear?" asked the woman.

Jennah Sharpe

Claire McIvor stared out at the sea watching the great and powerful flashes of mer tail gilded by the sunlight. He'd been accepted, welcomed as a long lost brother.

"I'm Claire," she answered, feeling of surge of peace inside. Claire felt light-hearted for the first time in too many years.

"Welcome home, Claire. Let's see to those bruises," whispered the woman, seeming to give as much weight to her words as she could. "Come, then. Follow me. I'll show you home."

About the Author

То learn about Jennah Sharpe, please visit more www.jennahsharpe.com. email Jennah Send an to at jennah_sharpe@yahoo.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers well as as Jennah! http://groups.yahoo.com/group/jennahs_romantica

Seth Kolski, a werewolf, hides his heritage and passes for normal. Until he meets Jamie.

The Strength of the Pack © 2007 Jorrie Spencer

Since his sister disappeared two years ago, Seth's solitude has intensified. Despite his deep need to be part of a pack, he sets himself apart, wary of humans who fear the wolf in him.

When Seth hooks up with his teenaged crush, loneliness and physical desire overcome his distrust. Jamie welcomes his attentions, albeit a little shyly, and Seth rationalizes they can have one night together before they part.

For Seth can never be part of a regular family. No normal woman is going to accept his freakish nature, nor his past violence. Especially a single mother determined to protect her family. However, Seth and Jamie's bond runs deeper than he knows. He cannot return to the shadows. Yet exposure may bring danger to them all.

Book One of the Strength series.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Strength of the Pack:*

"Would you like whiskey in your coffee?" he asked over the burble of the coffee machine.

"No, thanks."

He added a dollop to his mug, then stilled. She might not have recognized the tension in his body if she hadn't been watching closely.

"I had a crush on you, you know," he said abruptly.

Her cheeks warmed as she sat on a stool behind the counter, putting a barrier between them. She didn't want to get too emotional, something she was quite capable of, as Derek had pointed out oh so many times. "I'm flattered." Her words made it past the tightness in her throat as she realized they were going to make love. She was unlikely to back out now.

He hitched a hip on the edge of the counter. "Now you are. You wouldn't have been flattered back then."

"I liked your company." She remembered the skinny, awkward teen. He'd followed her around when Tom was off playing with other friends who didn't want to hang with the unpopular Seth. Derek—they'd just started to date—had teased that she had an admirer and she'd laughed, not wanting Derek to know she enjoyed the attentions of a fifteen-yearold boy. Derek would have given Seth grief.

Other memories were sweeter. "You thought everything I said was wonderful. Pretty heady for an eighteen-year-old girl." With a college boyfriend who made sure she knew who the smart one in the couple was.

"I was obviously devoted." He crossed thick, muscular arms. Despite his leanness, this was a man with a good amount of upper body strength.

"I didn't quite figure that out."

He raised an eyebrow in doubt.

She shrugged. "I didn't think about it like that."

"You didn't think about me much," he corrected. "Understandable. I was young."

"You were Tom's friend and Tom's friends were first and foremost from another planet. Including the nice ones, like you."

"So, I was nice."

"Oh, yeah. Aren't you still?"

He blinked at the question. "I try my best."

"You were nicer by far than my then-boyfriend Derek. Even if I thought he was great at the time." She didn't hide her bitterness.

"I think it's better we don't discuss Derek." His voice was solemn. Part of her wanted to complain about her ex, but it would spoil the mood. Instead she watched him pour coffee, hands now steady. She, too, felt more at ease. Casual sex scared her, but this no longer felt casual, or at least thoughtless. They didn't have much history, but they had something.

He picked up the two mugs and walked past her. "Come with me." His elbow pointed towards the doorway.

He exited the kitchen. His straight back and strong shoulders mesmerized her, bringing alive a desire that had long been buried deep. She entered a cozy den. A place for friends. Though the thrum of excitement beating through her veins contradicted that thought. Since she'd set eyes on Seth, her body had its own ideas.

He placed the mugs on the coffee table. As he settled into one corner of the couch and she in the other, she was tempted to scoot over and cuddle up to him. She liked his caresses, his firm arms around her. The space between them suddenly seemed daunting.

He held out his hand to her.

She opened her mouth but the word "I" stuck in her throat. Indecision grappled with desire, tangling her words.

"Whatever you want, Jamie." He dropped his arm, eyes pale and watchful. Attentive.

"I don't know what I want. How's that for sophisticated? Though presumably I knew when I accepted your invitation to drink coffee."

"You wanted coffee," he suggested, drinking his. She hadn't thought that eyes twinkled, but Seth's did.

"Truth is, I never drink coffee at night."

"You don't have to drink coffee for my sake." His rapt attention flattered her. It had been years since anyone focused on her like this.

"I know." She set down the mug and he reached over to snag her hand. "I just—"

"You don't have to talk, either." He closed the space between them. *Don't talk*.

He pulled her next to him, smelling of musk and male and outside. His fingers ran across the back of her neck and she shivered. The other hand came under her chin and he turned her face towards him, brushing a thumb across her lips. The feather-light touches had her trembling and he'd hardly done a thing.

"I don't usually—"

"Shhh." He brought a thumb back to her lips.

He was right. He didn't want to know she'd left Derek two years ago and their sex life had stuttered to a halt before the split. He might want to know her belly was knotted with desire, but he was going to find out before long.

As his arms came around her, she forked a hand through his dark hair and remembered the buzz cut his father used to insist Seth wear. "You have gorgeous hair."

He stiffened slightly and she wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't just pulled her into his lap. Maybe he feared she saw him as some kind of trophy. He *was* handsome, as well as physically fit. But what drew her were his volatile eyes, his soft, persuasive voice, his frank interest.

"I wouldn't be here." She evaded his lips though she did want to kiss. But she couldn't make love without talking. It wasn't her way. "If I hadn't known you ten years ago."

His mouth explored her neck, giving her goose bumps.

"And you used to rescue frogs the other boys captured. Put them back into the pond where they belonged."

He drew back, his eyes crinkling with humor in a way she hadn't seen before. "My unpopular actions have had long-term benefits, I see."

"I couldn't have gone home with anyone else."

His hold on her tightened. "Be careful, Jamie, if you do go to bars on your own again. Don't go home with a stranger."

She had to laugh. "Are you trying to talk me out of this?"

His serious, somewhat guilty expression puzzled her. She reached up and touched his face, rough from shadow that had formed by the end of the day. "I want to be here, Seth."

"I sure don't want you to be anywhere else," he said roughly.

She grinned. "Maybe it is better if I don't talk."

"Let me think about how I can arrange that." His mouth skimmed hers and her lips parted, wanting more. Which, she suspected, was how he wanted her to feel.

He took her mouth with his.

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