



# Selkie Island

Jorrie Spencer

SADDAIN publishing, Ltd.

*Gone without a trace...now danger tracks them to their one safe harbor.*

A hundred years ago, her mother's plea gave Morag a second chance at life—but not as she knew it. Now she lives a mostly solitary life as a selkie, seal in winter, human in summer, barely aging while her family and friends pass away. As the lonely years become almost too heavy to bear, she clings to the memory of one intense summer affair with a young man who left her, as humans always do.

Nine years have passed since Clay hitchhiked to the Maritimes, where he embarked on a memorable if short-lived affair with a mysterious woman. Their enchanted time together called him back a few months later—but she had disappeared. Now, wounded and desperate, Selkie Island is the only safe harbor he can dredge from his feverish haze of pain.

When a strange boat plows onto the beach, Morag is curious—and shocked to discover her long-lost lover, unconscious and hurt. Nursing him back to health is the first thing on her mind...right after she convinces him she's real.

As real as the danger following in his wake...

Warning: This title contains explicit, intoxicating sex on an island!

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.  
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520  
Macon GA 31201

Selkie Island  
Copyright © 2009 by Jorrie Spencer  
ISBN: 978-1-60504-717-1  
Edited by Sasha Knight  
Cover by Kanaxa

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: August 2009  
[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)

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*Jorrie Spencer*

# Chapter One

She heard the boat first, its vibrations traveling down through the water. This arrival was a rare occurrence, and she felt driven to investigate the intruder. Leaving the ocean floor—she wasn't far from the island—she angled her body, undulating upwards at top speed. She hit the surface and caught sight of the boat headed towards her and her island.

As it came closer she saw that it was surprisingly small. These days only larger boats seemed to venture this far out from the mainland. Most people gave her island wide berth—it had certainly wrecked many boats in its time—but this one was aiming for Selkie Island, and she didn't know what to make of that.

Curiosity was her first and strongest emotion so she waited, just below the surface. The occasional seal hunter or angry fisherman existed, so she kept her profile low as the boat passed by, then followed in its wake, swimming along behind it. It struggled in the rough water, making its way through the large waves.

Her vision through air wasn't terribly clear, but a single man appeared to be slumped over the steering wheel. How odd. Intruders—visitors, she corrected herself, deciding to be positive—generally did not come alone, and they usually arrived in warmer, gentler weather than that of a gray, wet, windy spring day.

It was hard to describe the excitement growing in her, though she knew she should feel more cautious given the terror engendered by the last set of strangers who'd landed on her island. But loneliness was a powerful force in her life, and as of now, it swamped her fear.

He rounded the point, rather clumsily, and she heard the boat scrape a rock, harsh enough to cause damage. She cringed, not wanting the man to sink the boat. Never before had she rescued anyone from drowning, and the logistics would be challenging. Seals didn't have limbs useful for lifting humans, and her human shape would very quickly become lethally chilled in the spring ocean.

Thankfully, the boat was not immediately harmed. It kept going, rather grimly she imagined, towards the little beach that she considered hers. A mild sense of territoriality rose within her. Still, human conversation was something she sorely missed, and it had been a couple of years since she'd last spoken to anyone.

Maybe. Her sense of time was deteriorating. She knew it. And at some point she might lose it forever and forget what was human in her.

But not today, it seemed. She braced herself, for this wasn't the time of year she changed. Usually she waited for summer and heat and sun. Her seal body was never cold, only sleek, thick, furred and comfortable. On the other hand, her human body did not like the cold and over the years, that body seemed to become a little thinner, a little weaker and less able to withstand the elements. As if it was fading from disuse.

Rain began to fall. The gray sky had darkened since the intruder's arrival. Morag dragged herself onto the rock, and like the rock, she lay half in and half out of the salt water. Her focus turned inward.

She was never sure of the passage of time when she shifted forms though it felt instantaneous and perhaps it was. Certainly the first transformation, or what she remembered of it, had not taken any amount of time. It couldn't have, she'd just died and the magic had needed to work quickly.

She allowed the energy to engulf her—it was always her choice—and the seal was gone, only its shadow-light living within her. In the seal body's place, she'd become a wet, sodden human, shivering in reaction to the shock of change though she wasn't yet cold.

Pulling herself out of the water, she crouched in this new body, already growing familiar, becoming hers. Then she crawled up the short cliff onto the bank. Rising, she remembered her height and enjoyed being on two legs and lifting her arms to the wind. She ran for shelter, a little astonished that it was so easy to embrace the human body after this length of time being seal. She came to the old house from the other side of the island than the intruder, wanting to reach home first before he could catch sight of her. If she was clothed when they met, he'd be less likely to think of having sex with her. At least, that had been her experience over the years.

The door opened, and she breathed a sigh of relief at gaining shelter from the wind and rain. Human skin was not much of a barrier against the elements.

Her shack remained hers, she saw with satisfaction. The lighthouse-maintenance workers continued to ignore her home, and her relation left it unlocked after doing his yearly drop of supplies. Her family had not yet forgotten her, even if some years the supplies went untouched when she couldn't face the human solitude of living on the island by herself.

However, one day, her sister's descendants would forget. Not only had she outlived her first family, at some point in the future she would outlive their memory of her and she would, finally, be lost.

That was her future, but now her curiosity about this lone boat in spring, before the fishing season, had drawn her out, drawn her home. If only the clothes were still in the chest... Yes, she saw as she lifted the cedar lid. Whenever she returned after a period of time away, she feared someone had decided to clean out the house, taking her clothes with them.

Her older relations used to visit with her during the summer, but the newer ones made her shy. They didn't believe in her and had no patience to wait for her to summon up courage to appear before them. They

jumped on and off the island, anxious to get the drop over and done with. She'd overheard more than once that they only visited to placate their elderly mother and her crazy ideas.

Morag's niece was now an old woman.

Before dressing she wrung out her hair as best she could and tied it in a knot. She wanted to cut it off, but not when she was rushed like this. Growing nostalgic, she pulled on pants, sweater and jacket, all of which had been given to her by the one who'd loved her. Clay had been the most patient of everyone, waiting days for her to appear before him. Once he'd landed on Selkie Island, he'd acted like he'd had all the time in the world.

She hugged his clothing to her, a frail echo of the embraces she had given him and he her not all that long ago. When she was seal, she didn't miss him as keenly. But she was human again and it felt as if he'd left yesterday.

He was the only one she'd ever laughed with since her immediate family died.

*Enough.* Humans, she had to admit wryly, were too nostalgic. The pragmatism of the seal fell away when she shifted from that body. Here, now, she had to focus on the intruder and ignore her memories. She set off from the house.

Morag didn't take the direct path to the beach where the boat had landed. Instead she circled around to it, silent on her bare feet, stopping before she might come into his view.

But as she peered past the point he wasn't there, though the boat had been pulled up from the shore. Not far enough for this time of year when the tides could be high, but she'd think about that later. First she needed to locate the boat's owner while keeping her advantage—she knew he was here, but he didn't know she existed, and for now it should stay that way.

She walked carefully by the boat, listening for movement and hearing none, though it was windy. Cautiously she started up the small bank, and froze at the sight.

The man was there, lying on the ground of all things. She'd expected him to be moving, at least standing. It was an odd place to rest, if that's what he was doing. He still hadn't seen her. His back remained to her.

Was it a trap? She waited, silent, then stepped closer to get a better look.

Recognition slammed into her, stealing her breath. She took another step, shaking now, wondering if she was mistaken, wondering if she was no longer able to distinguish among the different humans. Was her memory shot and she thought every man was her lover, Clay?

He was sleeping and that made her uneasy. He shouldn't be sleeping in the rain, curled into himself. She breathed in and smelled the slight metallic tang of blood. Her heart, which had stopped beating during her shock, started up again.

"Hello," she whispered and got no response. That made her scared for him. Something was terribly wrong. "Clay?"

He didn't stir and her uneasiness grew. She drew closer.

He was older, which surprised her. Because she'd barely aged, he shouldn't have either. But he did not live by her rules, and it was *him*. He smelled of Clay, that distinctive musk, perhaps a bit stronger with age. She'd liked his smell though he'd been embarrassed by the statement when she'd made it that summer, so she'd only said it the once.

"Clay," she repeated. He had a scar on his chin now and more wrinkles where before the skin had been smooth in his youth. His forehead was creased in pain. And still he didn't stir.

She placed a hand on his arm, and for a moment he didn't react to that either. Then he pulled air into his lungs, a sound of alarm rising with that inhale, and his eyes flew open. He rose, grabbed her wrist hard and yanked her to the ground as he rolled to lie on top of her. A stone dug into her back, his weight made it difficult to think, and bloodshot, unseeing eyes stared down into hers.

"Clay?" she said for a third time. Her voice sounded weak, unused. "It's me, Morag."

His gaze seemed to sharpen despite the dullness in his eyes. Shock gave way to recognition and disbelief. His mouth opened slightly and she thought he might speak. Instead his eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped on top of her.

Well. At least his bruising grip relaxed. She rolled them back over, not sure if she wanted him to wake up again or not, though that hadn't been an attack so much as a shocked awakening. The pressure of being lain on might have panicked her, but it was Clay who'd loved her at one time. All of her emotions were overlain by confusion, yet she felt a strange, aching relief.

Because she'd never thought to see him again. He was from far away, he'd only been a visitor, and still he'd come back to her.

Mind you, she'd rather he were conscious and happy to see her. Remembering his hot hand encircling her wrist, she touched his cheek. He was burning up. She'd thought it had been windburn giving his dark face a ruddy complexion, but it was a high temperature. She sat back on her haunches, bracing herself to try to wake him again, hoping he wouldn't try to initiate another wrestling match. Despite her efforts, he couldn't be roused by her shaking or her pleading. Which probably wasn't a good sign.

It took her a few minutes to slide her body under his and rise, balancing him on her back. It wasn't so much his height, though he was taller, it was his muscular, solid frame and her human weakness. Still they didn't have far to go and she half-carried, half-dragged him up the path towards the lighthouse and home.

She laid him down on the ground in order to go open the door and set something up for him inside. There were old blankets in the chest and she used that as a bed, placing them on the wooden floor before returning to drag him in and lay him on them. He was muttering now but not really aware, and again, she touched his face, alarmed by the force of the heat. Her hand was cold so she pressed her cheek against his forehead, and her heart started to beat fast with fear.



Sarah had caught a fever one summer, almost died of it, and Morag's mother believed that only by keeping her cool had she saved her younger daughter's life. Morag bit her lip. "I'll be right back, Clay." On impulse she kissed his cheek. Then she picked up a pail and ran for the ocean, her easy source of cold water.

She had her work cut out for her. As little as she knew about humans, she recognized that. But she would apply herself to saving Clay. Later she'd try to figure out what his reappearance on Selkie Island actually signified. For him. For her.

It meant a lot to her, his return. Because no one but her mother and sister had ever come back for her.

## Chapter Two

He was on fire. Maybe he'd died and gone to hell, except he didn't believe in hell. It just fucking hurt. He was going to come out of his skin.

The cold shivered over him again, a reprieve from the heat but the pain of it made him shake harder. With the cold came visions of Morag, though what she was doing with him, he couldn't fathom. Had he died? Was she in hell too? The idea caused him pain.

"Hush."

The coolness swept down his body and his teeth began to chatter. Hot and cold together, his body couldn't compute, as if it no longer knew how to cope. He should be worried about that reaction and his inability to understand what was going on, but he could barely think behind the heat and the pain and this specter of Morag come to haunt him nine years later.

He went under but came awake when something hot and jagged punched into his thigh where the bullet was. He screamed before he passed out. Time faded into blackness.

At some point, his head was raised and liquid poured down his throat. What the fuck was going on here? He forced himself to open his eyes and look, though it was hard to concentrate, hard to *see*, and what he saw didn't make sense.

Morag again and always. He hadn't known her well or for long, but he kept dreaming of her. She made his heart ache. She was above him like a ministering angel. He knew she was an illusion because this Morag was the same age she would have been when they'd first met—in her mid-twenties—and her hair was hacked off in that same awful style of hers.

She was nodding, a determined glint in her eyes though she looked tired, weary, worried. In real life she'd always been carefree, a little fey even. Certainly no nurse. "You're going to be all right, Clay."

"Dead?" he managed to ask Morag's doppelganger through dry lips.

"Not while I'm here." She smiled and it was exactly like that old smile of hers. His mind might be shot, but his memory wasn't and he was creating a bizarre sequence of images culled from his past.

He tried to respond to her, but things went murky. The different sensations blended together: heat, cold, water being poured down his throat, pain in his thigh, Morag's face... In the background there was sometimes a song being sung in a foreign language, soothing him. Sometimes his hand was held. It was a strange kind of hell and he didn't know what to make of it.

Then he slept, oblivious. Hot and cold, hot and cold. It went on forever.

Eventually the hellish heat left him and with it the fog of confusion and incomprehension. He woke shivering in the dark. Like the tide, the heat had receded, leaving awareness in its wake. He blinked, staring straight up as he lay on his back. It was hard to see in the pitch black.

He felt like shit, like something had beat up every single cell in his body. He didn't know where he was.

*Don't move, you're not alone.*

Instinct warned him someone else was here in this godforsaken place. Had Aaron found him, despite all his precautions? Clay heard breathing, soft and even, as if the person near him was sleeping. But Aaron wouldn't be sleeping beside him, at least not while Clay was alive.

Something in him relaxed. People who wanted to attack you didn't sleep beside you. Still, Clay didn't move. He searched his mind to figure out how he'd gotten here—wherever *here* was—and became panicked by his inability to come up with answers.

*Just wait. It'll come.* He forced himself to take deep breaths and stay calm. Last thing he remembered was...driving that damn boat over the ocean towards Selkie Island and almost sinking in the process, what with the large waves and his fever incapacitating him. But he'd gotten to shore, hadn't he? The waves had threatened to swamp his boat, but he'd prevailed, or the boat had.

Where the hell was he now? He tested his body, flexing his hands, wiggling his toes, then winced because of the pain in his thigh. The bullet, he remembered with a jolt. That wasn't good. He'd tried to extract it the first day and had gotten scared he was going to hit the artery and inadvertently kill himself. So he'd ignored it. A problem to solve later. It hadn't killed him yet.

Presumably. Earlier in the fever he'd thought himself dead but now... Now he felt alive, if exhausted and uncomfortable.

He shifted and a grunt of pain escaped him. He froze as beside him a shadow rose to remind him of how vulnerable he was.

A match was lit and he caught a glimpse of red hair and freckles before a candle's wick caught and burned, offering a small amount of light in this dark of night.

The shadow, candle in hand, leaned over him and he stared, mesmerized, unable to move.

"Clay?" She lightly touched his forehead, as if the gesture was familiar to her and to him. Then she smiled, relief in that expression and a sheen to her eyes. "Your fever, it's broken."

How could Morag be here? In his astonishment, he could barely speak, yet that wasn't the question he asked. Instead, he demanded, "Am I dead?"

She settled back on her haunches, gazing at him. "I wish you'd quit saying that."

He'd said it before? "But...how did you find me?"

She cocked her head, puzzled by his words. "This is my home. I told you that."

He swallowed with some difficulty. His throat felt dry. It was a dream of sorts, evidently, though he found he wanted to respond. "You told me many things, Morag, and most of them were lies."

She wiped her eyes and for a moment he thought she was crying because of his accusation of lying, but when she spoke, she spoke of other matters. "I was very worried about that fever. It just wouldn't quit." She set the candle down and reached for his water bottle. Yes, it was his, the one he'd brought from Toronto. How the hell were Morag and his Toronto water bottle in the same dream?

"Drink," she commanded. "You've sweated so much, you need to drink."

"I feel parched," he admitted. Why couldn't he be healthy in his dream? Very annoying. He winced as he rolled to his side, his thigh shooting pain down his leg. This felt too real and disquiet rose in him. "Morag?"

"Yes?" She was wiping her eyes again, the tears completely silent. Why did his dream Morag have to weep? It pained him.

"Why are you crying in my dream?"

"I'm not," she denied and scrubbed her face of the evidence before she lifted a hand towards him. At his flinch, she stopped in midair and waited till he got used to the fact she was going to touch him. She brought cool fingers to his face and looked reassured. "The fever has broken, Clay, and you're awake, you're lucid."

*No. I'm not.* But instead of arguing the point, he first drank as much as he could, the effort tiring him. As he let out a shaky breath, he fixed his gaze on her once more. "I know it's a dream because I'm nine years older and you're exactly the same as you were when I was twenty-one. Also, you're wearing the clothes I gave you nine years ago. That wouldn't happen." He almost felt proud of this logic, that he could present it to this mirage.

She simply blinked at him, her brown eyes beautiful in the candlelight. "I don't grow old, Clay."

His head fell onto the bedding. Nothing made sense and exhaustion was threatening him. He rolled back on the makeshift bed.

"Remember we used to hold hands when we slept?"

He did, but he just watched her warily.

She pulled the blanket that had been covering just her and it went over both of them. Then she blew out the candle so the darkness returned. Explaining her actions, she said, "I don't want you to get chilled. Now that you're healing, it's important you stay warm."

Did the dying normally have so many detailed delusions, or was he particularly blessed?

Rather tentatively, she placed her hand in his, under the blanket. He remembered that hand—long-fingered and fine-boned. What the hell. He clasped it tight. Right now this delusion was the only thing he could hold on to and take comfort from. So he did.

Slumber took him.

~ \* ~

The next time, he woke alone and it was daylight.

He was naked, probably had been for a while but hadn't thought to notice. Now a blanket kept him warm and he didn't shiver. He shifted to see that the place looked like the one he'd seen in candlelight during his dream that was increasingly feeling like not-a-dream.

Though Morag was gone. Perhaps that part of his candlelit memory had been a hallucination. Gingerly he sat up and the rather musty blanket fell away from him.

The air was cool, and he stank of sweat and salt. But he didn't want to get cold again, as he'd been cold so often lately. He wrapped the blanket tight around him and surveyed the place.

He recognized it then, and little had changed in the small, barely furnished shack beside the lighthouse. This was the place that Morag had liked to call home.

"Your home away from home, you mean," he'd said at one point.

At her flat no, he'd decided her attachment to the place was charming. But now, nine years on and no longer in the throes of his first true lust, her reaction seemed almost odd.

He'd talked to Morag last night when she'd appeared unnervingly real. He'd obviously gotten a lot of details right in the dream, in that he was in this shack, on this bedding. Sooner or later, he'd figure out how he'd gotten here from the boat. Perhaps he'd been so feverish he'd been out of his mind.

Sun streamed in through the two small windows. The shack was surprisingly clear of cobwebs which suggested someone had been around, unless he'd been cleaning in his delirium. *Okay, don't think too hard.* It was making his head hurt.

He gazed around his shelter again. Many decades ago, a family had lived here, when the lighthouse required a keeper. Morag had told him she was a descendant of one of the early lighthouse families and spent her summers on the island. It was too small and thin an island to interest people nowadays, and only the seals were its real visitors. He hadn't noticed any seals on the way in but then, he'd been rather single-minded at the time, just trying to reach that small beach before his fever incapacitated him.

He'd come here looking for a sanctuary of sorts. A place where no one who was trying to kill him could find him. He hadn't expected to find Morag.

Wait a minute. He hadn't. Morag was a dream, he told himself firmly. Unwrapping the blanket enough to look down at his thigh, he inspected the wound that had been cleaned and bound. Tentatively he fingered the bandage to feel that the bullet was gone, extracted presumably. Then he eyed the makeshift bed someone had placed him on. He was pretty sure he hadn't been taking care of himself these past few days.

He wrapped himself up once more because he was starting to shake. Thirsty, he snaked out an arm and reached for the bottle of water left for him. Yes, it was his bottle, but it was full, and he'd been drinking it for a while now.

*Okay, think things through.* If it wasn't Morag, someone else had cared for him. *But who? And why?* Had he been so feverish he'd been unable to tell one redheaded woman from another? It wasn't surprising Morag would be on his mind, given where he was. That a stranger had taken care of him was worrisome at some level, but he couldn't complain since it had also been lifesaving. Now that he was lucid again, it was becoming clear just how badly off he'd been. He was surprised he'd managed to buy a boat and drive it out here.

He just wished the present situation made more sense. In the light of day, he couldn't pass this off as a dream or as hell. So instead, he drank down his water and realized he had to piss, badly. On somewhat shaky legs he rose, still cocooned in the goddamn blanket, and headed for the door. The shack didn't have plumbing.

He pushed the door open and squinted against the sun as he stepped outside. The wind was strong—it couldn't be anything else on this island where the wind hardly ever died—but it wasn't punishing, and he managed to walk far enough away from the shack that he felt he wasn't pissing where he slept. Afterwards he stumbled back inside to warm up. He was trembling from exertion by the time he shut the door and leaned against it.

Food. He needed to eat. Scanning the one-room house, his gaze stopped at his waterproof pack. So his caretaker had brought that up from the shore. Because if memory served him correctly—not an entirely sure bet at the moment—he'd collapsed before he'd reached here.

He dragged the pack over to his bed and sat down to dig out another protein bar. With some trepidation, he ripped open the package. Last time he'd munched on one of these he'd blacked out. So this time he took a small bite and chewed a lot, and could barely keep it down. He wanted to vomit.

Shit, this wasn't good. He'd been running on empty before he'd fled Toronto. Now he was edging towards skin and bones.

He found he wanted to lie down again and rest, and this also alarmed him. He'd never been this helpless in his life. As he tried to convince himself to take another bite, the door's rusty handle turned. Though he tried not to, he flinched as the door opened.

It wasn't Aaron. It wasn't Steeles, Aaron's hired gun. Clay tried to calm his galloping heart.

A woman stood in the light, holding a bucket. He couldn't make out her expression because she was backlit by the sun's rays, but it was Morag's voice that declared with some satisfaction: "You're up."

He was gaping, he knew, but he couldn't stop. She entered, shutting the door, and he observed her closely. She was dressed in the clothes he'd given her long ago and while they didn't look new, they didn't look much worn either. Her face had not aged, and where before she'd seemed to be the mysterious older

woman—by perhaps four years, a significant number at the tender age of twenty-one—now her mid-twenties seemed young to his thirty. Nine years ago and here she was. He found it hard to fathom.

“How are you feeling?” A mundane question and it was beyond him to answer. Besides, he didn’t want to speak and have his voice crack. She approached him, face serious. “You need to eat, Clay, so I’m going to make you chowder.”

“Oh,” he managed.

“I know, you aren’t a fan of seafood. But you’ll remember there’s no choice here and we need to get you better, right?”

“I guess,” he said faintly.

She frowned at that. “Of course we need to get you better and fish will do that.”

He remembered they’d eaten a lot of fish that summer they were together. Though he’d also gone for supplies in town, back when he wasn’t worried about CSIS finding him. Given his fugitive status, it didn’t seem like the greatest idea, even if he’d had the energy for such a shopping trip.

He gave his head a sharp shake. While the idea that this was still a dream held some appeal, he really had to let it go. Morag was here. He was here. They were talking. The hows and whys he’d figure out. He cleared his throat. “I have some food.”

She crouched by the bucket where she was efficiently gutting the fish. “Those awful wrapped things of yours? I attempted to eat one earlier. It was hard to swallow.”

He shrugged, trying not to feel defensive. The protein bars had been plenty useful over the years.

“They’ll make you sick. You need something lighter after not eating for so long. My mother taught me how to make chowder, remember?”

“Yes.” He remembered all her stories that he’d lapped up at the time and only later realized made no sense whatsoever. If the situation were different, he might have been able to summon up anger at the way she had deceived him. But she had just saved his life, and now she was cooking for him. Even if she was a compulsive liar, she had obviously made a real effort to help him.

He lay back down, tired and confused. Later, when he had more energy, he would ask her questions.

“Clay,” she ventured, gazing at him, her expression turning shy the way it used to. “I’m so sorry you got hurt. You worried me a lot this past week.” *Week? He’d been out a week?* “But I’m very glad you came back to see me.”

He just stared until she looked disappointed by his lack of response and returned to the work of food preparation. But he didn’t know what to say. He’d come back to the island. Almost a decade later, he’d come back out of desperation and because he had nowhere else to run. He’d thought Morag would be long gone.

## Chapter Three

It hurt her heart to see Clay like this—wounded, tense, older. The jump in age made her sad, as if she'd missed something important in the intervening years while she'd been mostly the ocean's creature.

But what was really hard to see was how harmed he'd been by someone who had put a bullet into his leg. They'd drained him of energy—he was too thin—and something had filled him with doubt and fear.

So unlike the Clay she'd known. Though her mother had once said young men were the only people in the world to think they could conquer life and even they eventually learned they could not.

The last time she'd seen Clay, he'd been twenty-one and oozing self-confidence. He hadn't known how to be scared and that had fascinated her, given her own approach to life.

Having drowned once scarred a person, even one who spent most of her time as a seal. Being a seal made it easy for her to catch fish though, which was important for Clay right now. The chowder took time to make, but he needed something broth-like and nourishing instead of those inedible dry bars he'd brought with him.

When it was cooked, she carried the chowder to him, and he roused himself, wrapping the blanket around him a little self-consciously. That hurt too. He'd had no self-consciousness about his body back then, showing it off to her when he had the chance and he'd been beautiful. The beauty was still there, but there had been damage and he needed to heal.

"Where'd you get the milk for the chowder?"

She grinned at the question. "You asked me that last time."

"Yes."

Her smile died at his serious expression.

"But at that time I believed everything you said."

She blinked, unsure of his meaning, though clearly he was suggesting she lied. But he was too weary for any real confrontation, so she just said, "Clay, try to eat something. You need it."

He bent his head over the banged-up pot, dipped in his spoon and drank in a tiny amount. Lifting his gaze in surprise, he laughed a little. Laughter had always come easily to him. "It doesn't make me want to throw up."

"That's a start."

He took another spoonful, more eager now. As he continued, he even ate a bit of fish.

"Don't overdo it," she warned. "Your stomach's not used to eating."



He just looked at her, spoon resting against the edge of the pot, and she shifted uneasily. “Why are you helping me?” he demanded.

The question and the suspicion behind it took her aback. She didn’t know what answer he was looking for, but she gave him the simple truth. “Because I want to.”

“Why?” he persisted. She frowned at his strange vehemence. Then he shrugged, trying to slough off his question, and looked down at the spoon he held. “Never mind. Perhaps you’d help anyone.”

She considered this. “Maybe,” she allowed. “But you’re special.”

His mouth twisted. “Because...?”

“Because you’re Clay and you told me you loved me.”

He stared and she tried not to squirm as his dark eyes grew bright with emotion. “Was that a joke to you?”

“No.” She didn’t understand his anger and hoped he would explain it to her. Maybe not now, he was too tired, but later.

“You didn’t say it back, Morag, if I recall.”

She ate some chowder to avoid his gaze. It was true. She’d held on to those words, kept “I love you” for herself, even though it wasn’t something you *could* keep for yourself. She’d learned that after he’d left. “I was waiting.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “For what?”

“For you to come back.”

“Right.” His tone was scoffing and he laid the spoon down. Settling himself on the bed again, he regarded her with heavy eyelids. She would make him eat more later. “Well, I’m back. Love me now?” His tone was flip and he didn’t expect an answer, didn’t want one.

She couldn’t understand his anger, his *tired* anger, although his exhaustion made total sense.

He looked at the ceiling as he continued. “I came back that autumn in early October, nine years ago, looking for you. I got laughed at for asking after you, for asking about Selkie Island. They wanted to know if I believed in fairy tales. They said you didn’t exist.”

“Very few people know about me. I told you that.”

“They said no one could live on the island, unless they were a selkie. Big joke. Ha-ha.” He sighed. “One asshole asked me if I believed in voodoo too.”

She wasn’t sure what voodoo was, but it evidently had offended him.

“That’s because I’m black, Morag.” The words came out clipped and she couldn’t understand the meaning behind them. He didn’t look at her, and it seemed that saying she *was* a selkie wasn’t going to work here and now.

“You made a fool of a black boy from Toronto.”

She shook her head. He'd been touchy about the color of his skin. People had judged him on it, he'd told her, though not everyone. From her childhood, she didn't remember anything about skin color. The number of people she'd met had been limited. And later, her visitors too. All she knew was he'd been beautiful from the first time she'd set eyes on him, and generous with his smiles and laughter and affection.

"I'd be angry with you now except"—here he smiled but it was a ghost of his old warmth—"you saved my life and you're giving me food to eat."

She wanted to offer him something but she didn't know where to begin. "I told you what I could."

He closed his eyes. "What does that mean? You wouldn't even give me your age. At the time, I thought you were being coy."

That set her back on her heels. Did she strike him as *coy*? "I can't tell you, Clay. I was born long ago. I don't have a proper age."

"Yeah, I remember you said that too. At the time I found it charming." The anger was fading as his voice became slurred with sleep. "A strange way to tease."

She'd have to be clearer with him this visit. It was true, at times she'd avoided direct answers because she'd feared his reaction to what she was. But she hadn't lied. "I'll tell you everything, when I can show you. Wait a few days, okay?" Her voice dropped. "I didn't know you came back. I'm sorry I wasn't here. I would have wanted to know but I was in the ocean."

"Uh-huh." He lifted heavy lids to look at her, eyes no longer feverish-bright, but alert. "I forgave you years ago. I figured it was more about you than me. But at first, I was quite angry." His mouth quirked. "Wounded pride, I'll admit it. I thought I was over my anger until I saw you again. But it doesn't matter."

She wanted to matter a little. Seeing him here, despite his fatigue, his damage, brought her joy. She wouldn't think too hard on how this was going to end, though end it would. Just not yet.

Despite the risk of his rebuff, she lay down beside him. She, too, was tired after turning seal and fishing for them both. Looking after him was going to keep her busy, a notion that captivated her. She hadn't been busy for such a long time.

He snaked his hand out of his blankets and grabbed hers. "You weren't my first, but I fell quite hard for you."

"I missed you, Clay."

"I gave you my address."

"I couldn't—"

"—leave the island," he finished for her. "I never believed that. After all, we first met on the shore, when you told me to come here." And then she took two days to show herself here. He'd thought the cute redhead had tricked him, but he hadn't cared, had liked the novelty of being by himself on the island in the middle of the ocean.

"The shore is close enough, in this small bay, but I cannot go farther," she said sadly.

“And yet, you weren’t around in October.”

“I was around...” she held her breath, not ready to say the words, and yet it seemed important to speak them, “...as a seal.”

He let out a long exhale, closing his eyes. “When I am better, I’ll worry about you and your stories.”

She didn’t say more, simply brought his hand to her mouth and kissed each of his knuckles. He smiled at that and shortly afterwards fell back asleep.

~ \* ~

They didn’t really talk again till the next day. He was too tired to think clearly, and Morag was too busy cooking, cleaning or going off to collect firewood from the driftwood that reached the island.

They were eating fish chowder again. He’d have to get used to that, just like that summer when they were together he got used to eating a lot of fish. Morag certainly seemed to thrive on it.

He still couldn’t believe she was here. When she glanced at him, her face seemed to light up. That’s what had made him fall so hard for her the first time. Before or since, no one had ever looked at him like that, like he was all-important. And it hadn’t mattered that he knew nothing about her, or that her explanations made no sense. He’d thought she was quirky.

Only later, when they had parted and his mind was no longer hazed by lust and supposed first love, did he realize it was more than quirky. Her version of her life was nonsensical.

*I don’t get older, really. At least, I age very, very slowly.*

*I was born here.*

*I only eat fish. I have for years.*

*I talked to someone two years ago.*

All nonsense, though perhaps one could only eat fish.

One question bothered him at the moment, and it struck him that he was not exactly firing on all cylinders for it to occur to him only now. Clay looked over to where she was cleaning out the pot and cleared his throat. “Where’s your boat, Morag?” *How did you get here?*

She flicked him a glance and if he hadn’t been watching carefully he wouldn’t have seen her body stiffen. Okay, so she didn’t like being questioned. He didn’t think this was a game for her though. Perhaps there were mental-health issues he wasn’t going to understand.

She applied extra vigor to scrubbing the pot. “I don’t have a boat. Never have.”

“Did someone drop you off here then?”

“I swam.”

He sighed.

“I’ll show you later, if you want. When you’re better.”

“Okay,” he said for want of anything else to say. He sounded ungracious, he knew, given what she was doing for him.

“I have some questions too.” Her words were quiet.

He sat up, tired of lying down. “Go ahead.”

Her gaze dropped to his leg. “Who hurt you?”

He felt a tremor run through him but tried to suppress it, not wanting her to see his weakness. He swallowed before he said, “My boss.”

“Boss in what?”

“I work for CSIS.”

Her eyebrows dipped together. “See...suss?”

“Canadian Security Intelligence Service. C-S-I-S. Kinda the equivalent of the FBI in the States or MI-5 in the UK.”

Her face looked completely blank, and he remembered she had strange holes in her knowledge. For some reason, that made him nervous, as if there might be more to her background than he could possibly understand. “A service?” she ventured.

“It’s like a police force, but...we look into national security issues. I was working undercover, pretending to be someone I wasn’t.”

She nodded, appearing to find herself on firmer ground. “You were acting.”

“That’s part of it,” he acknowledged. She should know this and it scared him a bit that she didn’t. He didn’t think *she* was acting. Who had left her here? Where the hell was her family, because she shouldn’t be all alone. Did she not have anyone to depend on? She’d talked vaguely about her relations before, but as if they were distant and unsupportive. Indignation on her behalf rose within him. No matter what, he’d always had his mom and his cousins.

Morag seemed isolated and a little lost, despite being so at home on this island. “Why were you doing this acting?”

“To keep an eye on potential terrorists.” At her puzzled expression, he added, “People who want to hurt or threaten other people.”

“And your boss?”

“He’s been collecting money from the bad guys,” he said flatly. “I found out. He tried to kill me so I wouldn’t be able to tell anyone.”

She tilted her head, looking at him solemnly, and he wondered if perhaps she was a bit dim and he’d been too stupid to realize it. Had he taken advantage of her back then? Being twenty-one and sex-focused, had he decided an older woman meant experience and not recognized she was something else? The idea made him feel ashamed.

“You were betrayed.” It was a statement.

Well, she got that right, so Clay hoped she wasn't too naive. He nodded.

"Sometimes it's dangerous to be too trusting." She wrapped her arms around herself. "But we can trust each other, right?"

For whatever reason her words made his throat tighten and all he could do was nod again, though he wasn't being entirely truthful. He trusted her to take care of him right now, he didn't have much choice. But she made him wary too.

That night as they lay down to sleep in the candlelight, he recognized he wasn't nearly as exhausted as the day before. There was a restlessness in him that gave him hope. He spoke into the darkness. "I think, tomorrow, I'd like to walk around a bit."

She took his hand, as she seemed to do every night. The skin was drier than it had been, from all her cooking and cleaning. "Okay. Though the sky isn't promising."

"You can forecast the weather?"

"Some," she said cautiously. "The ocean is rather unpredictable though."

*Like you.* But he wasn't going to tell her she was like the ocean, no matter how poetic that might sound. He had another question. "Can you read, Morag?" he asked abruptly.

She didn't answer right away and when she did, she sounded sad. "I used to. My mother taught me. But I haven't seen a book for so long, I think I may have forgotten."

*Could* people forget to read? Only Morag would raise the possibility. He'd been reading all his life and was no judge of the matter. "I brought a couple of books. Just grabbed them on my way out as I thought I might need something to distract me. We can look tomorrow and see how you find it. If you like."

She squeezed his hand. He liked it in his. For the first time since they'd reunited, his body stirred thinking of hers. Nine years ago, their time together had been mostly about sex and they'd been wild for each other. But now everything had changed and he didn't know if he had it in him to make love to her under these circumstances—if she even wanted him to.

He didn't really trust her, was part of it, but also he feared she had fewer resources than he realized. At the very least she'd had a strange upbringing and didn't know some basic facts about life. He swallowed as he recalled that she'd claimed she couldn't get pregnant, and he'd accepted that statement back then without a second thought—twenty-one and happy as hell to not think about condoms.

"I'd like to see the books," she whispered.

"Morag?"

"Yes."

"You..." He blew out a breath. He wanted to put it more delicately but then she might misunderstand. "You didn't get pregnant after I left, did you?"

"No." Her tone said *of course not*. "I told you. I can't get pregnant."

He'd thought she meant she couldn't get pregnant because she was on the pill or something. But this sounded different. "Why not?"

She was silent for a while. "Because of my curse and my blessing."

He waited, hoping she'd say more, something less cryptic. Besides, he didn't know how to ask the next question. It took him a few minutes before he realized her breathing had evened out and she'd fallen asleep. Probably for the best as he didn't really expect she would have said anything that he could make sense of.

Well, tomorrow. He'd get outside and they'd look at books and he'd try to better understand the mystery that was Morag. It was a wonder that she'd been here. He recognized that even if she didn't. Yet she talked as if she'd been waiting for him.

He exhaled slowly and shifted to his side to get more comfortable, still not releasing her hand. It gave him comfort and that was a fact. He had to smile at that little confession to himself and then he let sleep take him.

## Chapter Four

Despite his intentions, the next day was not the right one for him to venture outside. The wind blew hard and the rain fell. Maritime weather. Clay tried not to feel depressed though the walls seemed to close in around him. It was a small room.

Morag had slipped out earlier. Of course she had. Freezing wind and rain didn't faze her.

Okay, he wasn't going to think too deeply about Morag right now or else his head would explode. He was a little worried he was beginning to believe she *was* a mythical creature and that wasn't a good sign. Did Stockholm syndrome include buying into your sole companion's delusions as she fed you good food and kept you warm?

Well, no matter what she was, Morag was also kind. She'd set up the fire, heated water, allowed him the privacy to wash. Not that she hadn't seen him naked before, and not that he cared. But it was a nice touch, and the fact was, he felt a little self-conscious about his ragged body. The past nine years had affected him much more strongly than her. She was virtually unchanged, if a little...faded, not so much in color, but there was a tiredness in her expression. He'd have called it world-weariness, but she was too unworldly to be described that way.

He'd remarked sometime yesterday that she was exactly the same and she'd looked away, her expression turning forlorn. *"I am tired of being the same, year after year."*

Well, he hadn't known what to say to that.

By the time he finished washing himself as well as he could with a cloth and a bucket of warm water, he was shivering. So he sat on his bedding that needed airing out—maybe tomorrow would be sunny—and munched on one of the protein bars that Morag so disdained. Now that he'd been eating for a couple of days it was easier to digest the prepackaged food.

Next he rebandaged the wound, something she'd been doing. It was on his inner right thigh, and it was healing nicely. The pus had stopped leaking out and the edges were pink rather than flaming red. He rinsed it with salt water and put on a clean cloth—one of those she'd boiled and hung. The effort and the pain had him breaking out in a sweat, so he lay down and fell asleep.

He woke as Morag stepped inside, wet and naked. She didn't look at him as she put down the pail, no doubt filled with fish, and crossed to the small chest to pick up a blanket and wrap it around herself.

Perhaps it was wrong to not have averted his gaze, but he couldn't help note a few things. She was thinner than he remembered. Certainly not the ghastly skin and bones of himself, nevertheless, she hadn't

needed to lose weight. Her breasts remained high and her limbs dusted with freckles, and he found his chest ached with longing. Part of it was lust, yes. They'd bonded back then, and the comfort and familiarity they'd had in each other's arms had been a homecoming of sorts he'd never found again. However, they were now strangers. Nine years on, it was hardly surprising. But he'd like it to be different between them.

Her brown eyes found his, guarded, the blanket wrapped around her as if it were a way to protect her from his questions.

"Cold?" he asked to break the silence.

"No. But I will be if I don't stay by the fire."

He sat up and opened his knapsack. The first time he'd dug for clothes since he'd arrived here. He dressed himself in sweats and a sweatshirt then looked at Morag. She'd been wearing his old clothes from a decade ago almost constantly. He gestured towards his bag. "Would you like to wear something from here for a change?"

He was not going to ask where her own clothes were. Just like he wasn't going to ask how she could come in from the outside after hours in cold if not freezing weather and not be chilled. She had said she had something to show him when he was better, and he would wait for that.

"There's only jeans for pants, but how about a sweater?" He held the latter up as an offering. "The jeans will fall off you. I'd wear them myself, but not with my nice bullet hole. I'm afraid the seam will rub the wound raw."

She walked over and picked up the sweater from him.

"What about a T-shirt?" he offered.

"Okay."

He pulled one out and she reached for it but instead of handing it to her, he encircled her wrist with his hand.

She stiffened, and he rubbed the tendons on the underside of her wrist in reassurance before letting go.

"You're thinner," he observed.

"So are you."

"I definitely am. But a lot of that was the last couple of weeks when, you know, I got shot, stole a car, caught a fever... All that fun stuff. What's your excuse?"

She offered him a small smile as she retreated. "You won't like to hear it."

"Try me." He braced himself and he could feel her observe him doing so.

She shook her head but he wouldn't look away so she said, "I haven't been human enough. And I'm tired of living here."

He just gazed at her.

"See. You don't want to hear my explanations."

*Because they're not explanations.* But he just gritted his teeth. "Never mind."



"I'm a selkie," she blurted out and the color on her face rose.

He knew the meaning of selkie because he'd looked up the word after he'd left Selkie Island at twenty-one. "Okay." *You think you're part seal, part human.* He wanted to shrug it off, but it was an explanation, however unreal, of how she survived the elements when she ventured out each day. He'd been hoping for her to describe something more mundane.

Gazing into the fire, she continued, "I can be a human or I can be a seal. Mostly I live as a seal. That's how I'm catching the fish. I know you don't believe me, but I avoided telling you the truth last time and you were angry with me for *lying* when there were no lies. Now you get the unvarnished version." What energy it had taken to deliver this bout of "truth-telling" dissipated and her shoulders slumped. "I didn't tell you I was selkie years ago because you would have left right away."

Would he have left if he'd thought she was crazy? If she'd scared him enough, maybe, though he liked to think he wouldn't have just abandoned her. Admittedly, this talk of hers made him uneasy but he'd already been scared for the last three months, once he realized what Aaron was doing, once he realized he had a dirty boss. This weirdness wasn't nearly as alarming. Perhaps her talk was a way of speaking in metaphor, and he would come to understand her better as they spent more time together. He would leave the topic alone for right now.

"I was planning on hiding here for a while, Morag. It was the one place where I didn't think they could trace me."

He'd kept his youthful journey and summer fling secret for some reason. Partly because once it was over, it had felt almost unreal and partly because it seemed almost too important to talk about. Deciding to travel by himself, he'd chosen to drive out to the east coast in his mother's old car, wanting to see the ocean, experience it, after his childhood and youth in the city. He'd experienced more than he'd expected, lured to the island and falling in love with Morag. Now he was back and ready to stay.

"I hope that's all right with you." If they hadn't traced him yet, he thought they might never find him here.

Her face softened. "Of course it's all right with me. I've missed you."

~ \* ~

The next day they stood outside to see that the winds had blown away the storm, leaving clear sky with only the odd wisp of thin cloud here and there. Clay breathed in the fresh air and turned to smile at her. Which was a relief to Morag. His smiles had been few and far between, whereas just his presence made her happy and she wasn't able, or willing, to hide it.

He liked the smell of the ocean, Clay had said before, as if it was new and amazing. She'd known nothing else, of course.

His smile faded, his face becoming solemn. She worried him, she could see that, despite the fact he was the one hurting most.

“You said you had something to show me, Morag.”

If he'd been stronger, she'd have dreaded what was coming next. But he was in no shape to leave here yet. He was stuck with her for a while longer, so it was easier to keep her promise.

She'd only ever shown her mother and sister before today.

He limped down to the little beach since that was the easiest path to take to the water, though she usually clambered up and down the other side, preferring to leave and enter the water on the big rocks.

As she took off her clothes, he frowned in disapproval but did not speak until she was naked. He assessed her, and if it wasn't with the frank admiration and eagerness of their earlier times, there was something to be read in his face. His eyes had darkened.

“Still beautiful,” he murmured, and she flushed despite the cold wind. He stepped closer to catch a lock of her hair. “Remember when we were together?”

How could she forget? But she just nodded, lost in his deep brown gaze.

He stepped back. “I missed you too.” It was an admission for him. Then he lifted his chin. “Do whatever you must do. Before you freeze.”

Wading out into the water, she had to admit she preferred plunging in. She began to shiver, and when she was waist high she turned to see consternation darken Clay's face.

“Morag. The water is too cold. Come back.” He'd decided she was acting foolishly. “That's enough.” There was fear in his voice, fear of what she was doing to herself, she supposed.

She lifted her arms, more to silence him than anything else, and felt the shimmer that presaged change. Her body wanted it. Wanted the heft and weight and warmth of the seal's body.

For a moment she was gone, and then she plunged into water.

Clay almost fell over. As it was he lurched and had to regain his footing. The water closed over Morag, or what had been Morag, and he wondered if he'd been mistaken. It had happened so quickly, instantaneously. One second she'd been standing there, arms raised, skin turning white from the frigid water, and he'd been angry with himself for encouraging her in her delusions.

The next second, a light had shone where she'd stood, only to transform into a seal. Before he could process what he'd seen, it dived under and was gone.

No, not gone, for its sleek head surfaced almost immediately where Morag had stood. It stared at him with enormous dark eyes. No blinking, though perhaps seals didn't have eyelids to blink with.

His legs were shaking so he crouched down and put out an arm to steady himself, all without taking his eyes off the creature. He couldn't really believe it was Morag, but he couldn't really believe it wasn't her either. Because she was gone, completely, and after the light *it* had taken her place.

It was treading water, in a distinctly seal-like way. Naturally, it was seal-shaped. It—she—barked at him. Clay tried to find his voice, but all he could manage was to wave her towards him.

She barked again, a turn of her head, *no*. Couldn't seals come onto land? He was pretty sure they could, though he should have watched more *National Geographic* or something.

"Come here," he called. If she came, he would know it was Morag. And if it didn't, he'd be second-guessing himself forever. "Morag!" he said more loudly, demanding a sign that she recognized her name.

She swam closer, till her belly or flippers or whatever were touching the bottom. A third time she barked and he didn't know if she was warning him or what. Then just like before she was gone.

The light made him close his eyes momentarily, a bit longer than a blink, and there was Morag rising out of the knee-deep water. She shook her head once and ran a hand over her thick mop of hair, squeezing water out.

Her gaze was defiant as she stalked past him to her pile of clothing and started dressing. He stayed where he was, staring out at the water, not knowing how to put these new pieces of Morag's life together with what he knew of the world. He almost wished he didn't know. But last time, when he'd wished he didn't know something, Aaron had been dirty, and that denial had almost got Clay killed. He refused to deny knowledge this time. He had to work on accepting this.

After a moment, she came and sat beside him, which helped him to face the fact that the light and the seal had not been a hallucination or a misunderstanding, that he was not still somehow fevered and didn't know what he could have seen.

She was here, solid, and like it or not, that demonstration answered a lot of questions, even while it led to many more.

He cleared his throat. "So that's how you catch all that fish."

She'd been staring straight ahead at the water, like him, but at his words, she glanced over warily. "That's how."

He picked up her hand and felt a slight resistance from her, but not much. Her skin was warm to touch. "Why aren't you cold?"

"I never am when I'm a seal, or right after."

"Something to do with the light?" Christ, this conversation was surreal.

"What light?"

"The light that shines when you...change."

This interested her. "I don't know. I don't see the light myself."

"Oh." He guessed that made sense. It was part of her transformation. She was, for a moment, the light. Eyeing her, he admitted, "I have too many questions."

She surprised him by leaning against him, and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Their first embrace, really, despite the hand-holding. “What would you have done if I’d showed you this the summer we met?” she asked.

“Run like hell.”

“Well,” she said, her voice wry, “I’m glad I waited.”

“So am I, Morag.” He couldn’t see, but he thought she might be smiling.

“We have to hide your boat.”

He looked up at the green boat that lay above them on the shore. It was turned over. Morag had probably done that. “No one’s going to see it out here.” But her statement gave him pause. He’d always thought this was the most isolated place on Earth and you couldn’t see the boat from the mainland, even with high-powered binoculars. “Are they?”

“What if your boss comes looking for you?”

“He doesn’t know about this place.” But even as he argued, Clay feared Aaron could find it, if he really put his mind to it. “I thought coming here would be enough.”

“You’d be surprised how many people pass by. Soon the fishing season will be upon us.”

He frowned at her statement. “The fish are all gone, Morag.” Perhaps she wasn’t aware of how that industry had collapsed.

“I see them setting out lobster traps every year.”

“Oh.” Lobster. He hadn’t thought of that and he pulled in a breath. It was good to know this information. Perhaps she was more social than he’d realized. “Do you…greet these lobster fishermen? Do you they greet you?”

She snorted. “No. They largely stay away from this island. It’s considered haunted. If they do land, I watch, observe. Listen. They’re not all good people.”

Her body had stiffened under his arm and he squeezed her protectively. “Did someone threaten you?”

“I can take care of myself.” Which wasn’t really an answer, but she continued, “People may notice the boat and wonder, come to investigate. No sense inviting trouble. I want to put the motor under the house, in the cellar, and carry the boat to the woods. Maybe we can do that tomorrow.”

Clay stood. “Let’s do it now.”

“I don’t think you’re strong enough.”

“You’ve got me worried. I don’t want to bring these men to you. They’ll hurt you if they can.”

She gazed up at him and her mouth twisted, not with bitterness, but a kind of secretiveness. “I’m hard to find if I want to be. Let’s make you hard to find too.”

## Chapter Five

Maybe she shouldn't have mentioned the boat and its visibility today. Moving it had almost done Clay in. He had to lean on her walking back to the house and collapsed once they got inside. She gathered the bedding they'd been airing out and helped make him comfortable.

"I'm a weakling," he muttered, and she had to laugh at him.

"You got shot, you've been very sick, and we just carried a boat across the island."

"A *small* island."

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

He turned on his side, propping himself up on an elbow, and she noticed that his eyes had darkened again, like they had when she'd stripped on the beach, even though she was clothed now. "I owe you, Morag. A lot."

Gratitude wasn't really what she wanted, but she'd take it and maybe that wasn't all he was offering. Not that it mattered at the moment, because he was wiped out and needed to sleep, recover from his exertions.

"Come here," he said, like he'd said on the shore when he'd called to her seal-self, but this was different. There he'd been incredulous, intense. Here there was a teasing and a lightness in his expression. It recalled to her their times of making love.

She walked over and crouched beside him and he sat up, placing a hand deep in her hair. Only he could touch her, she thought, just as he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, then lightly on the mouth.

"Soon, I'll be less weak." He smiled and it was a promise that warmed her. She kissed him back, once, a chaste kiss, and he lay down again.

As he slept, she did chores. That included fetching fresh water from the spring that ran regularly but slowly out of the cliff on the south side. She also collected more driftwood and salted the fish she'd laid out to dry in the sun. She'd forgotten how busy being human was. It wasn't easy living on this island and providing for two, but it was rewarding, and a fitting way to end this existence.

Once Clay was better and safe, she would leave humanity for good. It had been difficult all those years ago to be taken from her family and become a seal, only visiting in the summer until they'd been forced off the island by the needs of a growing family. But she'd been a young girl then, twelve years of age, and the will to survive had been strong. One hundred years on, well, that will had weakened. All that

was left of her family was the occasional visit she made to her niece Morag. Her sister's baby girl was growing infirm, and it pained Morag to see her namesake fading into old age.

The blessing and the curse had allowed Morag to survive her drowning, but it had not come without a cost. She would become completely seal and die as one. She was too old for a seal, so when she stopped shifting, she'd be able to stop living.

The problem was, she didn't want to die as a seal. She wanted to end as she'd begun. But it was difficult to accomplish such a thing. As Clay continued to sleep, she went to crouch by his bag. She'd smelled the gun a while back but hadn't investigated it. Curiosity got the better of her and she dug into the pack to find the weapon, pick it up, weigh it in her palm.

So different from the rifles her father had owned.

In truth, she was frightened of dying as a seal. Of cold, of starvation, of old age. Drowning again, she could not withstand. The gun in her hand was almost beguiling. Sharp and quick. Over in a moment.

"Morag!"

She jumped, dropping the gun to the floor guiltily.

Despite his fatigue, Clay was up and striding across the small room to grab the gun off the floor. "What the hell are you doing? The goddamned thing is loaded."

She looked down at her hands. "Sorry."

"What are you doing?" he repeated.

"Just curious."

That alarmed look of his grew more intense. "Curious about *what*?"

"How it works."

"Why?"

She shrugged. She could feel the weight of his concerned gaze on her, but she didn't lift her eyes and let him see what was on her face. He wouldn't like it.

"Morag," he said, quieter now, struggling to get himself under control. "What do you know about guns?"

"Nothing. My dad used to own rifles."

"Well, don't touch this one." He made a noise, metallic, like he was shifting something in the gun. "I'm emptying it, okay? But it's dangerous. You know that, right?"

"I'm not stupid."

"I understand you're not stupid, believe me. You're very resourceful. But you also have these...holes in your knowledge."

"We never looked at your books," she said, more to divert him than because she actually wanted to look. She was scared she'd forgotten how to read.

He pulled the bag away from her and put the gun in it, zipping up a pocket. "We can look at books," he said gruffly, still upset with her handling his gun.

She could almost feel his regard, his puzzlement. He wanted her to look at him, so she shot him a smile as she moved away. "Just let me check the fish."

He'd awakened feeling content, which sure as hell was a real change. He wasn't entirely certain he was in his right mind, believing that Morag was a selkie and all. Though if nothing else, he could see that the island had been named for a reason.

But as he opened his eyes and Morag had come into focus, his happiness had collapsed. She'd been holding his goddamn gun in her hands, examining it with an expression that had alarmed him. As if she was weighing her options.

He'd startled her and she dropped it, but before he could question her further she'd disappeared outside, something about fish. Well, half her time seemed to be spent on fish, but he didn't plan on complaining about that since she was keeping them fed.

He didn't think he'd met someone so capable in his life.

But her holding the gun had scared him... Maybe he was just a little too on edge, given the events of the last month. Maybe he'd read too much in her expression, and she was only speculating on how it worked, nothing more. It's not like he knew her well.

He wanted to hide the bullets, but that would leave them at a disadvantage if Aaron somehow found this island. If nothing else, Morag seemed very bent on Clay's survival. So as long as he was at risk, he didn't think Morag was likely to use the gun to hurt herself. If indeed he'd read her expression correctly. Something that seemed less likely when he thought about Morag and her practicality.

No need to panic then. It was good to think this through, and by the time Clay was safe, he hoped to have no reason to believe Morag was interested in the gun for the wrong reasons. He hoped to realize he'd misunderstood her curiosity.

Curiosity. Yeah, that was it.

He forced himself to stand, body aching from carrying that boat, but it felt good to have done that kind of work. Then he went outside into the late-afternoon sun to find Morag, his erstwhile lover, current friend and sometime seal creature.

Selkie.

He spied her easily enough, given the size of the island and that most of it was clearing, aside from the small copse of salt-stunted trees that resembled bushes but that she called the woods.

As he approached her, she continued her work and didn't look at him as she asked, "What are you doing up? You should be resting."

While she turned over the last of the fish, he gazed down. "I'm trying not to be an invalid. It's not my favorite occupation. What are you doing?"

"It's a little early in the season, but I'm drying fish for us."

"Yum."

Rising, she planted hands on her hips and eyed him.

With deference, he held up a palm. "I know, I know. I'm not complaining. Exactly."

She looked at the westering sun. "Another hour, then I'll bring them in. But it's been a good day, sunny enough to dry fish and hang out bedding."

"It's been an eventful day." He knew these details of housekeeping were extremely important, were keeping him alive, but in truth, he was a little stuck on her revelation this morning. Even if he recognized it was no revelation for her.

She smiled suddenly and he asked, "What?"

"It's good to see you out and about. I'd gotten used to you..."

"Always lying down."

"Well, staying in the house."

"Your *house* is about the size of a toolshed."

She tilted her head. "It's been rebuilt since my time when it was two stories high, but my sister and parents used to live there throughout the year."

Scratching his jaw, he tried to take in this information. Because, yeah, being a selkie hadn't entirely explained where she came from or why she didn't age. "And when was that?"

"I was born in 1901."

"Jesus Christ." He turned away. The wind seemed to pick up, making him shiver. He needed more clothing out here but he'd left his jacket inside.

"In 1913, I drowned. Went over the side of the boat in November. By the time they found me it was too late." With this matter-of-fact recounting, her voice had gone higher, like a child's, as if she had last spoken of this when she was twelve. "My mother begged the island to save me."

He rounded on her, settling his hands on her shoulders. "The island?"

"There has been a history of selkies here. My mother believed the myth and she begged the island's magic and it answered her prayer." Her gaze was open, clear, as if what she said made perfect sense.

Clay shook his head. "Morag, you've got to explain more than that. I wasn't here in 1913. I know nothing about selkies apart from what you've shown me today. Are you...immortal?" He could barely get the word out. He didn't want her to be so set apart from him.

She stared at him, eyes bright, shining in the sun, so beautiful and he longed to kiss her, but first he needed to hear this explanation. "The island passed its gift to me so I could live if I remain close."

She trembled under his hands and he pulled her to him.



“It was a great gift and yet, I have not managed to be very happy. It’s too lonely. The seals themselves are little company for me, although we sometimes play and I have a fondness for them. And my family has left me.” She was speaking into his shoulder. “It was not so terrible in the beginning when I could visit with my mother and sister.”

“Not your father?”

“He did not want to acknowledge me after I drowned. He called it a curse and was angry with my mother for what I had become, for what she had asked me to be.” She paused and her voice grew quiet. “Later I came to understand that he blamed himself for my drowning. He believed he should have handled the boat better. Seeing me only caused him pain.”

Clay stroked her hair.

“But the years passed and my family grew older and eventually they left. I was alone. Being alone makes me tired.” She pulled back. “I haven’t liked to see you so sick and hurt, but I have loved being busy. I have had nothing to do for so long.”

He couldn’t even fathom her life and he stared at her, as if that would cause her words to make sense to him. Instead, he felt stumped. She was expecting a reaction so he said, “It’s a lot for me to take in.”

She nodded.

“Let me think on this for a while, and then I will have questions.”

Again, she nodded.

“Will you promise me something?”

She looked wary but said, “Yes.”

“Never use my gun. Promise me that. A gunshot wound is a terrible way to die, Morag. I have seen it.”

Gazing back, her face revealed nothing, but she gave him the promise he wanted. “I will never use your gun, Clay.”

## Chapter Six

She was happy and she grabbed that happiness to her. She knew how rare and fleeting it was. Clay was healing and she no longer feared he would die. Following that, Clay had not rejected her after she'd shown herself to him. Instead, he'd come outside, searching her out, and hugged her when she'd talked of her past.

Their time together was limited, as it had been the summer they'd met. Right now, she felt like she had lived out the last few long decades all for this moment, in order to save Clay and spend time with him. Love him. The meaninglessness of the previous years fell away in the here and now.

He was eyeing her in that way of his. When he'd been younger and healthier, he would have shown less caution. But there was something special about this more careful dance. Even if it made her nervous. She arranged what was left of the firewood.

"Come here, Morag," he said softly. He sat cross-legged on their shared bedding. She'd always loved his voice. A slightly different accent that he described as typical Torontonion and a deep, rich voice.

She stopped what she was doing, turning to look at him, and he smiled reassurance. Placing her hands on her knees, she rose and walked over.

He raised a hand, palm out, and she placed her palm against his. They'd done this before. Hers was smaller all around. He threaded his fingers through hers and gave a small tug.

As she sat she said, "There's something I need to tell you."

Looking away briefly, he laughed. "I can claim with some confidence that at this point, nothing you say will surprise me."

"Maybe this isn't so surprising." She cradled his hand in two of hers, liking the contrast in skin, hers too pale from being seal all the time, his warm and dark.

With his other hand, he smoothed her hair off her face, an encouragement.

She stared down. "I missed you after you left."

"Oh, Morag. I had *no* idea how lonely you were."

"You couldn't." She bit her lip. "I knew you weren't from here and wouldn't come back, but sometimes I hoped."

Leaning forward, he kissed her cheek. Soon he would want to kiss her mouth, but she needed to confess first.

"After a time, I still missed you and I missed...being with you."

He ducked his head so he could catch her eye. “Sex, you mean.”

Even the touching, the affection that had come with sex with Clay, but she just nodded. “So one day these two guys came to the island. I never found out why they landed here. It didn’t matter. I was curious, they weren’t fishermen and they weren’t a relation, so I decided to be, uh, friendly.” She swallowed. “I made a mistake.”

Clay had gone rigid beside her, guessing where her confession was going.

“I got away, Clay,” she said quickly, to reassure him, to let him know she hadn’t been harmed.

He turned her around and wrapped her in his arms, placing light kisses on her cheek, neck, shoulder. “I’m glad. And I’m glad you told me.”

He hugged her tighter and she melted into him. She felt him hard against her bottom and it made her smile. That was good. She’d been worried that the two men would have scared her enough to make her unnerved by Clay. “But, Morag, I’d like to know why you needed to tell me. Because it was something you wanted to share with me?”

“I meant to be faithful to you.”

He sucked in a breath. “Jesus. Honey...it’s been years. I, well...”

So he hadn’t been faithful to her, but she didn’t care. He’d come back for her, that’s what she’d craved. “It hasn’t been years for me. More like days.”

“I don’t understand. Doesn’t time pass for you when you’re a seal?”

“Yes. It’s different though.”

He nuzzled her throat and she shivered in pleasure. “Since we’re in confession mode. I’ve had two girlfriends since I was twenty-one.”

She couldn’t ignore the way her stomach sank but held on to the hope that he’d said *had*, past tense. “And now?”

“No. I haven’t been in a relationship for a while. My job, well, it’s too stressful.” She laid her head back against his shoulder and he said, “Finish telling your story. About the two men.”

She closed her eyes, because it was easier in the telling. “I was careful, even if I wanted to meet them. I stayed near the water. They’d been drinking like my father used to do occasionally.”

“Did they touch you at all?”

They’d grinned when they’d seen her, and not in a friendly way. That’s when she should have fled, but she’d been unwilling to lose the chance at greeting someone after several years of not talking. It hadn’t taken long for them to manhandle her.

“One lay on top of me. That’s when I knew I didn’t want this, not that he’d asked. I pretended to cooperate.” Their drunkenness had made them stupid and easy to manipulate when they thought they were getting what they wanted from her body. “I slid into the water, shifted. They got scared then, that I’d drowned or something. Left the island in a hurry. Never came back.”

“Not your fault,” Clay murmured in her ear.

“I was unwise. I didn’t think they’d be you, but I was...” ...*looking for a friend.*

“Lonely,” he finished for her.

She shrugged in his arms. Then she turned in his embrace, wrapped her arms around his neck and spoke into his throat. “I’m not lonely now.”

“Strangely enough, neither am I.”

He cradled her face in his warm hands, kissed her eyelids, her nose, and she lost all patience and surged up against him to kiss him full on the mouth. Like he’d been waiting, he received her, pulling her closer, taking control of the kiss, welcoming her. There was a patience there in his touch that she didn’t remember and it made her feel treasured. It also made her feel crazy with need. Suddenly it was too much and she broke off the kiss, grabbed at her pants to pull them down.

“I want you inside me.” She wanted everything he’d ever given her before and she wanted it immediately. Her heart was about to beat out of her chest and she needed him now after being deprived for so long.

He helped her with her pants, more slowly than she liked, then allowed her to help with his. They kept their shirts on because it was cold and besides, she just wanted him *there*.

He slid his hands down her thighs. “I’m not going anywhere, Morag. No need to rush.”

Didn’t matter that he wasn’t going anywhere. There was need riding her. She rose on her knees, found him with her center and sank down on to him. As he entered, she felt like he opened her up, opened up everything, and her chest flushed with something old and new and powerful. She bowed her head and he curved his hand around the back of her head to steady her.

She expected him to move but realized with his wound he might not be able to so she began to rise. His arm came around her ribs, immobilizing her against him.

Lifting her head, she asked, “What?” Not the most coherent question and he answered by nibbling at the side of her neck. Goose bumps ran over her skin.

“Clay.” The demand in her voice, it didn’t seem to belong to her but she needed him to move now, otherwise she might scream, or burst into tears. A tremor ran through her.

“Okay,” he said, whether in agreement or reassurance, she didn’t know, but he rose on his knees, lifting her and laying her on her back. “Look at me.” His demand now and she answered it by staring into his dark, almost-midnight gaze. His face was mostly in shadow but his eyes shone. “Won’t be long,” he warned, but she didn’t want it to be long, just *now*, and he moved.

She moved with him and the years fell away, they were back to when they knew just how to please each other’s bodies, the rhythm their own and exactly what they needed as they rose and fell together. The tempo increased as something within her built, a pressure, a wave of intensity that crashed through her and she did scream. Upon her shore he fell, coming inside her, her longing sated by him, by Clay.

She clung and he didn't let go.

He was careful not to let all his weight rest on her, though it took more effort than normal. But he didn't want to move, to let go. Making love with Morag had been a homecoming of sorts when he hadn't known he'd needed to come home to her. Not until she'd found him again.

"You're mine," she whispered and he smiled into her hair. "For a little while," she amended.

"Longer than a little while." Sleep was claiming him and his words were in danger of being slurred. "Let's make this last longer than our first summer together, okay?" He slid to the side, maintaining full-body contact without smothering her with his weight.

"Don't go," she said and he didn't know if she meant he shouldn't slide out of her or if he shouldn't leave the island in the future.

"I don't want to go," he managed before sleep took him.

He woke hours later. The darkness was just beginning to lighten to gray so sunrise was approaching but still a ways off. Morag lay in his arms. A relief because he'd dreamed that she'd swum away, turning to light as he held her, the ocean rising to claim her. But here, now, her back was pressed to his chest, and he was hard against her beautiful ass. He palmed one cheek.

She pressed against him, arching her back, and he entered her from behind.

"God," he muttered as she moaned, a low note deep in her chest. He didn't move but bit down on the tendon running from her shoulder to her neck, tasting the salt, her own or perhaps the salt water's. It didn't matter, it still belonged to her.

"Move," she demanded. Instead he lapped at her neck.

"Morag." He just wanted to say her name.

"What?" Frustration filled her voice. He remembered this, how they'd been crazy for each other, going at it like rabbits multiple times a day and it had been glorious. He'd cared about his lovers since then, but it had been nothing like what he'd had with Morag.

He placed a palm over one breast, caught the nipple between thumb and finger.

"*Clay.*"

"Um-hmm?"

"Please."

"You're beautiful."

She tried to roll onto her stomach and he clamped her to him, ignoring her cry of frustration. He understood that she wanted him to drive into her from behind, and God knew he wanted it too. Just not yet. Over the years he'd learned to appreciate a certain drawing out of the event and even if this was more making love than the sex he'd become used to, he still wanted to try for slow with Morag. Slow and rewarding.

He slid his arm down and found her clit, hard and engorged. Tracing a finger over it, he felt her crash into her orgasm as she let out a scream. He didn't relent, working the nub as she flew and came down to earth. She panted in his arms, trying to catch her breath, a sweat breaking out over her body.

"Clay, please."

"Please what?"

"Too much."

"Come again."

"I can't," she gritted out even as her body seized and she broke against him a second time. He was growing harder and harder inside her, likely to come by just feeling her around him, squeezing him.

So he pressed her down on the bedding, lifting her ass as he rolled, staying inside her. She was wet and welcoming and tight. Friction and feeling and deep, beautiful warmth. He drove into her and she screamed, "Yes, Clay." His cock grew impossibly hard, his balls tightened and he wanted to stay there, just at that moment before he went over the edge, when the feeling was almost transcendent.

She came again, squeezing him, and over that cliff he fell as his body seized and he filled her with his seed.

They both collapsed, less than gracefully. She seemed to have even less energy than him. But she turned to him and smiled, her face lighting with pleasure, and he thought of the sun rising. His heart squeezed.

She hit him in the chest, against his full heart, with her small fist. "What did you do to me? I couldn't breathe."

"Are you lodging a complaint?"

"No. Just..." She shook her head. "I never felt like *that* before."

"Well." He had to tread a little carefully here, as he wasn't interested in talking about his experience as such, not right now. "Thing is, there can be some advantages to drawing sex out instead of cutting to the chase right away." Okay, that didn't sound terribly sophisticated, but he more often did sex than talked sex.

"We never..." She buried into him, perhaps no better at talking sex than he was.

"No. And it was great." He stroked her hair. "But so was this."

"So was this," she agreed. "I feel like I have no bones."

He cupped her elbow, touched her collarbone. "Don't worry. They're there."

In turn, she traced his ribs, silently telling him he had bones too. "Can we sleep some more?"

He kissed her hair and tucked her against him. He faced huge problems in the future, he hadn't forgotten them, but for now his happiness overwhelmed him and he let sleep take him.

## Chapter Seven

He woke in bright daylight and Morag was gone. It felt like his body had betrayed him, to allow him to sleep through her rising and leaving him. But he couldn't ignore that he was still recovering from that bullet wound and the fever. Carrying that boat across the island yesterday had worn him out. As had Morag.

He was starving. Hungry enough to appreciate a protein bar and he ripped into one, chewing it down. Well, a healthy appetite was a good sign, right? He'd never been the pickiest eater, which was a lucky thing since he'd be choosing between these bars, until they ran out, and fish.

At what point did he have to worry about scurvy? Given that he wasn't in great shape, he had to be careful. Perhaps space out these bars which were well fortified in all the vitamins.

When he'd been twenty-one and vacationing here, he'd made trips to the shore, picking up supplies, but that was no longer an option. Obviously. He scrubbed his face, wondering about his future. During the days of panic, he'd settled on this goal of reaching Selkie Island, and he hadn't seen much beyond that. Now he had to think things through, and that included taking Morag into account. He couldn't expose her to danger, but he also didn't want to leave her.

It wasn't good for her to be alone so much. She sounded forlorn about her life at times. And the way she'd held his gun—he hadn't liked it. Not that it seemed possible to think of her as suicidal at the moment. She was full of energy, and so capable to boot.

But he didn't know what it was like to live over a hundred years and long outlive your generation.

He rose in search of Morag. Stepping into sunlight, he lifted his face towards the sun, absorbing its heat. Then he glanced around to see she'd hauled the fish she was salting and drying back out into the sun. He felt a pang of loss as he realized she wasn't there.

Perhaps she was in the water again. Did she need to go there every day? During their summer together they'd spent days in each other's company. He would definitely have noticed if she'd decided to turn into a seal, so she hadn't needed to be seal all the time then. Admittedly, she'd refused to ever go to the mainland with him. She'd probably spent time as a seal during his sorties.

Shaking his head, impatient with himself and his musings, he wandered down to the shore. She liked to shift on the larger rocks, she said, so it was there that he'd wait for her, and do some sunbathing in the meantime. There was no sense in getting too far ahead of himself. This was the strangest situation he'd ever been in and he simply had to take it one day at a time.

Absorbing the heat from the sun and from the rock he lay on, he dozed and woke stiff. The sun had moved in the sky, and he became worried that something was wrong, or that she wasn't coming back, though his worries had little foundation. For God's sake she'd lived a hundred years, she knew more about staying alive than he did. She'd kept *him* alive this past week.

He stood, shaking out his limbs. The bedding she'd arranged for him on the shack's floor was not the most comfortable place he'd slept in his life, but it beat this rock. He clambered back up the cliff and walked to the shack.

It was an hour later when Morag returned, strolling across the small clearing of the island, buck naked. Clay's worry and irritation evaporated at the sight of her and he stood there, beside the fish drying in the sun, and waited until she reached him.

"Where've you been?" He glanced at her empty hands. "No fish?"

She shook her head, a little guiltily, he thought. Though he was beginning to have trouble focusing on the mystery of where she'd been all day. She was gorgeous, red hair shining, skin still damp. He couldn't help it, he just grinned at her.

After tilting her head at his expression, her eyes warmed. "What?"

"You." Pulling her to him, he kissed her deeply, twining her tongue with his, learning everything there was to know about her generous kisses. He was rewarded by Morag pressing her body full against him, breasts, belly, thighs, and winding her arms around his neck. When she came up for air, she tugged down his sweats and climbed up him.

"You," he said, again staring into her dark eyes, watching them widen as he entered her, seated himself fully inside her. They both shuddered a little. He'd never felt such a connection to anyone and he didn't quite understand why the connection was so strong. It just was and he didn't intend to let go of something this special again.

"Clay," she said softly and she began to move. It took them a few tries to find the right movement, and he recalled that despite her enthusiasm and her responsiveness, she was actually pretty new to lovemaking.

Part of him wanted to carry her into the shack, but another part wanted her here and now, and evidently so did she. She flung her head back, trusting him to hold her as she came. In no time, he followed her, release weakening his knees, and the pleasure threatened to overpower him. As she pressed kisses against his neck and chin, he came back to himself and kept standing, kept holding her.

"Almost dropped you," he muttered into her hair, and she clung and laughed. She loved to hold on to him afterwards, he remembered, as if he might disappear, and he guessed he had.

"We'll take our time, next round," he added as she slid down his body but still leaned against him. It had felt more like a snack than a real meal, even if their bodies still reveled in the echo of lovemaking and connection.



She gazed up at him, her eyes bright, alive, and he smoothed damp hair from her face, marveling that she had been alive for so long, as if she'd been waiting all these years just for him.

"I like it fast," she admitted.

"You didn't like it the one time I insisted we slow it down?"

Her smile deepened. "I liked that too. You always did have so much to show me."

That had appealed to his manhood nine years ago. Now, he believed she had just as much to show him. He passed a hand down her side, over ribs, to rest on her hip. "I was so shocked that first time..." He trailed off, feeling a twinge of guilt about how oblivious he'd been till afterwards.

"...when I bled," she finished for him, quite cheerily. At least it seemed to be a good memory for her.

"It wasn't the bleeding per se." Clay remembered that at first Morag had thought the blood itself bothered him, more than the fact that she hadn't told him she was a virgin, more than the fact that he'd assumed with her eagerness and her kisses she was not a virgin.

She traced a pattern over his chest. "Later I wondered if you minded being my first."

"No," he said immediately. "Although if I'd known you were ninety-something and a selkie, I might have reacted differently."

"And now?" Uncertainty dimmed her expression slightly, but hope and faith was there too.

"And now"—he shrugged—"I just want you with me. Not exactly sure how that's going to work but we'll figure it out."

She turned away, taking his hand and leading him to the shack. "Don't think about the future." She threw back a look at him. "I'd go crazy if I did."

"What about thinking about dinner?"

"Sure."

But before dinner they made love again, this time Clay driving her crazy with his mouth before he rose over her and entered her and they came together.

~ \* ~

The next day, Clay managed to wake up before Morag did, and in doing so he also managed to keep her by his side all day. But it wore him out, not taking a nap, or maybe it was all the lovemaking. For his body was still healing and the following morning, which was full of fog and cooler than usual, he found that Morag had slipped away while he slept.

As was her wont. He felt a bit like a kept man. She'd left him food, chowder again, warming on the now-dying fire she'd obviously lit before she'd left. Chowder for breakfast was not something he'd ever particularly longed for, but it was sustenance and Morag had made it for him. So he ate it.

He'd been awake for a while, trying to read though he felt distracted by Morag's absence. He hadn't yet shown Morag his books but maybe today. She was not particularly keen so he wouldn't force it, but he

suspected she wouldn't have forgotten how to read, even if it came slowly, and she'd feel better knowing if reading was something she could now do.

As he leafed aimlessly through a book, the door flew open and she burst into the room with none of her usual grace and quiet. Her face was grim. "We have to hide. Immediately."

In quick, efficient movements, she swept up the bedding and his pack and stuffed them in the chest. She grabbed clothing and yanked it on, then glanced at the cooking paraphernalia by the fire. "Don't have time to put these things away." She doused the fire and left the rest.

"What?" he demanded, feeling a little slow as she dashed around the cabin.

"They're coming. They'd be faster but they don't know where to land. However, it won't take long for them to find my beach."

"Who is 'they'?" It couldn't be Aaron. Aaron didn't know about Selkie Island.

It could only be Aaron.

"Not fishermen. The lobster boats aren't out yet." She held out a hand to him and he shook his head. He would not endanger her.

"You go, Morag. Go be safe in the ocean. They don't know you're here."

"There's a cave."

He frowned. "You never told me."

"I never told anyone and had no reason to show you. Until now." She marched over and grabbed his hand.

"Is it by the water?"

"Of course."

Fine, she could still disappear into the ocean. He let go of her and stalked over to the chest, dug out his gun and bullets from his pack.

She barely glanced at his weapon, as if it was of no importance. "Clay, *now*."

She led and he followed, down to those large rocks she liked to shift upon. But instead of entering the water, they walked around to approach the point and ducked under a low-hanging rock. It was hard to see the entrance unless you were right there, but once you were beneath it, there was actually space to sit. "Cave" was perhaps a generous word, but as a hiding place, it might do.

At least, he'd easily be able to shoot anyone who tried to enter. However, if discovered, they were sitting ducks.

"I'll stay here and hide. Go to the ocean, Morag."

She shook her head. "I want to be with you."

"Please," he begged. He wanted to physically drag her out of the cave and throw her in the water, but not only could he not bring himself to force her, he wasn't sure he had the strength for such a battle.

Leaning into him, she wrapped her arms around his middle and hugged him tight. “No one has found this cave since Sarah and I discovered it a hundred years ago. I promise you.”

He blew out a long breath.

“I want to be with you,” she repeated, her tone this time pleading, and he understood she was scared of being left alone again. “It’s important to me, more than anything else.”

“Okay,” he muttered into her hair.

They waited all day. At one point, the intruders climbed down to the shore near them, and Morag had gripped Clay’s hand, watching his face as he listened to the voices.

Mostly they couldn’t make out words, what with the wind and the fact the intruders didn’t walk too close to their cave. She could see Clay straining to listen. Then one of them yelled, “No one’s fucking here, Aaron.”

Clay’s entire body went taut and he squeezed her hand so hard it ached. But she didn’t let go, and the voices receded. He turned to look at her and she knew what was in his eyes. He wanted to chase after them, stalk them in some way, but the island was too small for that to be a safe strategy, not when they had weapons. She shook her head and he watched, assessing her, probably thinking of her safety more than his. Then he nodded.

They sat there till the sun set, and Morag figured the men would have been forced to leave, unless they were staying for the night.

“All right,” she said softly. “Let’s see if they’re gone.”

Clay stood, hunched over given the cave’s low ceiling.

She tapped his arm. “Let me go first.”

“No.”

She blinked at him in the grayness. “No? I know this shore like the back of my hand.”

“They might be here. I will not have you killed on my behalf.”

She didn’t suppose arguing that she’d lived a long life, longer than his, was going to get her very far, not given the implacable expression on his face. “Okay. I don’t want them to shoot me either. But let me go first until we’re on the bank. Once we’re in the clearing, you can lead. With that gun.”

He didn’t like it.

“I know the shore, Clay,” she repeated, trying not to get impatient.

“I’ll exit first. You go ahead until we’re off the shore. Then I go ahead.” He took in her frustration. “These men are killers, Morag.”

“I understand. But I don’t want *you* killed.” She glanced pointedly at his leg where he’d been shot.

He sighed and ducked out of the cave. She followed, listening carefully. The wind had died down and it was quiet now. She just couldn't imagine strangers staying here overnight. It hadn't happened for one hundred years.

However, they were hunting Clay and that hadn't happened in a hundred years either. She placed a hand on his arm, insisting she go ahead. He barely allowed it, shadowing her so closely she felt crowded by him. And when they climbed up the bank, he stepped in front of her.

Again she listened. Her island felt right, sounded right, with just the wind and the water to be heard. Nevertheless they approached the beach cautiously and breathed more easily when they didn't see an intruder's boat there. They turned around for home.

The house was empty too, but Morag felt no relief at seeing it. The contents of the chest were strewn and Clay's pack was gone. The fireplace was a mess, ashes spread around the floor, her pots knocked over.

She made her decision then and there. "I have to go for help."

"Help?" he repeated. He'd thought she was completely isolated and couldn't guess at who she could go to for help.

"I still have family," she said stiffly.

"Okay." They were both tense and upset, so he spoke carefully. "But I thought you never talked to them."

"There is one I will talk to, but I have to search her out. She is old."

He was about to ask who this old woman was and how she could possibly help when he brought himself up short. What the hell was he doing? Morag's leaving was for the best. Get her off the island so that when Aaron came back for him, she was out of harm's way. He nodded. "Go then."

She blinked as if she'd been expecting more of an argument, and he opened his arms. She came into them, clinging to him like she never wanted to let go. They rocked together before he released her and she stepped back. She stripped off her clothing, slipped out the door and melted into the darkness. The sky was dark, clouds obscuring the stars and the moon, but Clay went into the darkness after her anyway. He thought he heard her footsteps but it might have just been the water and the small breeze that was beginning to rise.

When he was sure she wasn't returning, he went back in the cabin and lit a candle. It was difficult to see, walking across the clearing and picking his way through the small copse of trees, but he went slowly, carefully, until he found his boat.

They'd smashed it up. It was unusable and given what he knew of Aaron, he wasn't surprised they'd sought it out and trashed it. He hunkered down beside it, placing a hand on the broken side, and tried to think this through. He was trapped here, on a very small island, with a selkie who would come back for him, no matter the danger to herself.

Clay had to face Aaron before Morag returned.

## Chapter Eight

She swam. It was early for a summer visit to see her dead sister's house, a visit she didn't always make, and she hoped her niece was still alive. Morag had begun avoiding her relations, because the feeling of dread, her fear that her niece had died, was overwhelming. It was sometimes easier not to shift to human at all and just stay seal, stay removed from these emotions.

Weakness. When her sister had been alive, Morag had been stronger. Now, when she was a seal, it could be hard to remember that her niece might wish to see her.

But Clay was in danger and Morag had no choice.

It was still very dark by the time she dragged herself out of the water and walked up the narrow path that led to the family house. Her sister Sarah's husband had built it for his family. Morag had no clothing and didn't see how she could find some without knocking on the door. She had used a more stealthy approach in the past, but tonight time was important.

Thinking there was nothing for it but to forge ahead, she took a deep breath. With a clenched fist, she gave three loud raps on the door, paused for a few seconds and did it again.

Voices murmured and she heard heavy steps coming from upstairs. Well, her great-nephew or great-great-nephew was not going to be happy to see her. She wanted to flee, the panic of meeting humans threatened to overpower her, but she stayed put, for Clay's sake.

The door pulled open and a large man stood in its threshold, crossing his arms, his face creased with sleep and then puzzlement as he looked her up and down once before averting his gaze from her naked body.

"Heh, what's this?" Embarrassed, his expression suggested he'd been thrown for a loop. "Rebecca!" he bellowed, in some kind of alarm.

His alarm quieted her own. It was okay. *It is hard to meet those who do not acknowledge what I am, but it is doable.* A calm came over her.

He wouldn't look directly at her, but then his gaze seemed to land on something and he grabbed a big jacket. Probably his.

Thrusting it at her, he demanded, "Put this on."

She obeyed.

As an afterthought, he added, "You must be cold."

Not yet, but she would be if she stayed naked. She wrapped the large jacket around her.

“Rebecca!” he yelled again as if he was depending on Rebecca to save him. His hair was gray but he was hale, not elderly, and he didn’t seem to be appreciating Morag’s visit thus far.

A voice came, admonishing. “Hush, Henry, you’ll wake your mother.”

As a dark-haired woman bustled into sight, Henry said through clenched teeth, “There is a naked woman on our doorstep.”

Rebecca pushed him out of the way and took one look at Morag. “Well for God’s sake, invite her in. Don’t leave her standing in bare feet there. What happened to you, love? You must be freezing cold. Did someone abandon you? You shouldn’t be out in the middle of the night like this.” Rebecca continued in this vein, mixing statements with questions she didn’t expect answers to, as she drew Morag into the kitchen and decided Morag needed tea. Her final question was “Where are you from?”

There was an actual pause this time, and Morag realized that her hosts were waiting for an answer, even if Henry still wouldn’t look directly at her. She spoke her first words. “I’m from Selkie Island.”

Rebecca and Henry glanced at each other.

He closed his eyes, rubbing his forehead as he admitted, “She has the look of a MacNeil.”

“So she does.” Rebecca’s mouth had thinned to a straight line. “Best you wake your mother after all.”

Clay didn’t allow himself to sleep that night, he simply waited. He feared that if he did fall asleep he would not wake before Aaron returned. The idea of being shot unawares was worse than fighting for his life, even facing his death with eyes wide open. It was the longest night of his life, in large part because he feared Morag would return and he wouldn’t know how to force her to leave her own island.

The morning arrived with fog and silence, only the occasional cry of a gull pierced the sky. And still he waited, fortifying himself with protein bars.

At first the sound of the motor was so faint that he wasn’t sure if it was a boat or his imagination. But as the noise grew louder, he knew Aaron was returning to the island.

Clay had taken his position before the sun had risen, and he crouched behind a rock—not that he was particularly visible in the fog—staying hidden while the boat rounded the point and approached the beach.

Aaron and Steeles—yes, that was Steeles with Clay’s ex-boss—probably wore bulletproof vests, and Clay had to be careful he did not waste his bullets by shooting the vests. He wasn’t going to get a do-over here. If they actually came in his direction, he had a decent chance of taking them out. It was what he wanted, because if their guns were drawn and they were ready to attack, shooting them would be his only recourse. Ambushing them from behind was going to be more difficult for him to carry out, more cold-blooded.

“*You’re not a killer, Clay.*” Aaron’s voice, half-chagrined, half-admiring, or so Clay had thought at the time when he’d talked down a suspect instead of shooting him. Maybe it had been one hundred percent

patronizing, and Aaron had been disgusted that Clay had risked his own skin to save a guy now behind bars.

Didn't matter what his boss had thought. Aaron and Steeles were here, today, and they didn't walk down the shore towards Clay but followed the path up to Morag's lighthouse.

Clay made sure they were far enough ahead that he wasn't vulnerable as he left the safety of his rock. The fog aided him. He crept along the path, listening, trying to ignore his heart that beat too loudly.

Just then he became aware of the motor of a second boat approaching. He'd been so focused on Aaron and Steeles, he hadn't realized someone else was arriving on the island.

Morag.

Christ, he didn't want her here. Not now. He crested the bank to see that Aaron and Steeles were near the shack. Too far away to get a good shot. He lay down so he was barely visible and watched as Aaron stiffened and the two of them argued before they walked briskly across the narrow island towards where the boat was coming, presumably to get a better view.

Surely they wouldn't kill everyone in their quest to kill him. Too many bodies would ruin Aaron, no matter how clever he was. Clay watched the men watch the ocean. He couldn't risk trying to take them both and failing, only to have them turn their guns on the new arrivals. When Aaron turned in his direction, presumably to head back towards the beach, Clay scrambled down the bank and retreated to crouch behind his rock.

It was a larger boat that rounded the point. It didn't even come to shore itself but sent a little lifeboat with Morag and some hefty middle-aged guy, who looked less than enthusiastic about this new assignment of his.

Morag wore modern if ill-fitting clothes that made her appear different, like she didn't belong here. And she didn't right now. She should have stayed away for an hour longer. It would have been over by then, one way or the other.

She and her relation, perhaps a cousin, got out of the lifeboat to confront Aaron and Steeles standing at the beach awaiting them. There was an innocence in the way the two of them went before these killers, and it made Clay's heart ache.

"Are you looking for someone?" asked Aaron as if he owned the island.

There was a rather long pause, because Morag didn't seem inclined to speak and the man with her was rubbing his unshaved face. He was the one who spoke, finally, to Aaron. "Why are you here? This island belongs in the family."

"Really?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"I believe it's government owned."

The man scratched his jaw. "I think you should leave."



“No.” Steeles smiled. “At least not yet. We’re looking for someone. Have you seen a man hereabouts? Black. Six-one. Short cropped hair. Goes by the name of Clayton Johnson.”

“You expect to find him *here*?” Morag’s relation’s expression turned incredulous, and Clay wondered what Morag could have told him to bring him all this way in his boat. “How would he even get here?”

But Aaron was watching Morag, not her cousin. “I think you know something about Clay, don’t you, sweetheart?”

The cousin frowned. “Now listen here—”

“Shut up, Graybeard.” Aaron trained his gaze on Morag and Clay’s insides began to twist. “You tell me where he is, or I’ll make you tell me.”

She didn’t answer, didn’t react.

“*Listen*,” repeated her cousin, angry now. “She’s a bit slow, touched.” He tapped his temple to reinforce his point. “She has funny ideas. You just leave her alone.”

Slowly shaking his head, Steeles reached behind his back to bring out his gun and Clay’s heart plummeted. Aaron didn’t care what happened to these people. He thought it would be easy enough to hide evidence of their deaths on this small island with the ocean all around them.

Aaron spoke again, his tone poisonous, and Clay recognized that time had run out. “Touched or not, this girl knows about Clayton, Graybeard, and she’s going to tell us.”

Clay moved forward, raising his gun, and as he did, everything went slow and fast all at the same time. Graybeard reached for his weapon, a knife, which he had no hope of using before Steeles got off a shot. Aiming for Steeles’s head, Clay fired while Morag leapt to defend Graybeard from Steeles’s attack. In his turn, Graybeard moved with a speed and decisiveness that surprised Clay, plunging his knife into Aaron before he could use his gun.

As Clay came up to them, Aaron stared at him blankly, recognition there but fading almost immediately as his gaze dropped to his chest, to the knife within him.

“Fuck,” he gasped before he collapsed, bleeding out because the blade had hit his heart. Clay spun to check again, that yes, he’d shot true and Steeles was down, dead, not a threat.

Into the stunned silence came Graybeard’s bellow of “What the fuck is wrong with these assholes?”

Clay met his gaze, and the man had eyes like Morag’s, of all the things for him to notice. There was fury on that stranger’s face and, for a moment, Clay thought that Graybeard was enraged enough to pull that knife out of Aaron and gut him too. In the confusion Graybeard might not have realized Clay was on his side, had shot Steeles.

“Clay.” His name was whispered, and Clay shifted to reach for Morag who’d returned for him. To his horror, she fell towards him and he saw she was bleeding, had taken a bullet in the chest, the one that had been meant for her cousin.

Clay’s earlier words came back to haunt him. *A gunshot wound is a terrible way to die, Morag.*

God, no. Clay lay her down and yanked off his shirt to stanch the blood. “Jesus, Morag.”

She lifted heavy lids and looked at him. “I couldn’t let them kill my sister’s grandson, Clay.”

He dropped beside her, pressing down on the wound, trying to figure out the best way to bind it and stop the blood.

“She saved my life. *Goddamn*,” swore the grandson, still standing in shock, still bellowing and enraged. “I thought she was a nutcase making up strange tales to get attention. I only came here to mollify my elderly mother.”

Clay pressed on Morag’s wound and feared the grandson wouldn’t do anything but yell in confused anger. To his relief the man turned terribly efficient, and the next hour passed in a blur as they raced to save Morag’s life. He and Clay bound the wound as tightly as possible, then carried Morag to the lifeboat and into the larger boat. Henry—they managed to exchange names—was marvelously quick at getting the boat back to the small town, nothing like Clay’s slow, torturous journey out to Selkie Island a couple of weeks ago. Henry even radioed ahead to arrange for an ambulance to be waiting for them.

Clay held Morag’s hand and spoke to her the entire way, urging her to stay with him, though she was only conscious for the first ten minutes. At the shore, they took her away, barring him and Henry from the ambulance, so they followed in Henry’s truck, driving to the hospital to wait.

The wait was interminable. At some point an old woman joined them, and it took Clay a moment to understand she was Henry’s mother. Even stranger, to Clay’s consternation, she appeared to know who he was.

Morag had talked about him after he left Selkie Island nine years ago, the woman said, describing Clay as a young man from away who Morag had become fond of. Henry’s mother patted Clay’s arm reassuringly and declared Morag was strong, and he didn’t know how to answer that. No matter how strong a person, a bullet was stronger. Morag had held Clay’s gun one time, but she hadn’t wanted to be shot by Steeles, not when Clay was with her. He was sure about that.

Hours later he came to learn that Morag had died on the operating table and they brought her back twice. They were cautiously optimistic, but in a warning kind of way so he didn’t know if they meant it. She was resting in ICU and while they wouldn’t spell it out, there was fear of brain damage after one of the resuscitations. Clay could hardly process it, even with Henry’s mother taking his hand and telling him that he’d done good.

“It doesn’t feel good, ma’am.”

She smiled and a shiver ran through him because he recognized it as Morag’s smile. “You can call me Morag, dear.”

He blinked, trying to decipher that. He was so tired. “Morag?”

“Yes. You see, I was named after my aunt.”

## Chapter Nine

Clay refused to leave the hospital until he could see Morag, although apparently he was welcome in Henry's home.

"The door is always open," the elder Morag declared as her son took her away and Henry nodded agreement. Clay searched the man's face for reticence or resentment, and there was none.

In fact he parted with the statement, "I owe you my life."

Not really, since Henry would never have been threatened if Clay hadn't arrived here, but Clay didn't have the energy to point that out. Instead, they bid each other good night.

Clay would think about it all later, about the consequences of Aaron's death. It would have to be reported come morning. Soon there would be people asking him a lot of questions—police and CSIS—but unless he'd miscalculated badly, none of them would want him dead.

Morag wasn't dead. And in the early hours of the following day, a resident took pity on him and allowed him into Morag's room.

"Just a few minutes," he warned Clay.

He trod softly, unwilling to wake her, but as he looked down, she opened her eyes, dark in a pale face. Her freckles stood out and her lips seemed drained of blood. She'd needed more than one infusion.

She flexed her fingers and he picked up her hand, cradled it between his two.

"It's over," she whispered and her eyes became bright with a sheen of tears that did not fall.

"It's over," he agreed, recalling the long months where Aaron had been a dark and dangerous threat to everything he held dear.

She tilted her chin slightly in question. "I mean the curse, *my* curse. It's over. It's gone."

He frowned, swallowing, trying to understand what she meant.

"I think I died, and that's how the selkie's shadow-light left me. I can no longer feel the blessing. I can no longer shift."

Clay didn't know what to say, and he couldn't read her expression. Was she happy or sad? Maybe both. "I'm here," he offered, because he was. "I'm not leaving."

"Is it true what I overheard, that I died and they brought me back?" She gripped his hand. It was what he'd been told, so he nodded, watching her cautiously. To his surprise, she smiled and it was a smile of relief. "I've always wanted to be human again. But it feels strange," she added in a whisper.

He leaned down and kissed the tear that leaked from her eye.

“When I’m better, Clay, will you teach me to read again?”

He kissed her cheek, reassuring himself that she was alive, she was with him. “Yes.”

*One year later*

The day was calm and the sun high. A fog bank in the distance sent cool air their way, but that didn’t faze Morag. In fact, Clay was a little worried that she’d bounce right out of the boat in her excitement.

She’d had to relearn to swim as an adult and a human. It hadn’t come quite as easily as she expected. That first time in the city pool when she’d gone under and had to be pulled up had scared the shit out of them both, but she’d been determined to go back in. No way was she going to be scared of water after spending almost a century in it.

Turning to him, she grinned and as if reading his mind, pointed at her lifejacket. “Don’t worry.”

Henry was driving them today, their first visit out to the island, because he didn’t trust Clay or Morag with his boat yet. They’d be able to borrow it in a couple of days, he said, after they spent time with his mother and learning about the boat. Then they’d live for a week on Selkie Island and see how they fared when Morag was all human all the time.

“I can’t believe how much I missed this,” Morag marveled.

When they’d first left Cape Breton, Morag had declared that after decades tied to one place, she couldn’t get far enough away. But while she’d enjoyed living with Clay in the city, getting used to a huge number of changes—TV, let alone the computer, had left her gobsmacked—by the time spring rolled around she was pining for home.

“It’s like old times,” she said, “visiting the island in the summer.”

“Like old times,” Henry repeated, shaking his head. “Mother rests easier now, knowing you’ve been released.”

Clay nodded. He understood that Henry’s mother had been asked by *her* mother to watch out for her sister the selkie and to bring her home if she could. Because of this, Clay had become the elder Morag’s hero in a way that embarrassed him and amused his wife.

It also embarrassed him that the elder Morag was now demanding a “new first cousin” she could hold in her arms before her time was up. Yes, he and Morag planned to have a family, but another year or two of non-selkie living seemed like a good idea.

Morag went up to hug Henry. “Thank you for bringing us.”

“Of course,” he said tersely. “It’s the least I can do after not believing in you for the last thirty years.”

“You brought me supplies.”

“I did that.”

“Sometimes it’s the actions that count most.” Morag caught Clay’s hand. It had taken her a year to believe that Clay wasn’t going to up and leave her. Promises could only get you so far, so Clay intended to spend the next few decades following through and staying married. He loved his wife.

Morag spun and pointed. “Look!”

Following her finger, Clay’s gaze landed on a dark, sleek head watching them. Not a selkie, but a seal. He squeezed her hand. He thought the sight might be painful for Morag.

“It’s okay,” she reassured him. “I wanted to see the seals again. As a human.”

He tucked her against him as they watched a second seal join the first.

“Unlike them, I couldn’t have a family when I was seal. Well, I was never seal, but selkie, something lost in-between.”

“You’re not lost now,” pronounced Henry, as if that put an end to any ambivalent feelings she might have about no longer being able to live in the ocean.

But she grinned at her great-nephew’s words and kissed Clay on the cheek. “You’re right. I’m home.”

## About the Author

Jorrie Spencer has written for more years than she can remember. Her latest writing passion is romance and shapeshifters. She lives with her husband and two children in Canada and is thrilled to be published with Samhain.

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*One choice means heartbreak. The other, death.*

## Run, Wolf

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*Nightfall Wolf Clans, Book 1*

Leah Kendrick is guilty of only one crime: loving her human mate, Tom, enough to give him the gift of The Bite. The Pack council is merciless, and the punishment swift. In an instant everything she's ever known is ripped away, and they're turned out into the long winter with nothing. No money, no car, and no protection from a variety of creatures who'd like nothing more than to take down a lone wolf.

Friendless and broke, they form a daring plan to take back what's theirs and chase safety north. But the Pack has other ideas. And with time running out it's about to call their bluff...

*Warning: Contains savage werewolf combat, defiant love, graphic violence/language/sex, kangaroo trials and unrepentant criminal havoc.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Run, Wolf:*

We drove in silence, Tom at the wheel, on our way to steal back the money the pack had stolen from me. The weight of the quiet seemed to crush down around me in the truck, as if I were a mile underwater instead of driving through Somerville toward Cambridge. We headed south down narrow Prospect Street with its triple-decker houses that pushed right up against the road, looking faded and a little tired in the midday sun.

The shotgun lay beneath a blanket near my feet on the passenger side. Unloaded, but I was careful not to touch it. Respectful. Under my coat, I wore a polyester summer robe and nothing beneath it, in anticipation of the Change. I'd wrapped myself in one of those space-age thermal blankets that looked like a big sheet of aluminum foil and cranked the heater to keep my legs from freezing.

The office was a rundown one-story brick-fronted building. A wide, plate-glass display window took up most of the scarred façade, but I couldn't see inside through the bleary glass because of the blinds. A sign that said *Chockley Real Estate Management* had been painted on the glass, though the letters were now nicked and chipped. Weeds grew out front, poking up through cracks in the sidewalk.

The street was mostly empty, with only a few cars parked here and there. Frost still lingered in the shadows where the sun hadn't reached. Tom pulled the truck over to the curb just before the front of the building, trying to keep our getaway vehicle as close as possible and still stay out of the view of anyone who might be inside.

He looked at me. His eyes were steady, no trace of any fear, just a clear focus. "Ready?"



I nodded. My heart was beating—not fast—but with a strange weighted force so I could feel the thump reverberate through my chest and into my throat. I just wanted to get this done so we could go. Could go somewhere and live in safety. Not so goddamn much to ask.

Tom reached down and gently lifted the shotgun. He loaded it with shells, one after another, and then he pumped a round into the chamber. The sound was all business, a dead-serious *click-clack* that raised goose bumps on my skin, despite the fact that I knew the gun would be largely useless. My eyes strayed to the small, corded leather bag tossed in the console's drink holder. *That* was what would make the difference. My mother's sterling-silver shrimp ring was wrapped inside. I'd put it there with salad tongs first thing this morning, and I had the wounds to show for it. When I'd been unwrapping it, I'd brushed a little too close to the silver and my left hand had a line of blisters along my index finger that would be a long time healing. I could still feel the dull throb of pain.

Tom set the shotgun across his lap and lifted the bag, his face a mask of disgust at the feel of the silver's hateful aura. The ring seemed to send out a pulse—like a woofer pushing air for bass—that repelled us both. He slipped the leather bag over his head, careful to have it lay against the outside of his jacket. It was vital that the werewolves be able to smell the silver—just enough to make them unsure if the shotgun was loaded with silver pellets.

Tom looked at me and nodded. I shrugged off my coat and the silver gray blanket, pulled the door handle and stepped out onto the street. I kept my arms wrapped about me, though it did little to fight the cold. A powerful yearning swept through me to Change immediately and revel in the warmth of my fur, but I fought the urge. I couldn't shift until I was inside, otherwise the world would be treated to the first armed robbery that started with a naked woman on the sidewalk, and ended with something sporting a sharper set of teeth.

We hurried toward the glass door. Tom kept the shotgun as concealed as he could by his jacket. I clutched the robe around me, but the cold bit right through it and the cement froze my bare heels. My heart kept up that heavy thud.

Tom reached out and pulled the door open. A hot sizzle of adrenaline pumped into my veins, and an electronic sensor sang out an artificially cheery *deeeeng dong*.

The woman at the high counter looked up at us as we pushed inside. I recognized her immediately. Her name was Nora something. She'd been here the first time I'd come with Hannah to sign up for my car loan. Her eyes widened and her hand paused, hanging in the air only a few inches from a beige mug giving off the smell of Dunkin' Donuts coffee.

Tom swung the shotgun up and stared at her along the iron sights. "Don't twitch." He pushed deeper into the office and I shadowed him. "Can you smell the silver?"

Nora's lips pulled back from her teeth in a disgusted grimace. "Yes."

"This is loaded with silver buckshot. Don't make me use it."

Nora's gaze jumped to me. I could see the emotions in them—the hate, the *offense* that I'd do something like this. The smile I gave her dripped all kinds of nasty.

"Leah," Tom said. His voice was so calm it even helped settle me down some. "Do it."

I shrugged out of the robe, letting it puddle around my feet. Doubt flashed across Nora's face as I stood there naked. I closed my eyes, reached deep inside of myself, touched the wolf and Changed.

Pain. A tractor-trailer's worth and more. It burst within me like an explosion, as heat and jagged agony ripped through me. My bones broke, realigned; muscles tore, re-knitted; tendons snapped, reattached. Fur pushed from my skin. I felt my mouth tearing away from my face, my cheek and jawbones shattering as it stretched into a muzzle and filled with deadly fangs. The suffering stopped all at once, as completely as if it had never been. I stood there as wolfbreed, feeling the strength coiling through my muscles, reveling in how alive the world smelled, how crisp and deep the sounds were now.

I leapt forward, and I loved the powerful spring and release of my leg muscles as they launched me toward the counter. When I landed on it, a brass nameplate and a fake spider plant crashed to the floor. I crouched down, my arms dangling between my legs with my long claws curving out of my fingers. The snarling growl I gave Nora was low, but she flinched backward all the same.

"This isn't—" Nora began.

"Is there anyone else here?" Tom kept the shotgun aimed at her.

Nora shook her head. Her hair brushed against her face, lagging a half second behind the motion of her head. I lifted my muzzle, sniffing, tasting the air.

"*She's lying.*" I sent my thought to Tom across our Bond. I could smell another werewolf in the back offices. The scent was faint but undeniable.

"*I know,*" he sent back. Then aloud to Nora: "Get him out here. *Now!*"

Fear scent began to bleed out of Nora's pores. I could smell it mixed with fresh sweat. "I don't know what—"

I growled again, giving a menacing glimpse of teeth. Nora glanced at me, and then looked back toward the offices. I smelled the Change as the were behind the door shifted into wolfbreed.

"*He's gonna fight,*" I sent. "*We don't have much time. They've already alerted the pack.*"

We'd anticipated their communication across the Bond. If we moved fast, we'd be long gone before any help arrived. The more savage part of me felt regret. Already my heart rate had slowed and my wolfbreed body felt limber, powerful, almost aching for a contest. The wolf urge to battle seethed in my muscles, but I kept it on a double-wrapped chain.

The other werewolf hammered out from the back room, sending the cheap, hollow door splintering off its hinges with a massive hole dead center. He leapt into the hallway, his eyes blazing amber, fangs bared. I'd seen him before, I recognized that bark-colored fur and that swath of black beneath his chin. His smell was familiar, but I couldn't remember that damn name.

*"Handle him,"* Tom sent. He kept the shotgun on Nora, whose gaze remained flat and far away. I recognized the look. She was talking across the Bond to the entire pack.

The brown wolfbreed dropped down on all fours and shot out of the hallway. My claws dug into the fake panel counter as I gathered myself and launched at him. Tom never moved the barrel of the shotgun—never even glanced at the oncoming snarling freight train of fur and fangs.

*The ultimate battle is waged with one's heart.*

## Going the Distance

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### *Paranormal Deathmatch, Book 1*

Extreme fighting champion Quinn Padgett once had it all. Fame, fortune, freedom. One fateful night it was all stripped away, and for two years the alpha male has endured a torturous life, doing the bidding of a madman in a different kind of ring. The Deathmatch, where the only rule is kill or be killed.

It's as primal as it gets, and Quinn must draw on all his werewolf instincts to survive. Especially with Carri. Her very presence brings him to his knees, demanding he do all to protect her.

Carri had no idea how close danger lurked until she witnessed her boyfriend's sick idea of "entertainment". Now all she wants is to get away from the bastards who are hell-bent on ridding the world of that which they do not understand. But her boyfriend's reach is long—and brutal. Quinn is her only hope. And the only man who awakens a fire within her, body and soul.

As Quinn and Carri go on the run in a fight for their lives, they find themselves engaged in an even deeper and more dangerous battle—a battle of the heart.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Going the Distance:*

His heart raced. "No."

It couldn't be.

She was dead.

Quinn looked harder at the woman, inhaling deeper. There was no denying it. She was the same woman he'd sensed two years prior. She was Carri. The one he'd run to, trying to save only to find himself at the hands of madmen. The very woman he'd sampled paradise with, her kiss divine. A piece of him had died that day. He'd assumed she was gone, her body rejecting the healing agents in his saliva and blood. That's what his captors had told him. They'd taunted him again and again, reminding him that his attempt at being a humanitarian had fallen flat—leaving a woman to suffer a horrible death at the hospital. When he'd learned of her passing, Quinn stopped planning an escape and resigned himself to his fate. Having her with him, in the warehouse, alive and well rekindled his quest for freedom, for her.

The rush of lust left him wishing he had a free hand to adjust himself. His cock throbbed. No other woman had ever made his body answer so quickly, so intensely with nothing more than a stare. It was as if everyone but her ceased to exist for a fraction of a second. His heart thumped madly, his sinewy body eager to be free of his restraints in order to go to her.

The beauty amongst the enemy.

The light in the darkness.

He blinked, coming to his senses. The angry mob around her, pressed in, knocking Carri to and fro before she disappeared under the sea of people. His body responded violently, hardening, going prone, ready for another fight.

“No!” he roared with the need to protect her at all costs. He’d thought her dead and for twenty-four of the longest months of his life, he’d run the scenario of that night, long ago, through his head. Always wondering what would have happened had he been a few minutes earlier or if he’d have paid attention to his surroundings instead of getting lost in her kisses. Would she have lived? Would they have had the happily ever after so many people preached about?

When he’d awoken to find himself shackled, he had been taunted about her passing. They’d accused him of allowing her to die. Lies. All lies.

*She’s here and I’ll be damned if I let her go again.*

Surging forward, Quinn charged the guard as he opened the cage door. He bent his head, going low, using his shoulder to attack the man. The guard fell away and others shouted. All he heard was the soft cry of the female who had captured his attention so long ago and never released it. She was hurt. He could almost feel her pain.

Mindlessly, Quinn yanked his arms, breaking the shackles and freeing his hands. The silver cuffs remained on his wrists. Links of the broken chain dangled, striking his forearms, burning the skin upon contact.

Another guard came at him, carrying an electric prod. Quinn flashed a gleaming white smile at the man, already knowing he looked every bit the animal he was capable of being. He let his eyes flicker to that of the wolf’s icy blue. The guard stopped dead in his tracks before making a hasty retreat.

“That’s right, buddy. Run.”

Quinn knew others would come. They always did. On borrowed time, he charged forth, thrusting people away as he made a line through the now hysterical crowd, pushing in search of Carri.

His entire body responded to the scent of her and he knew he was close. She was the same, yet different. If he didn’t know better, Quinn would have said she still held the faintest hint of his scent upon her. He’d shared his blood with her so long ago that it shouldn’t be the case now. He shoved the last remaining human from his path, revealing the woman to him. His gut clenched. She was bloody and broken, as she’d been two years prior. A deafening sound ripped free of him and he bent to scoop her up only to find himself struck from behind. Electricity surged through him, bringing pain with it. His fingers and toes curled as streaking hot, tingling numbness filled him. His jaw set, his teeth grinding.

He just missed picking her up and fell to a knee before her. He used his body as a shield, keeping her from further harm as he was once again struck with an electric prod. His body was so close to hers yet not touching, preventing the current from passing through him to her. The guards spat hate-filled remarks at him. For once, he felt like everything they accused him of being.

An animal. A monster.

The raw need to protect the female below him was all consuming. His mind and body agreed on one vital thing.

She was not to be harmed.

An efflux of strength and resolve pushed through him and he struck out blindly, knocking away two attackers with one blow. Still, the onslaught continued. Admitting defeat wasn't a possibility. He'd been under the thumb of his keepers for almost two years. He knew how they operated, what they did to assure compliance on the part of the *animals* they housed. They would use Carri against him. They would threaten her to keep him in line and in the end, they would kill her to teach him a lesson.

"Get him!" one yelled.

Quinn's lips curled into a smile. Fangs showed and he permitted a partial change, knowing his eyes would burn with the wolf. Another jolt of electricity passed through him, this time seeming to invigorate him more than anything.

He spun, lashing out wildly, scoring a direct hit. He caught hold of one of the prods and the victim became the wielder of the weapon. He struck one of the guards, returning the favor. The guard was human and the energy too much for him to handle. Guilt never entered Quinn's mind even as the scent of charred flesh reached him. He knew they would hurt or possibly kill the woman he fought to protect.

Someone whistled, catching his attention. He twisted to find a guard standing above Carri, aiming a weapon at her head. Quinn was fast but he wasn't fast enough to be able to stop the guard should he choose to end the woman's life.

He put his hands up, stopping his attack almost instantly. He dropped to his knees, signaling surrender.

The guards converged on him, striking with everything they had. A sick thought occurred to him as he struggled to stay conscious.

*It's always a woman who brings me to my knees.*

*Only in each other will they discover how to be truly free.*

## Puma

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Callie, a cat-shifter, is a loner by virtue of the puma that lives inside her. After a job gone bad, her very human need for contact sends her in search of the only family she has. Callie finds her foster sister in a disturbing living arrangement. Something is seriously wrong in a place where people “belong” to one man and silence is enforced to the point a seven-year-old girl pretends to be autistic.

Dev Malik thinks it’s odd to see a strange woman in the tall grass behind his house, but he doesn’t have the time to ponder why. He’s too busy trying to shelter the child and woman in his household from Scott, the control freak who lives with them.

The truth is more dangerous than Callie imagines. Scott’s control is powerfully real. And Dev’s need to protect the vulnerable is as strong as Callie’s own. Their desire is as inevitable as it is frightening, for only by looking deep within each other will they find the strength to free them all from an unspeakable evil.

*Warning: This title contains explicit sex.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Puma:*

Instead of replying, or even responding to her statement, his gaze dropped to her mouth. His hand slid over her shoulder, across to her neck; fingers forked up into her hair and made a fist to anchor her head so she couldn’t move. His mouth was a mere breath from hers.

“I’m going to kiss you, Callie.” He watched for her reaction and she didn’t know if she was supposed to give a verbal yes, or not. He must have seen something to encourage him. She thought he would kiss like before: sudden, deep, all his for the taking.

His lips brushed hers and before she could protest his leaving, he returned, caught her lower lip between his gentle teeth, scraped it lightly. Like the end of this morning’s kiss, but this was a beginning. A noise rose from her throat, in question, in desire, and with the fist that held her hair in his grip, he angled her head.

“God,” he said, a guttural sound, before his mouth covered hers, forcing her mouth open, stroking her tongue with his. He tasted of mint and chocolate and Dev; and she tried to welcome him though all she could do was accept as he devoured her. She’d been kissed before and hadn’t much liked it, hadn’t liked the invasion. Dev was different, demanding, yes, but focused on her. His large hand splayed across her back, between her shoulder blades, and pushed her flush against him so they had full-body contact. The flood of sensation, from his talented mouth—she had never felt so thoroughly kissed, his tongue demanding hers to dance, then withdrawing to explore her lips before delving in again—to the warmth of his body pressed against hers.

She actually went weak in the knees.

As she sank against him, he cupped the back of her head, holding her in that kiss, while the other arm wrapped around her waist, anchoring her to him. He slid his hand under her T-shirt and clasped her ribs, his palm and fingers warm against her skin.

His tongue released hers, and he retreated to nibble her lips. He kissed across her jawline and descended to her neck where he sucked at the sensitive skin there. Her throat vibrated, half-groan, half-purr, all pleasure. As he kissed across her collarbone, he said, "Callie, Callie. I want us to make love."

He pulled back sharply then, as if to give himself a shake, and she reached for him, hands on his shoulders, scared he would go away. She couldn't stand it, couldn't take being released by him now.

He eyed her while he raised his hands to rest upon hers. For a terrible moment, she feared he was going to remove her hold on him, return to that "don't touch" manner he sometimes projected. Instead, he caressed the backs of her hands, feather-soft strokes of his fingertips over her knuckles, between her knuckles and, most sensitively, between her fingers. She trembled in reaction, amazed that her hands could react to his touch so. A warmth gathered in her belly.

He did lift her hands off, but linked fingers with his and brought their arms down together, pulling her up against him again. Perhaps he too craved touch despite his... She bit her lip.

"What, Callie?"

"Earlier you said you weren't interested in sex."

He stiffened and she closed her eyes, wishing the thought hadn't flitted through her mind, wishing she could have lied or at least fobbed him off with a "nothing", though it was important to her that she be honest with Dev.

She rested her face against the crook of his neck and willed him not to push her away after her reminder. When she kissed him, he shuddered. They were soft, almost chaste kisses, not like his that had ravaged her neck.

He brought her arms behind her, clasped both wrists in one large hand, while with his other, he pressed a palm against the small of her back. Her belly felt him hard against her. Aroused.

That made her smile into his neck.

"Look at me," he demanded, so she tilted her head back to meet his gaze. "You like that, that you've made me hard, that you've made me want you?"

"Yes." She struggled a little, which resulted in her writhing against him, but he didn't release her arms. Lifting his free hand to her face, he held her gaze to his, palm on her cheek. With the pad of his thumb, he traced the bone just under her eye, traced her cheekbone, then ran that thumb over her lips.

"You're beautiful."



It made her breathe faster, these words, these intense caresses, this attention. He trailed fingers down her neck to the swell of her breast. He was watching her very carefully as he lightly palmed her breast and her sensitive nipple began to ache.

“Dev?” She wasn’t sure what she was asking.

“Hmmm?” His mouth dipped to her neck, teeth scraping the soft skin, then soothing it with a kiss. And again. His hand slipped under the hem of her T-shirt, and rose to catch her nipple between thumb and finger, rolling the nub. “Do you like that?” he murmured as he kissed her throat.

She arched against him and he swallowed her “yes”, his mouth taking hers in a punishing kiss.

Her knees gave out this time, but he caught her, finally releasing her arms, though not her mouth, as he lifted her and she wrapped herself around him. He brought her to the bed.

She tried to contain her disappointment as he set her down on the mattress. He yanked off her shirt, then his, her shorts then his, all in short order. It had been a revelation, this kind of foreplay, but now he was ready to fuck.

He crawled over her and for a moment she thought he was going to move up so he’d fuck her mouth, but he reached back and pulled her up so they were face to face again, her under him. He’d wanted to make love, she remembered, and that reassured her.

“You make me feel, Callie.” The words seemed almost to be dragged from him and she touched his face, roughened because he hadn’t shaved.

“I think you’re beautiful too, Dev.” She wanted to offer him something of her feelings, though that barely described her real emotions. Tentatively she ran a hand through his short hair, which was surprisingly soft to touch.

“Are you scared to touch me, Callie?”

“No.” The question caught her off guard, and it must have shown.

“You prefer that I touch you?” He skimmed a hand down her side and across her stomach. Her underside. It made her feel vulnerable and he seemed to notice, because he crossed his palm back and forth across her soft belly until she relaxed into the touch. “Tell me what you like,” he urged.

She didn’t know. He traced some ribs, but he didn’t release her gaze so she said, “I like you.”

He smiled then, so pleased, the smile wider than she’d observed before, like she was seeing a new Dev.

“I like everything you do. You make me feel so warm. Inside.”

His slightly bemused expression made her add, “Is that wrong to say?”

“No,” he said immediately. “Nothing is wrong to say.” He sat back and she feared he was retreating, giving up on them making love. Perhaps because he thought she didn’t like to touch him? That wasn’t it, wasn’t it at all. She was just so unsure, but she began to rise, to follow him.

He came back, pushing her down, lying atop her, that full-body contact she craved, though he took some of the weight with his elbows. He kissed her deeply, a kind of reassurance, then broke away and held her shoulders. “Stay here.”

Again he sat up. Instead of backing away, he pulled up both her legs, ran palms over her thighs, front and back. Then calves were caressed before he wrapped his hands around her ankles to place her feet down near her butt, knees pointed up. She frowned at him and he smiled, resting hands on her knees. He pushed them apart, making her legs drop open.

She felt completely exposed and very, very wet.

“You, Callie, are going to tell me if at any time you feel *uncomfortable*, okay?”

Her chest rose and fell as he placed the heel of his palm on her pubis and rubbed lightly. Surprised, realizing she was completely ready, she arched up to push against his hand. “Dev, I want you inside me.”



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