



eBooks are *not* transferable. They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.

Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
512 Forest Lake Drive
Warner Robins, Georgia 31093

Heart of the Sea
Copyright © 2007 by Sela Carsen

Cover by Anne Cain

ISBN: 1-59998-677-9

www.samhainpublishing.com

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: October 2007

Heart of the Sea

Sela Carsen

Dedication

Without fail, to my family, whose patience knows no bounds.

To Angela James, who, despite her protestations to the contrary, is a Nice Editor.

To Dayna Hart, who held my hand while I speed-wrote the first draft.

To the Crit Wits, who put up with my inconsistencies.

To the Romance Divas, whose humor and knowledge help me grow as a writer and a person.

Prologue

“You will find all you need in the sea.”

Ronan Burbank raised an eyebrow. Then he smiled at the old woman with the thick Scottish accent who had obviously crashed his party. He extricated his hand from hers.

“Thank you very much, ma’am. I’m sure I will.” As the guards escorted her out, he gestured to his head of security. “Make sure you take her through the kitchen first. I’ll see if Harry can’t look in on her for a moment before you take her home.” The poor woman looked a little blue around the lips. Probably needed her medicine.

Harry was actually Dr. Harold Kilhausen, noted cardiologist and head of staff at Providence General. The doctor was an avid sailor in the little spare time he had and crewed on the best yacht racing team that Burbank Industries sponsored. This party was not just the annual fête, but also a celebration of their latest win.

Ronan enjoyed celebrating success. It felt good to bring everyone to his home. Burbanks had lived here off the south coast of Rhode Island for over a hundred years, building one of the massive mansions that were synonymous with turn of the century wealth. Ronan loved every stick and brick of the place where he’d grown up.

This little portion of the coastline boasted an impressive cliff and the view never failed to soothe him. The old woman had accosted him as he stood alone on his balcony, enjoying a quick moment of quiet overlooking the ocean before wading back into the social fray. Now, as he prepared to return to his guests, he thought he heard a faint splash. He glanced out to sea again, scanning the water for a disturbance. When he saw nothing, he went back to the party.

Chapter One

It was cold! Meriel hated being cold and it was always fricking freezing in the North Atlantic, even in late April. She longed for home down in Tennessee and tried to remember what a summer's night felt like. It was no use. Even under layers of blubber and fur, she was still human and still cold.

Seven years had passed since she'd gone to the Burbank company party and fallen into the waters of Block Island Sound in Rhode Island. She should have died. There had even been days early on when she wished she had. But nope. Not her. She was cursed.

No, seriously.

Cursed.

Meriel Byrne had turned into a Selkie.

Seven years ago, she'd thought impressing her boss was important. Since then, she'd learned otherwise. Now, finding fish was important. Staying away from seal-eating killer whales was important. Fending off the damn real seals who wanted to mate with her was important!

"Back off, fur face!" she barked at an importunate male. "I am not your girlfriend du jour. A) We're in open water, not the rookery, B) it's not mating season, and C) just yuck. Call me politically incorrect, but I don't think I can go for the whole interspecies thing."

She grumbled to herself as she dove away from him. If she'd known how attractive she was as a Selkie, she wouldn't have worried so much about shaving her legs when she was human.

A lone halibut, separated from its school, swam past her. Lunch time. In a burst of speed, she chomped down on it and swallowed.

If she ever regained her human form, Meriel swore she would never, ever eat sushi again.

But she had no time to waste, even for lunch. Nose pointed south, she swam for the small, historic village of Misquapaug.

Twisted it might be, but she couldn't help herself. Every year, she had this urge to return to the place where the curse had changed her. And why not? It wasn't as if she had anything pressing on her calendar. Just a lot of fishing.

At the edge of the sound, she made her way around the inlet to an immense, turn of the century mansion. The house was even more impressive for perching at the top of a lone cliff. She'd been there once. It belonged to Ronan Burbank, heir to Burbank Industries, where she'd been low man on the totem pole in the finance department.

Meriel sighed gustily. She'd had a massive crush on the man. At the company party, she'd been trying so hard to impress him, she stabbed her stiletto heel into the soft, sandy earth, then tripped and fell off the cliff.

It was such an idiotic way to die. Except she hadn't died. When Meriel hit the water, a curse she hadn't even known existed kicked into action and she turned into a Selkie. It had taken her months to learn to make her new body work for her, but after such a long time, she was as agile in the water as any born seal.

She bobbed in the surf, wondering if Ronan lived up in that big house now with a perfect wife and perfect children. Someday, she'd stop coming here and hurting for things she couldn't have. But someday wasn't today.

A lone sailboat floating in the active waters caught her eye. The choppy sea frothed at the tip of every wave and a particularly vigorous gust of wind sent the blue and silver sail jibing wildly around the mast. That was wrong. Whatever lackbrain was crewing that craft needed to get his rear in gear or he'd sink it.

The boat tipped hard and she realized why no one was at the helm. The solitary sailor was lying at the bottom in a haphazard array of limbs, either unconscious or dead. Meriel dove under the waves and shot toward the sleek little racing yacht, praying she'd be in time.

She was almost there when the boat heeled over in the wake of a high wave and dumped its human cargo into the unforgiving sea. The cold must have revived the man enough for him to panic. Meriel darted over to him and grabbed his collar in her teeth, pulling until they broke the surface. The buoyancy of the water didn't do nearly enough to counter the effect of the wind and tide. She struggled landward.

“Idiot,” she said between clenched teeth. There was blood in the water from his head wound and the taint of it washed into her mouth. She wanted to gag, but then she’d lose her hold on him.

“If you can’t sail, you shouldn’t be on the water.” She growled at him as she lugged his weight. The boathouse at the end of the Burbank dock became visible through the spray.

“Finally. Hey, moron. I know you’re passed out, but if you can hear me, you need to get up to the house. This is the Burbank place and they’ll take care of you.”

The man burbled, but it might have been the water rushing by. They reached the beach and Meriel nudged the man onto the sand, but he didn’t move away from the rising waves.

“Come on, mister. Get out of the water.” She smacked him with a flipper, but he didn’t move.

“Great. Just great.” Meriel hated going on land. All the grace granted her by the sea fled when she touched the sand, but she didn’t have a choice. She hauled herself up on her flippers, then snagged the guy’s collar again and yanked him higher onto the beach. He didn’t move.

“You’d better not be dead. I better not have just dragged my two hundred fifty pounds of blubbery ass onto land for no reason.” Panic crept into her voice and belied her words. He couldn’t be dead. Meriel didn’t do death. Even being a Selkie was better than being dead.

She flipped him over and finally saw the face of the man she’d saved.

“Ronan?”

All the silly, immature feelings she’d once had for him came rushing back like the tide and vanished again as quickly. Now was not the time. He needed help and there was no one else around. She couldn’t even give him CPR in her current shape.

“Help me!” she cried out to the wild sea. “It isn’t fair! You can’t take him the way you took me!”

Except the sea could do anything it pleased. Magic of a kind she never dreamed about on land was the stuff of ordinary life under the waves. And it was magic that she desperately needed now.

A sound reached her. The song of the finfolk—the magical beings of the water—pierced her ears and the spray of the surf carried enchantment. A single wave reached out and touched her flipper, leaving something behind.

In the sea, it didn't take much time for metal to corrode or become a resting place for other creatures, but the silver brooch that washed up on the shore glittered as if newly made. Another piece of ocean magic. The metal was twisted and hammered into a complicated design that looked Celtic, or perhaps Norse. The edges of the brooch were a series of complex knots surrounding a stylized seal. The seal was curved around a jewel so dark she thought it was black onyx. A ray of fading sunlight touched the surface and she realized the gem was a blue sapphire, its color so deep she could almost drown in it. She picked up the talisman with her teeth and laid it on Ronan's too-still chest.

"Please." Meriel put all her heart into the prayer. "Oh please, let this work. Whatever curse I'm under, please don't let it touch him, too. Mercy, I beg you."

"Mercy granted. For this." The voice she heard was a chorus of sound. The gentle trill of a country creek, the roar of the ocean as it crashed violently against immovable rock. The swift rush of an icy river down a frozen mountain. Even the light bubbling of hidden hot springs that warmed the earth from beneath.

"Make no mistake, descendant of Constance Byrne. Saving his life has entwined his destiny with your own."

She gasped in horror. She wouldn't wish her life on anyone, but what was done was done. She couldn't have let him drown.

Finally, Ronan coughed and gurgled, a pint or so of Block Island Sound leaving his lungs and soaking into the sand. He rolled to his side, sucked in huge draughts of air and coughed up more water.

"Thank God! You didn't die." She kept up a chant of gratitude as he coughed harder. The amulet slipped off his chest and he opened his eyes.

Meriel heard a yell and a form appeared over the dunes. A man, waving and shouting at her. The last thing she wanted was for strangers to discover her, so she hauled herself behind a hillock of rock and sea grass. The man came down and shook Ronan's shoulder.

"Mr. Burbank," he said, his Down East accent thick as winter fog. "Are you all right?"

"What the hell?" Ronan's voice was rough and harsh with the abuse it had taken. He rubbed his face on his sleeve.

“What happened?” asked the man.

Ronan sat up, his fingers closing around the brooch. He shook off the other man’s hand.

“Did you see anyone?”

“Might have. Thought I saw a woman standing over you.”

“A woman? I thought it was... Never mind.”

“Nice piece of jewelry you’ve got there, Mr. Burbank. Where’d that come from?”

Ronan looked at the silver in his hand and shrugged. His voice was slurred when he said, “I don’t know. It was just there.”

The older man looked around. Eerily, his focus seemed to settle right on the place where she hid and she crouched farther into the sand. *Idiot*, she chastised herself. *Why didn’t you go back into the water?*

“Where’s your boat, Mr. Burbank?”

Ronan lifted his chin. “Out there. On the bottom.” He drew up his knees and stared out at the sea. For a while, the man sat with him, occasionally casting glances over to the rocks where Meriel hid. The sky darkened with sunset and storm. The man left. Ronan stayed on the beach, unmoving, shoulders slumped.

From her hiding place, she waited, shivering. Time had been unkind to Ronan. The man she thought could never rumple was now shabby in spirit. It showed in the sorry slouch of his posture, in the hair too long even for fashionable carelessness, in the rough bristle that coated his face. What could have happened since she last saw him to batter him so badly?

Chapter Two

Ronan finally stopped watching the sea when the first splatters of rain hit him. He might have a death wish, but he'd rather it was quick instead of something horrible like lingering pneumonia, so he rose. The brooch fell out of his hand, but he ignored it, consigning it back to the tide.

Steep steps cut out of the sand and reinforced with wood led Ronan to his home, where he let himself into the kitchen. He walked through the darkness to his bedroom and sat on the edge of his mattress, not caring that he was still soaking wet.

He tried to buck himself up. Burbanks had weathered the storms of bad markets and bad seas for generations. Burbanks didn't give up. Burbanks didn't commit suicide, although over the years a few tragic accidents had occurred with suspicious timing. But really, what else had he been thinking, going out on the little racing yacht as drunk as he'd been? He wanted to die.

Until that seal caught him. Ronan peeled off his sopping shirt to examine the frayed collar. Teeth marks and rips...and a faint stain of blood. He felt his head gingerly, burrowing through the grime of salt and sand, until he encountered the lump. He checked his fingers. The wound had stopped bleeding, but it explained the hallucination.

Because seals don't talk. And even if they do, they don't have Southern accents.

God, he was tired. He looked around the room that had become his haven and his jail.

Seven years ago everything had been beautiful. He'd had wealth, a thriving shipping company and an unsullied reputation. Now, his family was gone and his friends had abandoned him. Even the ones who believed in his innocence no longer came by.

He felt dirty just thinking about it, so he stripped down the rest of the way and turned on the shower. Ronan stood under the hot stream without moving for a long time before he finally reached for the shampoo.

After the girl died, it was like the Spanish Inquisition showed up. Totally unexpected. Between the police, the IRS, and the paparazzi that disguised themselves as legitimate media, the Burbank name became modern slang for “murdering loser”. His company started hemorrhaging money until he had to sell it off, piece by piece, while it was still worth something.

Thank God for the boats. He’d stanch the flow in time to save one tiny portion of his business. The little workshop where he and his team built racing yachts was the only thing he lived for now. And the only way he’d been able to save it was by gutting the house to pay for it. Pieces of furniture, works of art he’d grown up with and taken for granted were sold away until the home he’d loved all his life became nothing more than a shell. He couldn’t even bear to live in it anymore, so he moved into the groundskeeper’s cottage.

And how pathetic was that? He’d been Emory Charles Ronan Burbank IV, goddammit. Now he was nothing.

He stepped out of the shower and dried off on the way to bed where he dropped the towel on the floor. Then he crawled into bed—the clock radio said it was two thirty in the morning—and listened to the storm beat against the shore line.

What had that seal said? “Thank God you didn’t die.” Well. Bully for him. A seal was glad he lived.

Meriel waited until all was silent. She must have dozed a little because when she looked again, Ronan was gone. She didn’t know what had happened to him but it was past time she got out of there. Maybe if she left, went back to the sea and never came back, whatever fate she’d bound him up in would leave him be.

The amulet glittered dully for an instant in the little moonlight available. Meriel picked it up again very carefully. This belonged to the sea and she was determined to give it back. But as she hauled herself back down the beach toward the surf, a sleek head rose from the water.

“Iona!” Meriel was so surprised to see her friend and mentor she dropped the brooch. “You startled me. What are you doing in Rhode Island?”

“Waiting to see if you do something foolish,” said the old seal. Iona’s accent was so deeply Scottish that even after seven years, it still took Meriel time to translate it into something understandable.

“Too late. I already did my foolish deed for the day. It looks like I saved the wrong man and now I’ve bound up his life in my curse.” Meriel took another determined heave forward, but Iona blocked her way.

“It may not be as bad as it seems.”

“Or—based on the way my luck seems to run—it could be worse. I’m voting for worse, so I’m going to leave now. Get the heck out of Dodge. Go find a nice sunny beach somewhere and boil in my own blubber.”

“Sounds nice. Except for the boiling in blubber part.”

Meriel tried to feint a dodge to Iona’s right, but the Selkie wasn’t fooled.

“What’s going on, Iona? Why won’t you let me back down to the water?”

“You can’t come back, child. This is your chance.”

“For what? To break the curse? Or to take Ronan down with me?”

“A chance to triumph over evil.”

“I don’t want to triumph over evil, Iona.” Meriel sighed. “I mean, I do want to triumph over evil...in a broad philosophical sense, but me? Personally? I just want to survive.”

“Then consider this a matter of survival. You must stay on land to ride the wave that fate has sent you.”

“Enough with the maritime metaphors, Iona.”

“You want plain speaking, then? I’ll give it to you. You’re not meant to be this way, Meriel Byrne. Cursed or not, the life of a Selkie is not for you. You must try to find a way out of it and you carry before you the thing that will begin the change. Take it with you. When dawn touches the land, you’ll have until the next sunrise to take back the life you’re meant to live.”

Iona turned her head in the boneless way of seals to look over the horizon. “The sun is rising now, child. Blessings of the sea follow you.” She slipped back into the water as the first pale finger of dawn reached the sand.

Alone on the beach, Meriel dropped the amulet and tried to run, but she didn’t make it to the sea. In that second, the sun rose over the horizon and time stopped. Magic happened. Agony ripped through her.

She would have screamed, but the enchantment trapped her vocal cords between forms. Another spasm caught her and squeezed until she thought her bones would break. Helpless, voiceless, she could only thrash against the pain until it eased. Finally, the last of the seizures faded and she lay on the sand, exhausted and beaten. Human.

Morning light battered him as unmercifully as the sea. His mouth tasted like fish guts. Ronan rolled out of bed naked and rooted around on the floor for a semi-clean pair of jeans.

Coffee. He needed coffee.

He'd learned his way around the kitchen enough in the last few years to make a decent cup of caffeine and a bowl of cereal. He leaned against the counter and crunched away on his Chocolate Frosted Sugar Bombs as he waited for the coffee pot to gurgle its last. The storm had cleared away the murk of the last few days and the bay sparkled with light, glistening off a scrap of blue and silver fabric as it tumbled up the beach with the tide.

Ronan put his cereal down with a thump, uncaring when it sloshed over the side.

The sail. He hadn't dreamed it. That meant...

He tore down the steps to the boathouse.

The boat was gone. Gone! That meant he really had been stupid enough yesterday to go sailing out into that storm so drunk he could hardly stand up—much less crew the dinghy. The words that spewed from his lips would have made a merchant marine whistle in appreciation.

Snatches of memory came back. The sail had swung wildly above him, clipping the side of his head hard enough to knock him into the bottom of the boat. From his vantage point, he remembered smiling grimly as he watched the storm play hell with sky and unending sea before the cold arms of the ocean claimed him.

The frigid dunking combined with the crack on the skull must have sent him into shock. But he remembered...a seal. A seal had hauled him by the collar out of the sea. And it had talked to him. Yelled at him. Dragged him onto the beach and thanked God for him.

He picked up the swatch of sailcloth and found another lump of shimmering silver fabric nearby. Only when he shook it out, it wasn't fabric. It was fur.

"What the..."

A woman rose to her knees from behind a hummock of sand.

"What are you doing with my skin?" she asked.

Ronan stared. He wasn't touching her skin. Which, from twelve feet away, appeared exceptionally fine. Pale and smooth with not a freckle or tan line to mar it. Although, now that he noticed it, it did have a very slight gray tinge and her lips were blue with cold. Also, he noticed she was naked.

"Your what?"

"My skin, Ronan. What are you doing with it? I need it back."

"Lady, I don't know what you're talking about." Her voice sounded so familiar. Shock knocked him raw. That was the seal's voice.

"What are you?" he asked, his voice cracking a bit.

"I'm a Selkie," she said in the drawl he remembered. His whole body jerked and wrenched sore muscles.

"What. The hell. Is a Selkie?" He rubbed a palm against the side of his temple where a tiny, evil smithy pounded on the anvil of his skull. His throat felt like someone had pried his jaw open and sandblasted it.

"I'm a seal-person and don't you take that tone with me. This is all your fault."

He was talking to a naked-woman-slash-seal-person who blamed him for her existence. Proof positive he'd finally gone round the bend. Ronan wondered if Dr. Kilhausen would still talk to him long enough to find him a bed in a decent mental institution or if he should wander down Main Street chattering to himself until he got arrested.

"Where are your clothes?"

She made a disgusted sound, like he hadn't been listening or something. He'd been listening. He just... This was too weird.

"Not clothes. Skin. I. Need. My. Skin." She spoke as if he was a particularly slow-witted child.

"I. Don't. Have. Your. Skin," he returned, then shook his head. "This isn't happening. I'm either still drunk or this is the world's worst hangover."

“Hangover? So you really were drunk yesterday.” She stood up and stumbled toward him. Wow. Nice ti— She shoved him back. “I should have let you drown.”

“Whoa, whoa, lady—or whatever you are.” He tripped and landed on his butt on the hard sand. The fur thing didn’t cushion his fall much.

“What happened to you, Ronan? Why did you do something so stupid? Are you trying to kill yourself?”

“What if I am?” he roared back at her. “Why do you care? What business is it of yours if I live or die?”

“I care, Ronan Burbank! I don’t know why, but I do.”

Ronan slumped. “Don’t. It’s not worth it.”

“Looks like someone forgot their Prozac today.” She cocked a hip, swaying a bit, totally at ease with her nudity. But he had the feeling that if he put one hand wrong with her, she’d bite it off.

He snorted. She grunted, an animal sound at odds with her human voice.

“How do you know my name, anyway?” He didn’t want to be curious about her, but he couldn’t help it. She was the only thing that had piqued his interest in a very long time.

“I know a lot about you, Ronan. Or I did seven years ago.”

“Seven years. What day is it?”

“Like I know exactly. Hello? Seal person. It’s not as if I’m wearing a watch here.” She waved a bare arm at him. “I do know that it must be around April twenty-fifth.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s the day I became a Selkie. Every year around this time, I make my way back here to see if anything has changed. This time, something changed.”

“How?”

“I saved your sorry ass.” She made a huge, wild gesture with her arms. “And now the sea or fate or God...or something...has decided that you and I are in this curse together.”

“Lady, I’m not in anything with you. You’ve got a curse, you deal with it yourself.” Excellent news. He wasn’t insane. She was.

“Gee. My hero. I think your silver armor needs some polishing up.” She crossed her arms and succeeded in drawing his attention back to a really, really great set of breasts. Her complexion was so fine, he could see the delicate blue tracing of veins under the skin.

“Why don’t you wait right there and I’ll call the men in white coats.”

“I’m not crazy, you drunk jerk. I’m cursed.”

“You think you’re cursed. What did you do?” She had to get off his property because this conversation was starting to get to him. He’d finally gotten used to the numbness and grief and he didn’t need anyone shaking up his life anymore.

“I didn’t do anything. Great-great-great-Granny Byrne did something and I’m paying for it.”

“Byrne? Did you say Byrne?” He knew that name. It was imprinted on his brain. Branded there, with all the accompanying agony. In all this time, it hadn’t healed.

“Yes. I’m Meriel Byrne.”

A red wash of rage swamped Ronan’s mind. He was going to kill her. With his bare hands, he’d strangle her. Drown her.

He rushed at her, hands clenched into fists. All semblance of civilization was gone and he didn’t care that she was a woman, smaller and slighter than he. She stumbled away from him, back to the surf. He splashed into the water after her, screaming a litany of foul language. Ronan caught her in a tackle and they both went down. She swerved and twisted—a wild bronc at sea—but he clung to her, wrath compelling him to ride this tide until it was over.

A heavy wave caught them and tossed them high up onto the beach.

“Get off me, you maniac! What is wrong with you?” Meriel Byrne, who’d ruined his life by dying, slid out of his grip like an eel, but he caught her ankle. She kicked hard and clocked him on the jaw, snapping his head back and earning her release.

“You took it from me,” he screamed, wild in his grief. “You took everything from me!” The words were the last of his strength and he sat in the sand, elbows on his knees.

That damn skin must have been following him, because when he reached down, it was right there. Ronan rubbed his thumb over it compulsively, smoothing the thick, glossy pelt. Tears he hadn’t shed for months now poured out of his eyes, burning like acid. They landed on the silver skin and rolled off into the sand where they were swallowed up.

He was pathetic. He might have lost everything that ever mattered to him, but it didn’t mean he could cry. So Ronan willed back the tears and stared resolutely out at the ocean until he could breathe again.

Chapter Three

“You asshole. You tried to kill me.”

Meriel reached down and slapped him. She’d never hit anyone before in her life and she was surprised to find that it didn’t help. She didn’t feel any better and now her hand hurt.

He didn’t even move. Something was very wrong here. Had he completely lost his grip on reality?

“Give me back my skin, Ronan.”

“No.”

“Give it back.”

He didn’t answer her and she ground her heels into the sand in frustration.

“Fine, then. I’ll take it.” Meriel bent to retrieve the corner of her pelt that was visible under his knee, but he reached out, quick as thought, to latch onto her ankle.

“Let go of me, or I’ll kick you again.”

“No.”

“You have a serious vocabulary problem. Try this: ‘Yes, Meriel. I’d love to give you back your skin. Then you can change back into a Selkie and get the hell away from me’.”

His jaw clenched and she noticed that it was swollen and red. “What happens if I keep it?”

Meriel’s mouth dropped open. “You can’t keep it. It isn’t yours.”

“Answer the question. I think I deserve at least that much.”

“Deserve? You tried to drown me, which in retrospect is kind of funny, since I’m a Selkie.” She finished on a yell, but he didn’t respond.

“You took away seven years of my life, Miss Byrne. You owe me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about and I owe you nothing. You owe me my skin, which you’re sitting on.”

“If this is what I think it is, then there’s something bigger going on here. I don’t think I can hand it back and go on as if nothing happened.”

Meriel ground her teeth together. “You can’t keep it. Don’t you get it? This could be very dangerous and you shouldn’t get involved.”

“It’s too late for that.” He’d become curt over the years. She remembered a smiling, expansive man, not this shaggy grump.

“Please, Ronan.” She shivered. “I’m freezing.”

“You’re naked.”

Meriel looked down. So she was. Naked and... “I hate being cold.” She hugged herself, trying to hide the pertinent bits, although it was a little late for that.

“What happens if I keep your skin?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” He never looked at her. Just kept staring out at the ocean.

“I...I’m not going to tell you.” They were on dangerous ground here.

“If I keep the skin, you have to stay on land, don’t you?”

Damn. “Where did you hear that?”

“I do occasionally read fiction, Miss Byrne. I read Irish mythology in grade school.”

“Geek,” she said derisively. “And I...I’m not sure exactly how it’ll work for me. I’m a cursed Selkie, not a born one.” Meriel rubbed her arms rapidly to try to build up some heat. “I’m cold, Ronan. I don’t have anything to wear and I’m hungry. Not to mention, I saved your life yesterday. Help me and I’ll tell you.”

“Tell me and I’ll help you.”

“What are you, eight? What will people say when they discover my frozen, dead body on your beach?”

He looked down at her with eyes as cold as Arctic ice. “That it’s about goddamn time.”

He left her. With her pelt and a ratty piece of what used to be his sail, Ronan walked up the sand steps and disappeared. Meriel tried to follow him, but without anger and adrenaline propelling her forward, muscles long unused were no longer up to the task. She took two steps before she fell to her knees.

Meriel stared at her legs in furious horror. Her limbs were strong enough, but the mechanics of putting one foot in front of the other had somehow become a little foggy. She thought of yelling for help, but she wasn't sure if Ronan would come back for her. And even if he did, she wasn't sure her pride was up to his frigid attitude.

She went up on her hands and knees. The brooch she had dropped earlier winked in the sunlight just beyond her reach.

"Ocean magic, my ass," she muttered. "If you're so special, why don't you help me walk?" She stretched out until she snagged the circle with her fingertips. Nothing. No help.

She had to walk. She couldn't drag herself across the beach because she'd lost her protective layers of thick fur.

"Fine. No walking. How about clothes, at least? Magic's no good if I freeze to death first." Meriel swore she could hear the waves laugh at her.

"Oh, that's great. No clothes." She waved her arms dismissively. "No, really. It's okay. It's fiiiiine." If the ocean had been a man, he'd have known enough to back away from her in this mood. "I don't need your help. You just go right on sitting there. I can do it on my own."

She held the brooch in her hand and pushed herself up. Each tiny rock felt like glass digging into her flesh. On the way, she stumbled and faltered, but she walked. She tripped once and had to dig a viciously pointy pebble out of her knee, grinding her teeth against the sting. Several scrapes later, she made it up the stairs.

With the massive mansion before her, other concerns pushed themselves forward—she was starving. Meriel's stomach growled as she tried to remember when she'd last eaten. That halibut. Its memory rolled around in her empty stomach. She'd been too exhausted and sick to eat that morning before Ronan showed up and ruined her life. Again.

So maybe technically he hadn't ruined it the first time. But how dare he accuse her of doing the same to him? There was one good way to solve all her problems, so Meriel walked up to the closest door of the immense home and started banging on it.

“Open up, Burbank. We need to talk.”

“There’s no one there.” His voice came from off to the side, behind a hedge. She walked around a corner, trailing a hand along the side of the house for balance, to find him lounging in the doorway of a small cottage. He stood straight when he saw her and frowned.

“Go away.” He stepped in and closed the door.

She marched over and put her mouth to the frame. “I can’t. You’ve got my skin. Now open up.”

His face appeared abruptly in the glass. “No.” And he walked away.

That tore it for Meriel. Trying to kill her was one thing. Being rude was completely another. She unleashed a frenzy of pounding on the wood.

“Emory Charles Ronan Burbank IV, if you don’t open this door right this second I am going to pitch a fit so loud your grandbabies will be born with it ringing in their ears!”

The echo of her yell died out and silence assaulted her. Her screeching had even made the birds go quiet in the trees. She slumped against the doorjamb.

“Where did you say you were from again?” The door opened unexpectedly and she yelped like a puppy.

“Tennessee.”

“It figures.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I’m freezing here, Burbank.”

Ronan reached out to steady her with one hand when she stumbled and the heat of his palm on her skin burned her.

“Jesus, you’re an ice cube.” He reached behind the door to retrieve an enormous towel and tossed it at her. “You’re still naked, Byrne. Cover up.”

She glared at him so hard he ought to have splintered into a thousand pieces, but it only gave her a headache. She took the towel and wrapped it around her shoulders. It was scratchy, threadbare in places, and it smelled a little fishy, but it helped ease the worst of the cold. Her stomach growled again.

He lifted an eyebrow and smirked, but didn’t say anything. So that’s how he wanted to play. By his expression, he wasn’t going to feed her unless she asked and she wouldn’t ask if he had the last steak on earth.

“Fine.” Meriel shook her hair back. “I’ll go into town and get something to eat.”

“You don’t have any money,” he said, his lips tilted up obnoxiously.

“Money’s not going to be an issue. Anyway, I’m sure someone will buy me a meal.” And she opened the towel up to flash him. His eyes widened and his jaw clenched so hard she thought she heard his teeth grind. Kind of cute, really. But she was a little surprised at her own actions. Where had her modesty gone?

Oh yeah. Seven years as a nudist seal.

Ronan grabbed her arm and hauled her in the house. “You are not going into town to proposition some tourist. They’ll pick you up for solicitation.”

“Whatever, Ronan. I’m still hungry.” His jaw set again and she smiled at him. “And naked under the towel.” She let it slip just a bit off one shoulder.

“Witch.”

“No. *Halichoerus grypus*.” He looked at her blankly. “Gray seal.” Ronan turned and stalked away from her, offering a surprisingly nice view of taut muscles moving under his jeans. With no shirt on, his back was beautiful. Tanned and smooth, a symphony of muscular control.

Meriel stomped her feet hard on the sand mat to get rid of her gooey, girly thoughts and stepped in. The blinds and curtains were all drawn, leaving the house in dismal shadow despite the bright sun. A haphazard array of shabby furniture littered the floor. Nothing in the little house spoke of wealth or privilege, or even comfort.

“Ronan?” she called, the sound falling dead.

Footsteps pounded on the naked wood floors. “Get dressed.”

He threw a pile of clothes at her. A wrinkled blue polo shirt and jeans worn almost white smacked her in the face. Meriel tucked the towel under her armpits to keep it from falling while she sorted out her new wardrobe. He stood, obviously waiting for her to make the comment that was on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed it and smiled sweetly instead.

“Thank you, Ronan.”

He grunted at her and headed through another set of doors. She followed him.

The tiny kitchen was clean, aside from what appeared to be this morning’s breakfast congealing in a puddle of milk in the sink. The coffee pot was still full and hot.

“What are you looking at?” he demanded. “I said, get dressed.”

She placed a hand to her brow—a precarious move because she had only a tenuous grip on both the towel and the fresh clothing—and slathered on her thickest Southern accent.

“I do declare, your gentlemanly ways will make me swoon.” Her normal voice returned as she stood straight. “Where’s the bathroom?”

He brushed by her on his way out of the kitchen and she followed, expecting him to point her to a powder room in the hall, but the door he opened surprised her.

The stripped simplicity of its furnishings couldn’t detract from the beauty of the room. Green sprigged wallpaper and a plain white bed frame left it fresh and lovely despite a thick layer of dust. He stood in the doorway and pointed inside.

“There’s a shared bathroom there.”

Meriel had to slide past him to step into the room, leaving a scant few inches between them. His bare torso, muscled and rough, radiated heat, anger and bitterness.

She paused, confused. “Ronan, I don’t—”

“Then don’t.” He cut her off. “Get some clothes on and come back to the kitchen.” He closed the door when he left.

Chapter Four

He had a Selkie in his house.

A Selkie who didn't seem to have any problem with nudity. It had been way too long since he'd gotten laid and suddenly sex was at the front of his mind. With a Selkie. That wasn't bestiality, was it?

Nah. She was cursed, not born. She was human. Oh baby, was she human. She had exactly the kind of body he liked. Little and curvy in all the right places. Not board straight and not Barbie silicone. She was also a natural brunette. Cuffs and collars definitely matched. He stared down at the cutting board and couldn't remember what he was supposed to be doing.

"Can I help?" Her voice startled him out of his reverie and instead of slicing the tomato in front of him, he cut into his finger.

She rushed over and grabbed it before he could put it in his mouth. "Don't do that. Here." She grabbed a paper towel and pressed it tightly to the wound. She'd brushed her teeth and washed her face, the familiar scents going straight to his head. "Let me look at it."

"Haven't you done enough?" he said. His shirt swallowed her. She'd pinned a heavy, dark brooch on her shoulder. It tickled his memory, but he dismissed it. There were more interesting things to see. The two buttons she'd left open on the shirt would have been modest from a foot or two away, but standing as they were, the vee offered a clear line of sight down her cleavage. Her unbound cleavage.

Ronan pulled away from her and went to the sink, aching from the cut and the sudden hard-on.

"You go wash that out and put a bandage on it. I'll slice the tomatoes." He nodded, too tired to fight for the moment.

He went into the bathroom and found a bandage in the medicine cabinet. His finger throbbed in time with his dick, but he ignored it. Ronan glanced into the mirror when he

was done and actually looked at himself for the first time in years. Jesus. It was a wonder he hadn't scared her to death. He needed a shave. And a haircut. And some Visine. His eyes were so red from both his hangover and his seawater dunking that they glowed demonically.

He reached for the shaving cream, but drew back his hand. Was he seriously considering shaving for this woman? Hell no. He narrowed his eyes at his reflection and ran a hand over his chin. The stubble really didn't suit him. He'd tried a beard before, but it grew in patchy. He should shave anyway. So the guys at the shop wouldn't tease him about his crap beard.

But not for a woman. Besides, she wouldn't notice. She didn't even like him. And he didn't like her. He splashed his face with water and started rubbing on the shaving foam.

When he got back, Ronan watched as she assembled sandwiches out of the few things he had in the fridge. She scraped up the last of the mayonnaise and, without turning around, asked, "Where's your list?"

"My what?"

"Your grocery list. You're out of..." Meriel finally looked over at him and her next word was garbled. Ronan's face felt naked, like he'd scraped off a layer of armor with his stubble. He also felt like an idiot and had to make a conscious effort not to cover his cheeks while she stared at him. After another moment, she blinked and took a deep breath.

"You're out of mayo. I was going to write it on the list so next time you go shopping, you don't forget."

He shaved for this? His temper snapped. "How can you do this? How can you make sandwiches after everything you did to me?"

"I didn't do anything to you, Ronan." She slapped a sandwich down on the plate. "I don't know what happened here, but let me tell you what happened to me. I fell off a damned cliff. Off. A. Cliff. The only cliff on the southern tip of Rhode Island, in fact. Why can't you live on the beach like everyone else?" Meriel paced the galley kitchen, picking up the sandwich fixings and putting them away. Bread into the breadbox. Tomatoes into a bowl on the counter.

"I hit the water and I nearly drowned. I was a breath away from death, Ronan. This life I have is a blessing given to me by a curse, so I don't know if I should be grateful or miserable. But I'll tell you what. If you're what it's like to be miserable, I'll take gratitude."

Pickles, roast beef and cheese in the fridge.

“When I woke up, I wasn’t even human anymore. I was a seal. There is no possible way to explain that to you. Iona, another Selkie, taught me everything I needed to know about surviving in the ocean, but she can’t help me with the curse I live under.” She put the lettuce into the crisper and slammed the refrigerator door. A bottle of milk inside the fridge rattled ominously, but didn’t crash.

“The ocean gave me this brooch to save you and told me it was magic. Because of it, because of you, I can be human for a day. Iona told me to use this time to figure out how to break the curse, but now you’ve gone and screwed me over yet again.”

“Me? What did I do?” Ronan rose to tower over her. Everything was out of control and he needed to win at something. Even if it was just being bigger.

“I saved your hide and in return you took mine, you jerk!” She didn’t back down from him, even when he stood an inch away with her hard nipples brushing his chest. The arousal that hadn’t completely died down sprang back to life. He grabbed her arms and pulled her flush against him.

“That’s right. Hate me. Hate me as much as I hate you.” Ronan’s gaze roamed her face, watching her blush suddenly, feeling the shudder that racked her body. She didn’t pull away.

“I...I don’t hate you, Ronan.” Her soft breath warmed his jaw, whispered in his ear.

“I don’t hate you, either.” He kissed her. He had to. If he didn’t kiss her, his head would explode. Or some other part of him. And she was so sweet. Even under the toothpaste, she tasted of the wild sea—of sights he’d never seen and places he’d never go. Not without her to guide him.

Ronan delved deeper, groaning when she opened to him, when her tongue rolled against his, softening the kiss that had begun too harshly. He let go the grip of his hands and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, holding her close, pulling her up to his height. She came willingly. Her fingers fluttered over his shoulders, wound into his hair.

His palms slid down her slender back until he filled his hands with her ass and lifted her so he could grind himself into the niche of her thighs. A gasp of shock left her, but he smothered it with his mouth.

Ronan nipped lightly at her and paused to gauge her reaction. She opened her eyes and smiled wickedly, her mouth wet and glistening, before she swooped back in and sucked his bottom lip into her mouth, returning the nip.

Perfect. Because what was pleasure without pain to remind them of the heights?

Ronan tugged at her legs until Meriel wrapped herself around his hips, then he walked them to the kitchen counter. Now she had the freedom to touch him and she indulged herself. His chest wasn't completely smooth, but had a sprinkling of dark hair that made a perfect shadowy triangle in the center. She spread her hands over it until she felt his nipples with her little fingers. Nipples. God, she wanted his hands on her breasts so badly she actually whined in eagerness.

He got the hint and pulled at her shirt until he finally touched her skin. She arched into him and hissed in a breath at the heated contact. His palms were rough and calloused, not what she expected of a business man, but she didn't care to pursue that rabbit trail. Not while his strong fingers stroked her spine, spanned her waist, slid up to the valley between her breasts. Teasing her with his touch while she squirmed for it.

Meriel tore her mouth away from his and put her plea into her eyes. He knew what she wanted. She could read it in his feral grin. But he asked anyway.

"Tell me, Selkie. Tell me what you want." His fingertips danced up her sides, almost touching her aching flesh, but then skittering away.

She whimpered. He put his hands around her waist, cupping the swell of her ribcage. "Tell me, Meriel."

Two could play this game, she thought, understanding his ploy for dominance. But she didn't have a submissive personality, so she retaliated. She dragged her hands down his back, fingernails leaving a light trail, and he shuddered hard, his eyes dilating with pleasure. When she reached the waistband of his jeans, she kept going until she slipped her hands into his back pockets and squeezed. He flexed, his jaw set as hard as the erection he rocked against her, and she grinned at him.

"Touch me, Ronan."

And he did. He put his hands under her tender, aching breasts and lifted, pressing them together. He flicked her nipples with his thumbs and she choked back her cry of pleasure.

"Don't hold back. Scream for me." He put his mouth over hers again and swallowed her next sob. Over and over, he caressed her, tracing each inch of skin, pulling and tugging at her nipples until they were swollen and hard enough to cut glass.

He pulled the shirt over her head in one smooth tug, and the press of breast to chest made her moan. They had passed coherent speech long ago and it took her a moment to understand when he muttered, “Need you,” in a voice harsh with desire.

Not smart. Meriel knew that. Screw smart. She needed him, too.

“Yes.” She nodded against his neck, reaching down to pop open the button on his jeans. He did the same to her, lifting her to yank them out from under her bottom. Their pants landed in a heap with her shirt. He hadn’t provided underwear and she’d already realized that he was going commando, so nothing impeded them when he stepped between her thighs again. Nothing.

Meriel’s eyes went wide.

“Condom,” she squeaked against his mouth.

“Clean,” he mumbled, pulling her hips to the bare edge of the counter.

“Me, too.” The head of his penis, broad and smooth, slid up and down the wetness that seeped from her body, readying them both for his entry. Muscles long denied ached as her brain flickered.

“Pregnant,” she moaned. That made him pull back. He dropped his forehead to her shoulder.

“Shit.” They were both breathing hard, and every time they inhaled, his chest hair abraded her nipples. “Not on the pill?”

“I’ve been a seal for seven years, Ronan. It hasn’t been an issue.” He had the strength to chuckle and she was grateful for the sound. Carefully, he rearranged himself before pulling her into a tight hug. He felt so good, solid and warm, snuggled up against her. Her breathing slowed as sanity returned.

“You haven’t had sex in seven years?”

“Please don’t remind me right now.” She wanted him so much her whole body thrummed as if she’d walked into an electric fence.

“I still want you.” His voice rumbled through her and her skin absorbed the vibration.

“I know.” There was more she wanted to say, but now that the heat had dimmed, she couldn’t push herself past her sudden shyness to do it.

“You want me?” Ronan’s face was carefully neutral when she looked at him. Too neutral. This was a man whose emotions had been boiling over the rim a few minutes

ago, so she wasn't fooled. And it was a little late for her to be bashful. She was sitting naked on a kitchen counter, for Pete's sake.

"Yes, I do. But..."

"Yeah. I know." He stepped back and the cold that had vanished when he held her in his arms returned. Ronan bent down to grab his jeans and her shirt and, although she knew they had done the right thing by stopping, the sight of his trim, rangy form made her body clench.

He handed her the shirt, but stopped her with a hand on her breast, cupping the weight of her.

"We'll do this, Meriel. We'll finish this soon."

She nodded, trembling at his touch, before he turned away to tug his pants on.

"I have to get to work," he said, facing the sunny window. He couldn't look at her. She'd finally put the shirt on, but now that he knew, intimately, what lay under it, his control danced at the end of a thin thread.

"At Burbank? How long does it take to get to the city at this hour?"

"There is no Burbank Industries anymore, Mer." He shortened her name automatically, liking the way it felt on his tongue. "I had to sell it off, piece by piece. The only thing left is the boat yard, and it's in hock up to the mainsail."

Ronan looked down at his fingers. He hadn't had a manicure in years and he didn't miss them. He'd earned each callus, each nick and scrape, and he was proud of the history on his hands now.

Meriel hopped off the counter and slid her jeans—his jeans—up her hips. He'd started to calm down, but his body hardened again as he recalled the path his hands had traced there. She had great legs. Muscled and firm. He shook his head.

The touch of her fingers on his arm startled him. "You build racing boats now?"

Ronan couldn't trust his voice, so he nodded shortly.

"Do you like it?"

He shrugged. Like. Not like. It's what he did now.

"Are you good at it?" He glanced around and she had a shrewd smirk on her face. Ronan barked out a laugh. She'd hit the right button. He pushed himself to be good at everything. He hated to fail, or even worse, be only mediocre at what he tried.

“Think you know me, do you?”

“Not really, Ronan.” She sighed and turned on the tap to wash her hands. She had such graceful fingers, long and slender. They hadn’t eaten their sandwiches, so she wrapped them in plastic wrap. “You want to take this with you?”

He nodded, watching with growing curiosity. She did things that needed to be done. She didn’t ask, she didn’t wait. Meriel was a lot like him in some ways. She found lunch-sized paper bags in a cupboard and tossed in a baggie full of chips and the last apple from the crisper.

“That ought to hold you.” He stood out of her way as she wiped down the counters, pausing at the spot where she’d been sitting a short while ago.

“So you’ll be staying, then?” he asked.

Meriel nodded. “You have my skin. I’m bound to you until you return it to me.”

Her skin? That’s what this housewifely industriousness was about? Ronan’s body went cold with betrayal. He grabbed her arm and swung her around, but his anger clashed with shock when she flinched away. He might be furious, but she was afraid. Of him.

“Don’t do that, Meriel. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Then let go.” He did, opening his hand abruptly. It sickened him that she thought him capable of harming her. Then he remembered the episode on the beach and realized that she was right.

“God, Mer. I’m sorry. I...I have to go.”

She nodded, her face closed, and he missed her. Missed her smile, missed her response to him. “Hey, if you need to go out, there’s a bike in the garage.”

Meriel nodded again and opened her mouth to say something, then hesitated before she finally spoke. “I may do some grocery shopping.”

Immediately, he pulled out his wallet and all his cash. All fifty-two dollars of it. He’d put himself on a pay schedule like everyone else in the shop and that was what he had left until Friday.

“Keep it, Ronan. I told you before, money’s not a problem.”

“Not a problem? Money’s the only problem I’ve got.”

“I doubt that. But it’s one of the odd-ball benefits of being a Selkie. All the treasures of the sea are mine for the asking. Nothing useful like clothes when I ask for them, or granting me freedom from this curse, but I can have all of these I want.” She opened her palm and where there had been nothing but smooth skin a moment ago, now half a dozen

Spanish doubloons glittered dully, caked with the patina of centuries and the residue of the ocean.

She dropped them onto the counter. One fell off and landed with a solid thunk before rolling under the edge of the cabinet. Meriel searched for some paper to make a grocery list.

“You mean, you ask for it and gold shows up in your hand?”

She nodded absently, testing a pen on the back of an envelope. “Sometimes it’s jewels. They don’t do me much good in the middle of the ocean, but I like the sapphires.”

“You like the sapphires.” She said it so casually. Not greedy, not expecting anything. Just a fact. “You’re dangerous, woman.” He glared at her sideways, even though she ignored him. “Or is this a test? You want to trade those for your skin?”

She sighed and put down the pen. “No, it’s not a test, Ronan. If I thought I could buy you off with a few moldy gold coins, I’d have done it already. I only want to know if you’re picky about your brand of mayonnaise.”

“I don’t care, Meriel. Buy whatever’s on sale.”

“Oh, I can’t do that. If you’ve got a favorite, then nothing else tastes right.” She sounded dead serious, too. As if mayonnaise were the most important thing on earth right now.

“Buy whatever you want, Mer. Hell, buy the whole damn store if you want to. Do you have any idea how much those coins are worth?”

She stared at the greenish lump of gold on the white counter, then shrugged. “No.”

“I thought you were an accounting geek.”

“I crunched numbers, Ronan. I didn’t deal in gold or antiquities. What kind of soda do you like?”

“I’m not going anywhere. It’s not safe to leave you alone.” Ronan grabbed the phone off the counter and called the yard. His foreman answered.

“Ayuh.”

“Devon, it’s Ronan. Something’s come up and I can’t come in.”

There was a long pause before Devon spoke. “Gray seals in the harbor.”

“Beg pardon?” What the hell? What did that have to do with anything? He had a gray seal sitting at his kitchen table, so he didn’t think anything else should surprise him.

“They only come once a year. Usually one. Sometimes two.”

“Oh-kay.”

“There was one in the harbor that day seven years ago. Waiting.”

This time it was Ronan’s turn for silence. Devon knew about the Selkies. He’d never figured the taciturn old man for a believer in myths. But then, he hadn’t believed in them, either.

“Devon, what day is today?”

“April twenty-fifth. She only wants one thing from you. Don’t fall in love with her. And don’t come in to work.” And he hung up, leaving a dial tone ringing in Ronan’s ear.

Chapter Five

That was the most Devon Murphy had said to him in twenty years. Hell, it was probably more than Devon had said to his wife in twenty years. Ronan hung up the phone and turned to Meriel.

“He believes,” he said.

“In what? In Selkies?”

He nodded, still reeling. There was a lot to take in this morning. But at least his hangover was gone.

“That’s not as big a surprise as you might think, Ronan. A lot of people who make their living at sea believe things that ordinary people don’t understand. From what I hear, the folks in Orkney don’t even blink when one of us goes on land.”

“Haven’t you been on land before?”

Meriel shook her head as she poured coffee for them both.

“Part of the curse, I guess. I can’t shapeshift when I want because I’m condemned to stay a Selkie. Somehow, saving you shorted out part of the spell. This amulet showed up when I asked the sea not to take your life, and I think it was the catalyst for me becoming human again. Even if it is just for a day.” She sat with the mug cradled in her hands, breathing in the steam. “I didn’t realize I missed coffee until I walked into the kitchen earlier and smelled it.”

This woman was messing with his brain, because it didn’t even faze him anymore when she talked about curses and magic from the ocean. From across the table, he watched her enjoy the cup. She was a shiverer, he realized. The things that turned her on made her whole body shimmy. He couldn’t wait to see what happened when she came.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. The constant recurrence of his erection getting caught in his jeans was going to put a permanent crimp in his dick.

“What else did he say?” She interrupted his wayward thoughts.

“He said you were only after one thing, and I shouldn’t fall in love with you.”

“You shouldn’t what?” she spluttered, using a napkin to wipe up the spills.

He waved away her question. He wasn’t going to fall in love with her in a day, so it didn’t need to be part of the discussion.

“I don’t get how he knows all this stuff. He’s never said a word about Selkies before. And he knew about you. Knew what happened the day you...you know.”

Her brows knit together. “That’s odd. I’ve never heard of another Selkie around here.”

“What, you know every Selkie alive?”

“Hey, it’s a small community.” Meriel jabbed playfully at his arm. “I haven’t met all of them, but word gets around.”

“I knew it. A bunch of gossiping seals. What do you do when you get together? Toss beach balls around and slap your flippers together?”

She laughed and he smiled. The happy sound felt foreign and strange in this house and he drank it in, thirsty for joy.

“Not even close. I spent the last several years with Iona, learning the seas, eating more raw fish than a sushi chef on a busman’s holiday, running from killer whales and freezing my butt off shuttling around the top of Great Britain.”

“So being a Selkie isn’t all it’s cracked up to be?”

“Not even close. It might not be so bad if I’d been born a Selkie, but as a cursed one, it’s not that much fun.”

“Tell me more about this curse.”

“I’d love to, really, but I have to say that sitting at the kitchen table isn’t helping me figure out how to break this curse. And even if I can’t figure it out, it’s not how I want to spend my time as a human.”

“You want to do something? Go out somewhere?”

“That sounds perfect.” She stood and took her coffee to the sink. “Something that involves walking. I find I really miss walking. And I could use the practice.”

“We can go down to the boatyards from here along the beach. Not too many people.”

“Great. Do you have any shoes I can borrow?”

“There might be a pair of flip-flops in my room. It’s a mess, but you can look.”

Meriel opened the door to a cave. A dark, funky smelling cave. He might keep his kitchen clean, but it didn't look like he was so picky about his room.

It wouldn't hurt to air it out a little, so she pulled up the shade, wincing again when the sudden burst of light illuminated the true extent of the mess, and cracked the window.

A pile of clothes she hoped were clean tumbled out when she opened the closet doors, but a quick search didn't reveal any shoes. Where else could they be?

Meriel dropped to her knees and thrust an arm under the bed, knocking out various bits of clothing, discarded paper, a few carnivorous-looking dust bunnies and one expensive brown Italian leather wingtip—nearly gray with dust. She moved around to another end and continued the search. The other wingtip appeared, equally in need of a shine, before her hand encountered something soft and silky.

A tingle of magic traveled up her arm.

Her skin.

She could leave now. Get away from him before he realized how much control he could wield over her. Forget about breaking the curse and go back to the ocean.

It wasn't really as bad as she'd painted it. Not really. Well, aside from the cold part. And the killer whale part. And the raw fish part.

No. She knew where it was now. She could leave any time she wanted. And it would be nice to walk on the beach for a little while before she went back to the open seas. With no clues to work with, Meriel didn't hold out much hope for breaking the curse. Better to enjoy the time she had left and let the future take care of itself. She tucked the fur back under the bed.

"I don't want treasures," she said to the listening air, "but I could really use a pair of shoes." She opened her hand to find a pair of dripping mesh water shoes dangling from her fingertips. They were even in her size. She blessed the person who'd lost them to the tide and slid them on before she went to find Ronan.

They walked down the sandy steps to the small beach where she'd brought him yesterday evening.

"It's been less than a day since I dragged you out of the water. How's your head?"

"Fine. There's barely even a bump anymore. So tell me about this curse."

"You've got a one-track mind, Ronan."

"I prefer to call it focused."

“I’m sure.” Meriel sighed. “I don’t want to talk about my curse right now. Can you tell me what I’ve missed? What happened to Burbank Industries?”

It was his turn to sigh.

“You went over the cliff at the party and the whole damn world fell apart. Naturally, we called the police and they ended up discovering that someone had been siphoning money off the corporation and cooking the books.”

Meriel gasped. “Who was it?”

“Evan Murtaugh. He was using your terminal so he could pin the blame on the new girl if he ever got discovered.”

“VP of Finance? That lying weasel. I never liked him. He always tried to look down my shirt.”

Ronan glanced over and the light in his eyes turned hot. “I can’t blame him for that.”

“Men.” It was so wrong to be flattered, but a thrill went through her anyway. “What happened then?”

“Murtaugh had his hands in deeper than we could have imagined. By the time we got the accounts straightened out, several of his sections were already bankrupt. After that, it was like quicksand. Everything around them got sucked down, too.”

“I still don’t understand how it could have been such a complete disaster. I mean, Burbank’s was so diversified.”

“It was the name that went to hell, Mer. Anything that had my name on it became suspect and deals started turning to dust in my hands.” He looked down and shoved those hands into his pockets.

Meriel pulled him to a stop. “That doesn’t make sense, Ronan. Something else happened.”

Ronan turned to stare out at the sea. Yeah, something else had happened. Before they discovered the real culprit, the spotlight had turned on him. Every detail of his life had been laid bare to the courts—and to the press.

Someone found a sticky pad on the allegedly dead girl’s desk with her name scribbled on it as “Mrs. Meriel Burbank”, and a firestorm of speculation exploded. They’d been secret lovers. They were planning to run off to Brazil, or the Bermuda Triangle, or somewhere equally absurd. But in true tabloid form, the media speculated that something had happened between the doomed lovers and they fought. Ronan was

even accused of shoving her off the cliff himself. Thankfully, there was no proof, not even a body, so no charges were brought.

Too late. He was already convicted in the eyes of the press and the public and after a while, even the few friends he had left began to distance themselves. That was the unkindest cut of all.

He told her. All of it. Even the parts that made his chest ache, though he kept the ache to himself.

"I don't know what to say, Ronan. I'm so sorry." She fought her way through his stiff stance, burrowing her arms under his and holding tight. Her lush little body gave off a blast of warmth and he took his hands out of his pockets. Slowly, he touched her. Put his hands on her shoulders and embraced her.

"No wonder you wanted to kill me."

"Meriel, I'm so sorry about that. I never meant to hurt you."

"It's all right, Ronan. I forgive you. And I'm sorry about my part in it. If I hadn't had that crush on you—written that stupid note—it might not have been so bad."

"Don't worry about it. It's over." The note meant nothing. He hadn't even known her then. But for what he'd done to her on the beach, he didn't deserve her forgiveness—and treasured it all the more. Ronan dropped a kiss on the top of her head and turned her back down the beach toward the boatyard.

"Come on. You still have to tell me your story. And I want you to meet Devon."

He tucked her hand firmly into his as they walked.

"I already told you a little bit of it. It's to do with great-great-Granny Byrne. A Selkie named Murchadha—"

"Who?"

"Murchadha. That's the old name. They're something else now, but I forget what." She pronounced the unusual word with a distinctly Celtic lilt, as if she'd learned to say it only one way—*murkaya*—pursing her lips, rolling over the r, with the accent on the first syllable. It didn't sound like any name he'd ever heard before.

"Anyway, he fell in love with her back in Ireland and gave her his skin, but she loved her husband and didn't know the magnitude of the gift she'd received. She left for America and took the skin with her. When Murchadha realized he'd been abandoned, he cursed her. Any child of her line would become a Selkie forever the moment they

touched the sea. There's a way to get out of it, but everyone seems to have forgotten. Tough to break a curse when you don't know the way out."

Their fifteen minute walk took over an hour while Meriel wandered and played all over the beach. Things he took for granted, things he never even saw as he trudged to work each day, caught her eye.

"I've never really been to the beach before, Ronan," she said, breathless from playing chase with the tide. The sun made the silver medallion pinned to her shirt gleam almost as brightly as her dark hair. "I mean, going to that party at your house was the first time I'd been so close to the ocean and we know how that turned out."

"I've lived here all my life," he said. "I can't imagine not being near the water."

"It was just as hard for me to imagine not being around mountains and hills. Tennessee is beautiful, but so is this. I can see why people never want to leave."

They finally reached town and walked along the docks until they reached the boatyard.

"'Winner Take All Racing'. I like it."

Pride and an old bitterness warred in his blood at her words. Bitterness that he couldn't put his name up there if he wanted any business, but this time pride won. The race wasn't over yet for him.

He poked his head in the door and discovered silence.

"Anyone here?"

No answer, which was unusual. Devon practically lived at the yard. Not that it mattered. They were a little ahead of their deadline for the Sonar racing keelboat they were working on, so if he wanted to take some time off, it was no big deal.

He took her down to the boathouse to see the almost-finished boat, but there was no one there, either. "Looks like we're all alone." Ronan pulled aside the tarp that covered the gleaming little yacht. "Meriel, meet the *Sea Bright*."

"Oh my gosh, Ronan. She's beautiful." Meriel touched the boat reverently, rubbing her fingers over the sleek hull as it rocked on the water.

Fierce joy rushed through him as he watched her admire his work. At odds with the hopelessness of the night before, he realized that though he might have lost a lot, he'd also gained some things. He was proud of the work he did. As president of Burbank, Inc., he'd always been able to look at the company he inherited objectively, filtered through market analysis and stock figures.

But Winner Take All was personal. He had his hand in each product. Each boat bore his blood and sweat, his frustration, his pride and, at last, his joy.

“Thanks. She’s the second we’ve built for these clients, and they won a cup at the Bay Haven Regatta with the first one. It looks good for marketing.”

“Always thinking of the big picture,” she teased. “But she truly is wonderful. Do you do the building yourself?”

“I’m only one part of the team here. We all have a hand in design and we all get in there with the tools and the grit.” He showed her around the rest of the shop, pointing out different aspects of the design. When they walked past the *Sea Bright* again on their way out, Meriel paused.

She touched his hands, turning them over in her palms, tracing the rough spots. “These are good hands, Ronan. Strong, capable hands.” She brought them to her face and he stroked her cheek with his thumbs. “I’m proud of you and I’m glad I was there to save you.”

“I didn’t think I was glad yesterday, but I am now.” He bent down to kiss the smile from her lips. He’d forever relate the clean tang of the ocean with the wild flavor of her mouth.

She responded eagerly again, throwing herself into the kiss. Without hesitation, he pushed his hands under her shirt to touch the smooth skin of her back.

“Still want you,” he whispered into her mouth, opening his eyes to see the flush of her cheeks.

She nodded, wordless, but her stomach chose that moment to growl loudly. They burst into laughter and it felt good. As if some dam inside him had broken at last.

“Let’s get some dinner,” he said. “You want sushi?”

“You think you’re pretty funny, don’t you?” She tickled his side and he twisted away from her.

“I’ll have to work on my crabby hermit routine, I guess.”

They left the building and Ronan locked up before he took her hand and walked with her up the pier.

Chapter Six

Toab's Market provided sustenance in the form of spaghetti, sausage, a jar of pasta sauce and a bottle of red wine. The loaf of warm fresh bread didn't quite make it back to the house as they tore off chunks and nibbled while they walked along the empty shore.

Misquapaug wasn't a popular tourist spot. The town had business to attend to and travelers soon discovered that unless they were fishing or visiting family, there wasn't much in the way of luxury amenities. Block Island, across the sound, catered to vacationers, but Misquapaug had no time to waste on such frivolity.

"Mrs. Toab likes you," Meriel said, watching the sky change hue over the water.

"She's about the only person in town who likes me. Everyone else thinks I murdered you. They wouldn't throw me a rope if I was drowning."

She punched him on the shoulder. "Hey, I didn't throw you a rope, either, buddy."

"That's right, you didn't." Ronan stopped. "Have I thanked you for that? For saving me?" His dark eyes were serious as he stared down at her. She was here for a day. Dawn to dawn. And in the space of a few hours, she'd lost her heart.

Stupid Selkie.

"Come on," he said, grabbing her hand and dragging her behind him.

"What? Wait. Where are we going?" She'd hoped for another kiss, not the Bataan Death March. Soon, however, they arrived at a familiar patch of beach. Sandy steps rose in front of them and Meriel tilted her head back to see the bulk of the Burbank mansion.

It was an impressive place, built at the turn of the twentieth century, and uniquely American, unlike the Roman, French and English revivals that influenced other mansions of the time. A Yankee clapboard house on a gigantic scale, it towered over the cliff in simple splendor.

“Ronan?” He led her into the mansion. They entered through a huge kitchen and he opened the refrigerator to deposit dinner fixings inside. He’d have kept going, but she went back to the fridge to take the wine out and set it on the countertop.

“Red wine likes room temperature.”

“Mer, it’s a six dollar bottle. With a screw-top.”

“So? It might surprise you. Haven’t you learned by now that appearances can be deceiving?” She grinned at him and he shook his head.

“Got any more clichés you’d like to spring on me?” He took her hand again and set off through the rest of the house.

“Money can’t buy happiness.”

“True, but poverty sucks.”

“Beauty is only skin deep.”

“That’s disgusting, considering I know where your skin is.”

“Ok, yeah. That’s gross.” It was covered in dust bunnies. She hoped they wouldn’t itch when she had to put it back on.

Ronan Burbank was a determined man, she realized as they crossed room after room, each one devoid of furniture and decoration. The stark simplicity, however, emphasized the true grandeur of the home. This place didn’t depend on decoration for its beauty. It had beauty built into its bones. Like its owner. Ronan was as stripped down as his house, but his inner strength was undimmed. Right now, he had one goal in mind and didn’t intend to deviate from his course. He was so focused, he wasn’t even answering her. She was curious enough to let him keep going. For a while, at least.

Finally, he brought her into a dim hallway, illuminated only by what little sun could reach into the shadows. Before he could open the door, however, she stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Here’s one. Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”

He looked down at her, his face indistinct in the darkness.

“We’ll see about that.”

Ronan opened the massive oak door with an appropriately eerie creak. They stepped into the black.

“Stay right there for a sec.” He left her standing in what could only be called stygian darkness, but that was a little too close for comfort, considering her already otherworldly

circumstances. The prickly fingers of self-inflicted terror crept up her neck as his footsteps abruptly disappeared.

A metallic jingle sounded from far ahead of her, then light. Ronan drew back the heavy velvet curtains and thick motes of dust danced in the sudden sunlight. They were in the library.

But not any library. It was the kind she'd read about in Gothic novels. Floor to ceiling shelves crammed with leather bound tomes, odds and ends of natural history, and a few rows of paperback novels. There was even a rolling ladder attached to a brass rail at the top so readers could climb up to reach books on the highest shelves. A bibliophile's dream come true.

Meriel drew in a deep, wondering breath and choked on the dust.

Ronan pounded her on the back until she held up a hand in surrender. "I'm fine. But this...this is amazing." Meriel straightened and walked to a shelf to run her fingers over the spines.

"It's pretty impressive, but a lot of it's for show. There are six sets of *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, all in different covers. My great-grandfather thought they looked important." His eyebrow quirked, letting her in on the cynical joke, and she laughed. She had to. The library that looked like a fantasy really was one.

But not entirely. She could tell that people had used it. Her eyes were drawn to the paperbacks and she discovered title after title by Georgette Heyer.

"My aunt." Ronan's voice came over her shoulder. "I mean, Georgette Heyer wasn't my aunt, but my aunt loved those books. Said they made her happy."

"I've read a few," Meriel answered. "They made me happy, too."

"I tried one, and it was kind of fun, but, you know, a guy reading romances." He looked sheepish at his admission.

"Which one did you read?"

"I can't remember the title. I remember she shot the hero. That was cool."

Meriel laughed again. The room absorbed the sound as though hungry for it. Every time she laughed, it felt as though some oppression lifted.

"So if we're not in the library to admire your aunt's collection of Regency romances, why are we here?"

"You."

"What about me?"

“Your curse. We can’t play all day, Meriel.” He looked so serious, his dark eyes focused on her.

“We haven’t played all day. We fought until lunch time.”

“And other things.”

She felt her face flush. Yeah. Other things. Things she’d much rather be doing now than scouring through a library for the solution to a curse that was mostly forgotten.

His hands, big and rough and warm, gripped her shoulders. “Hey, if it doesn’t work, at least this way you can say you tried. And if it does work...” He tipped her chin up with a finger and his gaze heated. “Wouldn’t you like to stay and do...other things for a while longer?”

Ronan’s head dipped to hers and stopped a heartbeat away. Her choice. She closed the gap in surrender. He tasted good. Like home, but not her old home. A home she dreamed of. The tang of toothpaste had faded and all that was left was Ronan. Rich, like dark chocolate and red wine. Under her fingers, his hair curled and clung like silken ties, binding her heart to his.

He wrapped his arms around her and she leaned on his strength, soaking it in because she needed it. Needed to feel his hard body against hers.

“Ouch!” Her cry was muffled against his mouth and he let go abruptly.

Meriel rubbed at her breast—not exactly ladylike, but darn it, something had poked her in the boob. The jeweled amulet from the ocean had nicked her. What a metaphor. Stabbed by magic.

She took the brooch off and laid it on the table.

“What is that thing, anyway?” Ronan bent down to examine it. He touched it and then jerked his finger away with a hiss.

“What happened?”

“It shocked me.” He brought his finger up to his mouth and sucked on it for a moment. “Like I touched a live fuse. Not a bad shock, but it got me.” He looked at the brooch in disgust. “Maybe it doesn’t like me.”

“I don’t know if it likes you or not, but it saved your life.” In the stillness of the abandoned house, the aquatic song rushed again in her ears.

“What?”

“When I hauled you out of the water, you weren’t breathing. It wasn’t fair.”

“Fair?”

“I mean, it’s bad enough that I’m already cursed. But watching someone die in the water where I changed seemed infinitely more awful than I could handle. So I called on the ocean to save you. The amulet washed up on shore. I laid it on your chest and mercy was granted, but at a price. The magic said that your destiny was now tangled in mine. Then you came back.”

It sounded ridiculous when she put it into words. Ronan’s eyebrow was back up, too.

“Don’t look at me like that. Like you don’t believe me. I’m a Selkie, for crying out loud. And you’re here. Not dead.”

Ronan pulled a chair out from the table and sat down backwards, resting his arms on the ornate back. Meriel sat as well, precisely, knees together, ankles crossed. She needed to get this right so he would believe her.

“Ronan, there’s a world under the water you can’t imagine. Deeper than humans can understand. After seven years, after all I’ve seen, I still don’t understand it. If I live forever, I never will.”

She touched the amulet, tracing her finger around the wrought seal—stark and fantastic.

“I didn’t even believe this existed.”

“What is it?”

“This is the Heart of the Sea.”

The Heart of the Sea. A fairy tale. A myth. But a powerful one. The name resonated in Ronan’s head with the buzz of truth.

“It can’t be.”

Meriel looked at him sideways.

“What do you mean, it can’t be? Do you know what it is?”

“The Heart of the Sea. It’s just a story. It doesn’t really exist.”

She opened her mouth, but he stood up, cutting her off. Where was it? Ronan tried to remember. He’d been about ten years old. Grounded again for God knew what reason, so he decided to check out the library. It couldn’t be any more boring than his room.

He walked to the door and turned around, surveying the room, trying to see from a child’s eyes. It had been up high, which was part of the attraction. Something about the

cover had sparkled, catching his eye. There was gold leaf on the spine, but now everything was coated with a thick layer of dust.

Ronan climbed the ladder and shoved off, the way he had back then. But he was heavier now and the rail was spotty with rust, so he only creaked over a few inches.

“Meriel, can you give me a hand? Just push. I know what I’m looking for.”

She looked up at him for a moment, no doubt questioning his sanity, but she pushed. She trusted that he’d find it. She trusted him. He pulled along the rail until he was there. Right there. The spine wasn’t perfectly aligned with the other books and it stuck out a little. *Tales of the Cold Sea*.

“Found it.” He climbed back down the ladder, and took Meriel’s chin in his free hand. “Thanks, Mer.” He kissed her quickly and her eyes widened, so he smiled and kissed her again. Slowly. With his eyes open, watching her watch him until her lids fluttered shut. He shouldn’t get distracted. There was no time for it, but he couldn’t help himself.

Her lips were cool against his, her cheek smooth under his hand. The scent of the sea went straight to his head and he wanted to kiss her in the water, float next to her, touch her wet, bare skin and feel her slide against him.

She was pressed to his side and he nudged his thigh between hers, needing to feel her response the way he had earlier. She took his invitation and purred as she rubbed against him, layers of denim in their way. A whimper of frustration left her—God, he loved listening to the sounds she made. The book slipped from his hands and landed on the floor with a sharp smack.

The sound startled her out of his arms and they both laughed.

“Maybe we should work on this,” he said as he bent to retrieve the book.

She cleared her throat and pushed her dark hair behind her ears as she opened the pages and began to read. She’d brushed it before they left the house, but playing on the beach had whipped it into a carefree style, individual strands set free to catch the sun. Layers of color shot through the brown and he watched gold and red intermingle.

Ronan knew the woman in front of him wasn’t model gorgeous. She was better. She was real. And until dawn, she was his. The idea nearly made him grab her and take her right there on the table. So tempting to step back between her legs, strip her naked and indulge himself between those beautiful thighs until the sun broke the sky again.

Shit. *Eight times four is thirty-six. The United States has won twenty-eight of thirty-two America's Cup yacht races. The Block Island Race was established in 1946 and George David's ninety-foot boat, Rambler, took top honors there this year.* Ronan's breath slowed as he cited statistics. If he lost control now, Meriel would be gone at dawn. But if they could find the answer to her curse, she could stay.

In a way, he felt responsible for what had happened. If she hadn't come to work for him, she never would have come to the company party, never would have come near that cliff. If not for him, she would never have been forced to live out a curse that wasn't her fault at all.

A low gasp drew his attention.

"Ronan? I think I found it."

The illustration on the front page of the story was an almost perfect replica of the brooch on the table.

The story told of the Viking ocean god, Aegir, who loved his wife, Ran, so much that he wished to travel to the depths of his domain to bring back the most perfect jewel in existence. However, even Aegir, with all his power, could not swim as deeply as he needed to find the jewel, so he asked a Selkie to help him. In return, the sons of Ivaldi, dwarves and master craftsmen, molded the setting in honor of the seal-folk.

"Okay, so what does that say about the power of the jewel?" he asked when they finished reading.

Meriel groaned and laid her head on her arms. "I have no idea."

"So we're not any further along than when we started." Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea. He wanted to help her, not make this puzzle more difficult.

"There's got to be something there, but it's not on the surface. Maybe it's like analyzing literature back in high school. A deeper meaning, some symbolism that we're not seeing."

"Mer. I sucked at analyzing literature." He did remember that Mr. Connor had always worn his pants hiked way up above his waist, but that wasn't very helpful right now.

"Well, I didn't. I was good at it. It's like those puzzles where you have to focus your eyes just right to see the picture. We need to adjust the way we're looking at it."

Ronan rose to his feet and stretched. "Let's bring the book back to the house so we can think and eat at the same time."

“Multi-tasking. You’re a man of many talents, Ronan.” She smiled at him and he stared. She fit. Here, in this house he loved so much. Sitting in the library with dust on her cheek and the sun in her hair. He wished he could give her what she needed. The very least he could do was feed her. He held out his hand.

“Come on, Meriel. Let’s go home.”

Chapter Seven

They ended up with a decent meal, considering that Meriel hadn't cooked in a while. Ronan had learned a few things about making do for himself, and they bumped hips in the kitchen. They ate playing footsie under the table with their sandy toes, her body growing tense with anticipation.

"I'll wash, you dry," he said and Meriel nodded. She cleared the table while he filled the sink with soapy water. She tried to keep her mind on the story they'd read, but she couldn't concentrate. She had nothing, although that wasn't quite true.

She had the rest of the night with him.

Twice while they worked, she opened her mouth to say something. Anything. But then her mind blanked out. She couldn't think of anything that didn't sound lame or desperate.

Finally, she put away the last dish. The towel in her hands was damp and she folded it. Then folded it again. The edges had to be just so. Because if they were perfect then he wouldn't notice how nervous she was, right?

It was odd. She'd never been a particularly sexual person before she changed. She'd had boyfriends, some more serious than others. She'd even indulged in a fling or two. And this...this was a fling, right? Just sex?

She didn't really know him, he didn't know her. Though that wasn't true anymore. She knew more about the real Ronan Burbank now than she had learned after weeks of moon-eyed day-dreaming and mild obsession. And he was the only person now who understood what had happened to her. What she'd become.

This wasn't as simple as she wanted it to be. But the dish towel had perfectly square corners.

Ronan took it from her, opened it, undoing all her work, and laid it out over the dish rack. She couldn't look at him, so he tucked a finger under her chin.

“We don’t have to do this, Meriel. We can wait.”

She shook her head, tears starting. “We can’t wait, Ronan. The curse is impossible to break. I go back to the sea at dawn to be a Selkie forever. And I want this. I want you. But I also want time. The one thing I can’t have.”

“Then we’ll make the best of the time we have.”

The kiss in the kitchen was followed by a kiss in the living room. They kissed again in the hall and stumbled through the door to his room.

“We’re changing the sheets first,” she said. At least it smelled better than it had that morning. He eyed the rumpled bed and the chaos on the floor.

“Fast. We’re changing the sheets fast.” He went back out to grab a set from the linen closet in the hall. She shoved the piles of clothes into one towering mountain in the corner and stripped the bed with a yank. The magic of her skin under the bed called out to her, but she ignored it.

Hurriedly, they tucked the fitted sheet on the bed, tossed the top sheet over and stuffed pillows into fresh cases.

“I’m not making hospital corners for you, woman.”

“What? Not interested in doing the job right?” she teased, seeing the tension in his body. Somehow, it made her feel better that she wasn’t the only one running on nerves tonight.

He dropped his pillow onto the mattress and crossed around the bed in two strides. “Oh, I plan to do one job right tonight,” he growled. She shivered at the sensual promise in his words.

“Want to see you,” Ronan said. Meriel stood pliable in front of him as he slowly drew the shirt over her head. The nubby texture of the cotton shirt, smooth a moment before, now felt like burlap, scraping at her senses until she was free. The weight of moonlight on her skin was all she could bear as she returned the favor for him.

She took base advantage of his beautiful flesh as he removed his clothing. His skin under her lips was hot and smooth as she kissed her way around his body. Meriel reached up on tiptoe to press a soft kiss at the nape of his neck, following the trail down to the rise of his tight, muscled ass.

She straightened and pressed her breasts into his back while she reached around to tweak his hard nipples. She loved being in this position herself, loved the power of a man

enveloping her from behind, but had never experienced it like this. She hummed, a throaty sound that they passed between them.

His hands took their own path, reaching back to pull her thighs closer to his, running his fingers up the cleft between them.

Meriel sucked in a breath as he discovered the wetness that had been seeping from her for the past hour in anticipation of this moment.

His head bowed with a groan and she pressed her brow to his spine.

Ronan turned abruptly. "I'm going to try to take this as slowly as I can, Mer. I'll try."

"At least we can start that way." Slow...fast...she knew there would come a point where all she would want was him inside her.

He walked her to the bed and watched as she lay back. This had always been a difficult moment for her. Like this, with him standing over her, she was vulnerable, open. His gaze burned where it touched, but slowly she tensed. When they touched body to body, he couldn't see her flaws, but they were all on display while he watched her.

In a moment, he looked away and bent to retrieve his jeans, digging in the back pocket. He held up the packets like golden coins. "Buried treasure," he said, tossing a handful of condoms onto the bedside table.

"Where did you get them?"

"They've been in the bathroom. But earlier I was so obsessed I couldn't think straight."

"Obsessed, huh?"

"Muddled. Lust-crazed." Each phrase was punctuated by kisses. Along her neck where he tongued the flesh under her ear, which made her shudder. Down to the sensitive spot at the top of her shoulder. Ronan bit oh-so-gently and she cried out. "Out of my head with wanting you." He whispered the last words to her collar bone as he lazily kissed his way down her chest.

Meriel dug her heels into the mattress and arched up, trying to reach his mouth with her breasts, but he was inexorable in his determination to make her wait.

He didn't even touch them, but let his fingers drift around her belly, drawing circles around her navel until finally, he held the weight of her breasts in his hands. She'd been wound up for hours since the abrupt end of their kitchen session. The sensation of his body on hers now made her desperate for more and she breathed out one word.

"Ronan."

The sound of his name actually sparkled in his ears as he heard her softly moan. A few more of those pleading words and he'd be plunging into her, past coherent thought.

Her breasts were a feast and he gorged himself, finding the difference in flavor and texture from one nipple to the other, from the skin at the top of the sloping mounds to the flesh underneath. But as he tasted, another sense was aroused.

Her scent rose from beneath him, cool and fresh. Ronan kissed his way down her body to find its source, pleased when she opened for him. He'd always preferred women who expected the best from their lovers. He enjoyed the challenge of living up to their expectations.

The soft, short hair around her pubis shifted back from his touch, leaving him with bare skin, sweet lips that already shone with moisture.

He kissed it away, listening to the sound of hungry approval she made. Ronan parted her outer lips with his hand, revealing the treasure beneath, the silken flesh, the hardening bead at the top. He breathed her in.

Each lick, each suckle, each probing touch of his tongue and fingers wound her tighter and tighter. Her hands were in his hair, on his face, her smooth, strong thighs tensed around him and still he pushed her, concentrated on finding the places that made her shiver until finally she exploded beneath him. Meriel cried out, her body shaking in time with the pulses of the orgasm that coursed through her, the climax he could feel run under her skin as he changed his focus. Ronan soothed her now with kisses on her smooth belly, two fingers buried inside her body until she breathed again.

Meriel turned away, breaking his hold, and buried her face in a pillow. Ronan climbed up to lay next to her, dismayed to find her shoulders shaking. She was crying. He'd seen her laughing, angry, and afraid, but these tears were beyond his understanding.

"Mer," he said, sliding an arm under her. She threw herself onto his chest, sobbing even more wildly, and there was nothing he could do but hold her until the storm passed. Not that he was complaining. Meriel was a perfect armful. Soft and feminine, graceful and earthy. She was a woman of wonderful contrasts and he wondered if he'd get the chance to learn more of them. Slowly, the sobs ebbed.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Did I hurt you, Meriel? Did I do something wrong?"

"God no, Ronan. I was just...overwhelmed. I've never—"

“Never what?” Because if he’d hurt her in some way, he wanted to know so he never did it again.

“I’ve never flown that high before.” Her words were so quiet, he had to strain to hear. “It was amazing. Absolutely amazing.”

As her tears dried, one of her slender hands began to move across his chest and abs. He tried to concentrate on her face, on her voice, but it was damn distracting.

Finally, he simply let himself be distracted and leaned back into the pillows, allowing her free rein. Her body temperature was lower than his and the slight contrast of her cold fingers on his hot skin left a trail of buzzing sensation wherever she touched.

Boldly, she circled her hand around the base of his erection and used her palm to slide skin over nerve endings until liquid leaked from the tip and dripped over her fingers.

Ronan reached for a condom. “I’ve been ready for hours, Mer. I can’t wait much longer.”

She let him tear it open, but then took matters into her own hands, pressing a tender kiss to the head of his shaft before she rolled the rubber over his aching cock. Even those light touches felt like lightning bolts to his system.

“Then let’s not wait anymore,” she said, spreading her legs to straddle him. With his hands on her hips, he watched her face as she sank down to swallow him in one agonizingly slow move.

He wasn’t a talker and neither was she, but she was vocal. Her moans fed his and the occasional “More” or “Harder” or “Oh yes” were the only words that punctuated the silence of the room along with the soft, wet, sliding sounds of their lovemaking.

They moved. He was harder than ever as he rose above her, sliding in and out of her body, her legs wrapped around him, their tongues mimicking the movement of their hips.

They shifted again. On his knees, he skimmed a hand down the smooth skin of her back, reaching under her to cup her breast. Ronan moved his hands under her shoulders, bringing her back to his chest, pulling her down onto his cock, pushing himself deeper than he’d ever gone. The gasps and groans were almost constant now as her pitch wound ever higher. Meriel began to curl in on herself and at the first silken contraction of her womb around him, he let himself go, pounding into her, shouting out her name over and over in his climax while she keened and sobbed again, twisting as the waves of her peak slammed her against him.

Meriel slumped forward and he grasped at her desperately, needing her body against his as their breath heaved in tandem. Her fingers fluttered over the arm he held around her waist and the words that tumbled from her lips were in no language he had ever heard.

Exhaustion hit him hard and he lowered her to the bed, watching as she curled up into a ball. Her eyes were still open when he returned from cleaning up, but she was covered by a blanket now.

“Your skin.”

She nodded.

“You knew where it was the whole time.”

“It’s not like you hid it very well, Ronan.” She smiled and lifted a corner, inviting him in. Cautiously, he slid his body behind hers, bending up his knees so they fit together like spoons. He put his arm around her waist and pulled her closer. Her hair floated into his face and he freed himself with a smile.

The fur settled over them. The warmth and the evenness of Meriel’s breathing lulled him to sleep.

Chapter Eight

Wrapped in the arms of her lover, under a blanket of magic, Meriel woke. Someone was calling her name. Iona? What was she doing on land?

Meriel pressed a kiss to the tips of the bristles on Ronan's cheek and slid out of bed. She pulled her discarded blue polo shirt on over her nudity and crept out the door. A storm brewed over the ocean and the wind whistled around the edges of the house.

"Iona?" she called. "What's wrong? It's not close to dawn yet, is it?"

"No," said a harsh male voice from the shadows. Iona stumbled forward, propelled by a shove from behind. The Selkie was old and her skin was wrinkled and gray with the cold. Meriel reached out for her, but rough hands grabbed her. Their captor, having what he wanted, pushed Iona away from them. The old woman didn't even have time to cry out before she fell. The sound of her head hitting a paving stone made Meriel's stomach churn with dread. A strong hand over her mouth prevented her from calling for help.

"We've got you now, Byrne. You've had your day in the sun, but now it's time to end this." He held her close, his arm a steel band around her waist, cutting off her air. She knew that voice. She'd heard it before somewhere, but she was too scared to think it through.

"What do you want?" Meriel asked. Terror and breathlessness kept her voice low.

"We want you to finish this curse. We've waited more than two centuries for a Byrne to touch water. We won't give you up after only seven years."

"What do you mean, finish the curse? I couldn't find a way out of it. I'm going back to the sea at dawn. I know that already." She looked over at her friend, but in the dark, she couldn't tell if Iona was breathing or not.

"You think that's it? You think the curse is that you only get to come on land once in a while?" He laughed and the sound made her feel filthy, as if she'd lain in rotten kelp. "You're as stupid as your granny. No, this is a curse for all time. You ruined us. Left us

on land, alone, until we died, dry as a husk and bitter as the Dead Sea. No, we're after despair and grief. We're after seeing that you feel our pain."

"We?" Who was he talking about? And how did he know so much about the curse? "Who are you?"

"The name changed, but the curse lives on." The crazy man's voice was a discordant sing-song in a thick Yankee seaboard accent. The accent. She knew that accent.

"Murphy. Devon Murphy. You're Ronan's friend."

He snorted. "Spoiled rich boy. Trust fund baby. One little scandal and he spends the next seven years whining and moaning about how they took everything away from him." He dragged her down the sandy steps to the beach. Meriel tried to trip him. She'd rather be dead of a broken neck than let this man take her, but he just picked her up and carried her, pinning her legs so she couldn't kick. A dead-looking hummock of fur lay on the sand. Iona's skin.

Meriel swallowed hard. "Don't you talk about him that way, jackass." She pounded his back, but he ignored her.

"He thinks his family was strong. My ancestor is in my blood, in my head. Murchadha passed long ago, but his children were all raised on the bitterness of his life. And now that we've got you, Byrne, we mean to make you pay."

A sturdy motorboat was tied to the boathouse and he pushed her in. The last thing she saw was his huge fist swinging toward her head. The last thing she heard was the motor firing.

Ronan woke to the smell of fish. He opened his eyes to the unwelcome sight of a naked, wrinkled, saggy old woman.

"Gah!"

"Gah, yourself, Ronan Burbank. Get up and bring Meriel's skin with you."

"What?"

"Get up. Devon Murphy has Meriel and he's planning to kill her."

The mere mention of danger to his woman galvanized him and he leapt out of bed. Unfortunately, he forgot he was naked, too, and cupped himself, trying to avoid the old woman's knowing gaze.

"It's a pity I'm not a few dozen years younger or I might have come on land for that, myself."

"Umm, thanks? Turn around, lady."

She sighed and turned as he yanked on his jeans and shoved his feet into deck shoes. He pulled a shirt over his head and grabbed Meriel's sealskin. It still held her scent—their scent. When he picked it up, something tumbled out and thunked on the floor at his feet. Ronan bent to pick it up. The brooch lay heavy and cold in his hand.

"She left it here?"

"It was pinned to her shirt. Must have fallen off." He shoved it in his pocket. Then Ronan pulled the only decent shirt he owned off a hanger and handed it to his guest. "Please. Now what happened?"

The old lady didn't waste any words as she buttoned the shirt and followed him down to the dock. "He's a descendant of Murchadha and he knows the rest of the curse. That means he knows how to break it, too. Careless of the Byrnes to have forgotten it over all these years."

Shit. The motorboat was gone from the boathouse. He'd wrecked the dinghy yesterday—was it only a day ago?

"Come on. We can go out on the *Sea Bright*," he said to the lady, and settled in for a run to the boatyard. When they got there, Ronan charged the door, knowing he'd locked it. He bounced off with a new bruise.

"Calm yourself," the old woman said. A sealskin was draped over her arm. It must have been her own, mottled with white spots. Meriel's was purest silver.

As he watched, the old lady's hands glowed. Silver and blue-green light played over her fingers for a moment before she opened them, showing him the key.

"Who are you?" he asked as he unlocked the door and started flinging off the dock lines that bound the boat.

"My name is Iona and we've met before. I told you this would happen then."

The keelboat's hull rocked in the waves as he pulled open the massive doors that led straight out to Block Island Sound. He had no idea what she was talking about and he didn't care. Only one thing mattered.

“Are you in or out?” he asked.

“I’m in,” the old lady said as she climbed nimbly aboard. Ronan pushed the *Sea Bright* off from the dock and set about running up the rigging.

The squall beckoned them closer, lightning dancing along the water as wind filled the spinnaker. The sleek little boat shot forward.

“You’re the old woman from the party,” he shouted over the noise of the wind and storm. Ronan remembered her now as he brought the mainsail around to take advantage of the whipping storm. “You said I’d find all I needed in the sea and then you disappeared. You knew all this would happen.”

“I was right then and I’m right now when I tell you that your true love will die if we don’t get to her in time. Now sail!”

True love? How did you fall in love with someone in a day? He didn’t deny it. He couldn’t. Maybe it was only the beginning, only a seed of love, but it was there. Enough to let him know that if he saved Meriel, it would grow into something strong and true.

The line in his hands nearly jerked him over the side when a vicious gust hit. It had been a long time since he’d had the time to crew a racing yacht. In truth, he was a better builder than sailor. But now it was time to face facts, do what he had to do, and concentrate on the task at hand.

Devon Murphy was a madman. And an unattractive madman, at that. When he cackled to himself, he sounded like an old bag lady and his lips peeled back from huge yellow horse teeth. Then there was the smell—a scent of rotting fish and decay.

Meriel’s entire head boomed in tandem with the throb of the motor as it chugged mightily against the storm.

“Have you lost your mind?” she yelled at him.

“Hee hee,” he screeched. “Murchadha will have his vengeance.”

“Murchadha was a juvenile bastard who blamed the wrong person for his stupid decision. He knew Granny Byrne was married to a man she loved, but he thought he was so damned special he could change her.” Meriel scrambled to her knees. “I hope you and your entire screw-loose family rot in hell for this!”

“You’re going to die, and your true love is going to die, and Murchadha will rest in peace and finally get the hell out of my head.” He really was nuts. He thought a dead Selkie was talking to him. She’d have felt sorry for him if he wasn’t trying to kill her.

“My true love? You mean Ronan?” Was this the ocean’s prophecy coming true? That Ronan’s fate was bound in hers—even if it killed them both? Surely the curse couldn’t ask so much of her. Meriel realized she needed to deflect the psycho’s attention back to her.

“He doesn’t love me, he barely knows me. And I want you to keep him out of this curse. It’s got nothing to do with him.”

“It’s too late for that now. Too late since the moment you called on the sea to save him. You love him already and that’s the truth of it. That’s the curse of it. Any child of the Byrne line will become a Selkie forever if it touches the sea.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know that part already.”

“But you didn’t know about the loophole. The one that gave you the ability to become human for a day. You saved a man and in return, you were given a day of humanity. It gave you hope, though you knew you had to return to the sea by dawn or die, right?”

Meriel closed her eyes against the truth. She had hoped. And she had loved. “Right.”

“You need your skin. Without it, you can’t swim well enough to survive in the water.”

“Again, I know this part.” Now she was starting to get annoyed. He was enjoying her misery way too much.

“But when you shifted and found your true love, that’s when the clock started. You never had a chance.”

“Could this be any more complicated? Your ancestor must have had a lot of time on his hands to make this up.”

“Shut up, faithless whore,” he screamed at her, spittle flying.

“Ew.” She made a show of wiping her face, though she couldn’t tell his spit from the splashes of water that drenched her.

“The same sea that saved your true love will kill him now. Ronan will die trying to save you tonight. He’ll sacrifice his own life for yours.” Murphy leaned close and she swore she could see hell-fire burning in his eyes. “And you’ll live forever as a Selkie then. Unable to shift ever again, knowing that your love is what killed him.”

The urge to weep in terror and hopelessness was strong. They were far out to sea and with the squall blowing around them, she didn’t know in which direction they’d fled. She could dive over the side, but she knew she’d never make it back to shore as a human.

Without her skin, she couldn't shift back. And without her... Meriel grabbed at her shirt, looking for the amulet pinned there, but it was gone. Oh no. It must have fallen off, but when? In the bedroom? Or on that torturous trip to the boat? Worse, what if it had gone overboard, back to the ocean it came from?

A brief, quiet hole in the storm made one thing clear.

"No more gas," Murphy shrieked as his manic glee turned to fury. A large wave lifted the little boat and slapped it back down into a trough. Meriel watched as it finally dawned on her kidnapper that she and Ronan weren't the only ones who might die that night.

"Do something," he demanded, twisting the starter in vain.

"Gee whiz, what do you think I should do?" She knew it wasn't smart to taunt a nutcase, but what the hell, right? What else could he do to her? So she lifted her brow and mocked both her tormentor and the raging sea.

"Help. Help," she said in her most deadpan voice. Meriel settled back into the corner and crossed her arms. "There. I did something."

He grabbed a wrench and raised it to wallop her when another wave crashed over the stern and flooded the cockpit. Enemies became teammates for the frantic minutes it took to scoop out the water.

"It's almost dawn," Murphy said as they panted in tandem. "You're going to die now."

"You'll die with me, you miserable piece of lobster shit." Inspiration struck her as something became clear. "And if I die without my true love, the curse dies with me. Bet Murchadha will be real impressed with you when you meet him in hell."

The crazy man blanched at her words and she was almost cruel enough to laugh at him.

Then she heard her name. It should have been impossible over the wind and crashing thunder, but there it was.

"Meriel, wait!"

The *Sea Bright's* sail cut through the gale. It was an extraordinary feat of sailing to have made it this far through the storm, Her pride knew no bounds. He really was good at everything he did.

But her euphoria was followed by bowel-loosening fear. Oh God, no. He couldn't be here. She couldn't let him die. She waved at him, frantic for him to go back to shore and safety.

"Go back, Ronan! Go back!" Murphy's hand at her back was so cold it burned. His mad laugh rang in her ears as he shoved her over the side.

Meriel twisted, tripping over a loose line in the bottom of the boat and she grabbed at him, at anything. He looked surprised when her hand closed on his shirt. She was too far over the edge to recover and, hauling Murphy with her, they fell into the cold embrace of the sea.

Looking up at the roiling sky from two feet down was like peering into a different world. Under the water, it was calm, serene and dark. Peaceful.

Meriel pulled herself up and broke the surface right before a wave swept over her head. Salt water flooded her mouth and nose and she choked, clawing for air. Ronan swam toward her and she grabbed for him.

"Here," he yelled, dropping something over her head. As soon as it touched her skin, the magic shot through her. The transformation back to seal was as painful as the change to human had been and she struggled weakly back to the air when it was over, searching for Ronan's beloved face above the waves.

She saw him, but only for a moment before he slipped under.

"No!" Meriel swam out, but lost him in the darkness under the water. Lightning above her illuminated a pale arm sinking down and she dove for him.

This was worse, infinitely worse than saving him had been the first time. It felt as if something was pulling against her, dragging him into the depths.

She looked down to see Murphy's mad eyes staring up at her. He wasn't even fighting to get back to the surface. Meriel realized he was already dead, his fingers locked around Ronan's legs.

Oh God. She couldn't pull them both to the surface, but if she let go of Ronan, he'd die before she could get Murphy free of him.

The curse was winning. Ronan was sacrificing his life for her, and she would live all the rest of her days alone at sea. She hadn't realized a heart could actually break, until hers shattered in her chest.

Ronan reached out and rested both his hands on her face. One hand was clasped around something—a glimmer of silver—the brooch.

“I love you,” he mouthed. A trail of bubbles left his lips and he arched in pain as his lungs filled with water.

Ronan Burbank died smiling at her.

Chapter Nine

The weight was gone. Murphy's hand had finally unclenched and he sank like hell-born brimstone as Ronan's body rose with her to the surface.

The fast-moving storm had swept over them while she fought and lost the battle for Ronan's life under the sea. Now, as she raised his face above the waves, stars peeked out of the thin clouds racing past in the sky.

The *Sea Bright* was still floating, but her mast was snapped in half, the mainsail trailing in her lazy wake. A sleek gray head popped up next to her.

"Help me get him in the boat, Iona." Her friend blinked and a trail of water that looked like tears dripped down her cheeks. Meriel wondered if there was a matching trail on her own face.

Other heads appeared, bobbing along the surface. Selkies from all over the area had come, called by magic...called by love. The words that left her mouth sounded even and calm.

"Can you help me get him back to port? Back to his people? He built a fine boat and it would be a shame to let it go to waste out here." And the *Sea Bright* was a fine boat. She'd carried him through the storm and it was fitting that this great vessel bear him home again.

"Aren't you going with him, Meriel?" Iona asked.

"I'll help guide the boat." She'd fall apart later. On her own. In the quiet depths of the ocean where no one could hear her scream her grief to heaven.

"No," the older Selkie said. "You're going back with him."

Meriel laughed, though it made the broken pieces of her heart pierce her so she bled. "I'd like to see that tabloid headline. 'Seal haunts bay, mourning dead man'. I don't think so. I never want to be around humans again. Look what I did, Iona. The curse came true because of every stupid mistake I ever made and a good man—a great man—died for it."

“I didn’t take you for a coward, miss.”

Meriel gasped. The last thing she expected from her friend and mentor was cruelty.

“What makes you think a curse can have any effect on true love?”

“I don’t understand.”

“That’s because you weren’t born magic. That’s what we are, Meriel. We’re magic. Magic from the hands of God Himself. And what is God?”

“God is love,” Meriel answered. Some Sunday school lessons stuck forever.

“And love always, always triumphs over evil. Though it may occasionally take quite some time.” The other Selkies clustered around Iona and Meriel and their sad eyes spoke of shared tragedy. She could feel the charge of destiny in the water.

“A curse cannot stand in the way of true love,” Iona repeated. “Do you want to remain a Selkie forever?”

“No,” Meriel barked immediately, then paused. “No offense.” A chuckle went through the gathering.

“None taken. Do you love Emory Charles Ronan Burbank IV?”

Meriel answered more carefully this time. “He’s only part of the man I am coming to love. I love Ronan Burbank. A boat builder. A good, strong man.”

Iona smiled and touched Meriel with a flipper. “Then go to him.”

This time, the change wasn’t painful. Music—the creek’s trill, the ocean’s roar, the river’s rush, the spring’s bubble—lifted her out of the water. A silver, blue-green light flowed out of the water upward, into, and around her. Her feet touched the water and she sank back into its embrace. A weight was gently lifted away and then the light receded. So simple. Except she forgot to tread water and was promptly dunked under a small, lapping wave.

Meriel came back up coughing, laughing and crying at the same time as her friends, her ocean-bound family, laughed with her. She swam to the side of the boat and hauled herself up and over. She looked down over the edge to find Iona holding something in her teeth. It was her skin, and when she touched it, she realized it still held the tingle of magic. She pulled her arm back.

“It won’t hurt you,” Iona said through her teeth. Meriel took the pelt and discovered that it held something besides magic.

“Don’t drop them,” warned the Selkie as Meriel peeked inside. The dark blue glitter of a hundred sapphires threw the weak light of dawn back at her.

“Find a place for the stones and then lie down with your love. Use the magic that’s left in the pelt to bring him back to you.”

“Thank you,” she said to her friend as she realized that the boat was moving. Sleek, round heads in every shade of brown and gray bobbed through the water as they propelled the craft landward.

Meriel found a covered tin pail in the tiny hold and dumped the stones in there before she settled in next to Ronan’s still form. He was so cold.

“This will work. It has to work because I love you.” She kissed him and cuddled closer, draping his arms around her body. His fist was still closed around the amulet and she kissed his fingers. Meriel pulled the silvery fur over them both and fell into a deep sleep.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” said Ronan. He cradled Meriel’s body against his own for a moment before he looked around. The *Sea Bright* was a mess, but they were back in the sound. Docked at the marina on Block Island, in fact.

And there were the harbor police bearing down on them to prove it. Frank Harmon had always wanted to be a cop, but didn’t want to go too far from Misquapaug to do it, so he was content with doing guard duty at the marina. He wasn’t bright, but he was diligent.

“Did you actually take this dinghy out in that storm, last night, Mr. Burbank?”

“Looks like it, Frank.”

“Why would you do something so crazy? And how’d you get back with no mast?”

Meriel stirred against him and he wanted to be the first thing she saw, the first voice she heard, so Ronan bent back down to her as her eyes fluttered open.

“Good morning. I love you.” He watched as she came fully awake, as she remembered things he had no memory of, things he wasn’t sure he ever wanted to know about.

Meriel threw her arms around him, dislodging the fur that covered her naked body.

Frank gawked and Ronan wanted to rip his eyeballs out, but he reached for the skin instead, tucking it firmly around her.

“We’re going to have to do something about you walking around naked in front of strange men,” he muttered, but she wasn’t listening.

Meriel scrambled to her feet and looked out over the bay, searching for something. He looked with her until they found it—a hundred dark heads bobbing at the mouth of the harbor. Gray seals barked, dove and leapt through the air.

“Thank you,” she yelled, waving to them as her hold on the pelt slipped dangerously. “I love you!” One leaped higher than the rest before they all turned and swam away, back out to the open sea.

“Do you think we’ll see them again?” she asked, leaning back against him. She felt so right, so warm and alive, and he held her tightly.

“I wouldn’t bet against it.” Ronan knew they had a fair bit of work ahead of them, getting Meriel back to civilization, learning more about each other. But he always had his eye on the future. Iona was a lovely name for a little girl.

About the Author

To learn more about Sela Carsen, please visit www.selacarsen.com. Send an email to her at selacarsen@gmail.com or comment on her blog.

Look for these titles by Sela Carsen

Now Available:

Not Quite Dead

Journey to the heart of Celtic legend.

Love and Lore

© 2007 *Carolán Ivey, Gia Dawn and Sela Carsen*

Samhain is pleased to celebrate its second anniversary with three novellas that will lure you into the labyrinth of Celtic myth and legend.

In *Wildish Things*, Carolán Ivey brings together an artist who is wounded in both body and spirit, and a sexy Irish bad boy on a Harley. Their whirlwind fling across Ireland takes a dangerous turn when their sexual chemistry awakens the deadly lust of an ancient goddess.

Gia Dawn's offering of *A Fairy Special Gift* has it all: A woman who can see fairies and wishes she couldn't, and a man who promises to help her with her "problem"—for the price of a kiss. Stir in the Celtic god Lugh who wants the woman for himself, rowdy flock of untamed pixies, and a pining Banshee in need of a makeover, and let's just say there aren't enough fairy traps in the world to control the chaos.

The *Heart of the Sea* beckons in Sela Carsen's take on the Selkie legend. When a woman accidentally falls into the sea and turns into a seal, the man she loves believes her drowned. Seven years later, she rescues him from a shipwreck and for one blissful night, she returns to her human form. But only for a night. Can true love overcome the Selchie curse?

He's gorgeous, he's got great manners, he's got a mission to accomplish. The only drawback? He's been dead for a hundred years.

Not Quite Dead

© 2006 Sela Carsen

Sabine Harper's night started out badly—a dead man jumped out of his grave, she was chased by a vampire and now she has an uninvited guest. The worst part? A guy who may or may not be entirely dead is looking ten times better than any living man she's ever dated.

Willem Breaux has only three days to avenge his murder, but upon awakening more than a century into the future, he discovers that he needs Sabine's help more than he could have imagined. And in the end, he'll need her love more than anything else.

Can Willem and Sabine find love—and a little laughter—in spite of time, death and an evil that's waited a century to make its move?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Not Quite Dead:

“Rose.”

Sabine looked up at the unexpected noise and saw a filthy man standing in the middle of her living room with his clothes in rags. She drew a breath to scream, but never made a sound. He was next to her in a flash, his hand covering her mouth. The blood ran out of her head so quickly, she thought she might faint.

“Rose,” he said again, and gathered her in his arms, crushing her to him as if he had missed her. After a moment, though, his embrace changed. He held her upper arms and pushed her away from him. His blue eyes glittered coldly and he spoke, his voice gravelly with disuse. “You betraying little *putain*.”

The synapses in Sabine's brain stretched to keep up with the fact that what lay before her eyes was real. The stretching created a void and through the void, her own voice echoed, quavering and thin.

“Who are you?”

“What do you mean, who am I? Don't you recognize me? Or has it been too long since you stabbed me in the back?”

She tried to pull out of his hold, but those strong arms pinned her to the back of the couch. A tiny, focused part of her mind droned *useless*, but her body struggled on.

“I don’t know who or what you are. I saw you step out of a grave tonight and run after a...a...vampire.” The void in her mind filled with hysterical laughter. She wasn’t sure whether it released itself from her throat or merely pushed against the skeletal limits of her brain.

“That’s right. The vampire you betrayed me for. Richard St. Ivraie.” He gave the name a French inflection and his accent was pure Creole.

“No. I don’t know any Richard St. Ivraie. I know I saw a vampire for the first time in my life tonight, right before the walking dead arose.”

“That can’t be possible, Rose. I know you loved him. How could you love a monster like that?”

Sabine heard heartbreak in his voice. “You’re both monsters. You came out of a grave. Please, please let go of me.” It never hurt to be polite to the insane.

“A monster?” He shook her and she shrank farther away from him. “I loved you. We were going to be married until you betrayed me with that fiend.” His eyes narrowed and she turned her face as his voice lowered to a whisper. “And then you murdered me.”

Her limbs were leaden now, all the adrenaline used up. As blackness rose in front of her, she pleaded with him. “I am not who you think I am. I am not Rose. Sweet heaven, you have to believe me.”

“You are my Rose. I would know you anywhere. Your hair, your face, even your eyes are...” He stopped. “I need light.”

He looked around and his brow furrowed. He squeezed his fingers around her arm in warning before he said, “Fetch a lamp.”

The man, blotched in gray and brown smears of dirt, made as if to rise with her. The incongruity of his action when there was a lamp on the end table, not two feet away, fired a lone spark in her mind.

He released her arm. Too terrified to disobey, she reached out and switched it on. The man sucked in a quick breath, his eyes widening before he returned his gaze to her. He snatched her chin in his hand and studied her eyes.

“They’re green.” His face contracted as he regarded her suspiciously. “What’s your name?”

“Sabine Harper.”

“Sabine.” One muscled arm reached past her and picked up the lamp. He shone it directly into her face. “Your hair is too dark. And your eyes should be brown.”

“Well, they’re not. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.” Fear evaporated to be replaced with fury.

He was silent. The anger in his own face melted away, leaving a stoic mask.

“The blonde who was with you. Who is she?”

“That’s Lily. She’s my cousin.” Sensation rushed back to limbs gone numb with terror. Nerves pricked painfully in her head and blood pounded at her temple. “She and her stupid little friends were playing a game tonight, mumbling spells, trying to raise you from the dead. I can’t believe it worked.”

Willem shook his head. “It didn’t work. Not unless she’s Rose.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I.” He looked down at his hand on her arm and grimaced. “You might be Rose and you might not. How long have I been...”

“Dead?” she supplied. “How long have you been dead? According to your tombstone, over one hundred twenty years.” Sarcasm dripped in her tone. This was ridiculous. Sabine wrenched away from his loosened grip. “If you knew a Rose during your lifetime, I can pretty much guarantee she’s dead, too. Unless she’s decided to go for a little walk tonight and stretch out her decayed skeleton. Who are you anyway?”

“My name is Willem Breaux. This used to be my house.”

She muttered an oath. “Great. Just great. Vampires, the walking dead, and now I live in a haunted house.”

“It’s haunted?” He leaned back from her.

“You’re here, aren’t you?” Sabine took deep breaths, keeping her eyes on the man who had invaded her home. His home. Whatever.

“Why, exactly, are you here?” she asked.

Willem rose stiffly and wandered over to the French doors leading to her spacious back yard. “I’m here to kill St. Ivraie.”

“Who?”

“Richard St. Ivraie. The vampire you saw tonight.”

“Fan-freakin’-tastic. Vampires. Dead man walking. I have completely lost my mind. You are a figment of my twisted imagination, right? That’s it. No more Stephen King movies on late night cable.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Sabine sighed and tried again. “You know what? Just for fun, I’m going to go along with this. I’m going to pretend this is real to see if my subconscious is trying to tell me something important.” She took a deep breath and pasted a patient smile on her face. “Okay. You’ve been dead for over a hundred years. Why now? Why after all this time?”

“Because he’s back. He stole my woman, turned her, and she murdered me. This time it’s my turn.”

Sabine snorted indelicately. “Nice. I thought vengeance was the Lord’s.” She rose and he followed her into the kitchen.

“I’m not a ghost,” he said, as if that would help.

Sabine filled her tea kettle with water. It soothed to her to go through the simple ritual during troubling times. “What are you?”

“I’m not sure.” He leaned against her counter and watched her assemble cups and teabags while she waited for the water to heat.

There was nothing left for her to do with her hands and she stopped. She turned to focus on him. There was a ghoul—imaginary, but very male—standing in her kitchen. He was dirty, but otherwise didn’t look as though he had lain decomposing for over a century. Maybe he wasn’t a ghoul.

He was something, though. His hair was probably dark blond under the dirt and since his clothing hung in rags, she had a pretty good idea that he had lived an active life, if his muscles were anything to go by.

The shrill whistle of the kettle broke the silence. Sabine poured hot water over her teabag, then hesitated. “I don’t know if you drink, or eat, or sleep. Should I pour you a cup of tea?”

“Yes, please.”

A ghoul with manners.

He smiled at her and he was beautiful. Fully male with a charming twinkle in his eyes. She shuddered and turned away as tears sprang again to her eyes.

“Are you all right?” he asked. Since they’d come into the kitchen he had watched her closely, examining her body, her hair, her face.

“Sure. I’m not usually a crier, but it’s been kind of a rough night. Anyway, it’s okay to cry during psychotic breaks.” She turned a half smile on him over her shoulder. Then, as if she entertained cadavers all the time, took the teabags out of the cups and asked if he wanted milk or honey.

He barely waited for the burning liquid to cool before he began drinking. The taste of something must have awakened his appetite because his stomach rumbled like the vibrating of a bass fiddle. She looked over at him. He might have flushed, but she couldn’t tell under the dust.

“Hungry?” she asked, smiling into her mug.

His lips tilted up and he put his empty cup on the counter. “Now that you mention it, I could do with something to eat.”

“As long as you don’t want to drink my blood or snack on my soul, I think I can fix you up.”

He ran his thumb under his lip as if to check for fangs. The dark gleam in his eyes, combined with the sensually assessing look on his face, made Sabine’s body tingle in a rush from head to toe. Not a ghoul. Definitely male. And so Sabine found herself frying eggs and ham at four o’clock in the morning for a man who had died generations before she was born.

SAMHAIN PUBLISHING, LTD.

It's all about the story...

Action/Adventure

Fantasy

Historical

Horror

Mainstream

Mystery/Suspense

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Red Hots!

Romance

Science Fiction

Western

Young Adult

www.samhainpublishing.com